



## 5. Jubilee in the Early Church

In the Old Testament, the economic principles of the Kingdom were seen demonstrated in a nation. In the New Testament, as the church was formative and small, they are demonstrated in communities of believers, communities of the King. We see these worked out within Jesus' band of disciples with their common fund, from which they gave to the poor.<sup>i</sup> Then in the first three to four years in their disciples in the Jerusalem church, then in the scattered church plants across Asia Minor towards Rome.

### Celebration

The disciples modelled Jesus' principles in the Jerusalem community. Our tenth principle is freedom and celebration. *They partook of food with glad and generous hearts.*<sup>ii</sup> The Jerusalem community celebrated life, enjoyed its goodness, but for the sake of their own souls, for the sake of the Kingdom, and for the sake of the needy deliberately forewent their rights.

### Cooperative Economics

Acts 2:44 tells us, *all who believed were together and had all things in common.* The fourth principle is *cooperative economics.*

Have you ever wondered why thousands of people started selling their possessions in the early church, so that there was not a needy one among them? The apostles modelled a lifestyle of communal sharing, and of simplicity. This was but an extension of the teaching of Jesus, demonstrated in the common purse of the disciples. It is an extension of the other principle in the Old Testament: *redistribution for equality*, not an utopian equality, but an equality in spirit that results in an active equalizing of resources.

### Forsaking

*And they sold their possessions and goods ...and distributed them to all, as any had need (v. 45).*

When Peter and John went up to the temple and were asked for alms, they had none. So they prayed for healing for the man. This is the nature of a bishop, of a leader of the church, to live simply, and be dependent on God. This involved *forsaking, simplicity, renunciation (6)*. The motivation for such drastic action is threefold:

- one cannot serve God and money.

- the needs of proclaiming the Kingdom
- compassion for the poor and needy since, *if anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him.*<sup>iii</sup>

This was *redistribution* (7) to meet the needs of those within the community... The result? a single-mindedness to God, a love for each other and a dynamic witness. We are back to principle one.

## Private Ownership Without Possessiveness

Acts 4:32 tells us:

*the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no-one said that any of the things which they possessed was their own, but they had everything in common.*

Some continued to possess things, but they gave up the attitude of protective *private ownership* (9). It was a voluntary thing. Acts 5 tells us the story of a couple who tried to cheat God. In verse 4, Peter tells them:

*while the property remained unsold, did it not remain your own? and after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?*

## The Equalizing Gospel

In this community we see the *equalizing* (7) effect of the gospel. The poor had their needs met. *There was not a needy one among them.* The rich are brought low. Jesus' brother tells us *Let the believer who is lowly exalt in being raised and the rich in his humiliation.*<sup>iv</sup> For the Kingdom uplifts the poor, but the rich refuse to enter it.

But at what level is this equality? Do all of us receive a mansion and two cars? No! it is the level of basic needs. *For we brought nothing into this world and we cannot take anything out of this world, but if we have food and clothing we shall be content.*<sup>v</sup> Basic needs vary according to many factors, so this is not a fixed level - a family of twelve needs more than a single person. It is a voluntary lifestyle. The outward action depends on the inner values.

I used to call it a simple lifestyle but it is a very complex process that is difficult to sustain unless there is a committed community that share this value. For most it is a *sacrificial lifestyle* (6), where we learn to depend on our heavenly Father for our basic needs rather than become anxious.<sup>vi</sup> Sacrificial living seems an easier concept to work with.

## An Eternal Jubilee?

It is difficult to discern if the early church understood this as simply a year of Jubilee or an eternal Jubilee. We only have a picture of Jerusalem church for three to four years before it was scattered everywhere in Acts 8, so it is difficult to determine what normal church life was beyond those early days of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, since the disciples had been with Jesus for three and a half years living a Jubilee lifestyle, one would likely conclude it was understood as an eternal Jubilee, defining an ongoing lifestyle for the church throughout the ages. That Paul does not refer to the Jubilee is reasonable, as to non-Jews it would have made little sense. (While he preached the Kingdom of God,<sup>vii</sup> he only uses that Jewish phraseology sixteen times in his letters, speaking more of its expression in the church or the work of the Holy Spirit).

How then did the early church continue to work out these principles as the gospel expanded?

## Work

With a new role to proclaim the Kingdom, and a new community to demonstrate it, do we still need to work? This was the question of the Thessalonians, who were so expectant of Christ's return to establish his Kingdom that they stopped working.

We need to look at both the disciples, called to full-time Christian work and those labouring with their hands, also Christian work. To the latter, Paul instructs, *to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody.*<sup>viii</sup>

Thus we now work for a new set of motivations:

- to extend the Kingdom, by commanding the respect of outsiders.
- to be dependent on nobody and
- to support others,<sup>ix</sup> both the needy and those involved in proclaiming the Kingdom.
- The thief must learn to work with his hands (Eph 4:28), so as to give to those in need.

Aside from productive work there are other vocations. Education in the scriptures is always considered good. Knowledge is essential to wisdom. In acquiring knowledge we learn of God. Working at a good education honours God.

### ***Full-time Christian Work***

But our primary work is now to be labourers in the Kingdom reaping a harvest.<sup>x</sup> And some are called to a full-time role in this. A full-time worker is to be supported because of his hard work.<sup>xi</sup> *The labourer is worthy of his wages.* However the normal approach of the early church was to depend on laymen and lay elders who supported themselves.

The Old Testament provision of manna, is the basis for Jesus' teaching to the apostles, that they are not to worry about food and drink, for if they *seek first his Kingdom, all these things will be yours as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow.*<sup>xii</sup> Thus missionary pioneers, both overseas and within New Zealand look to God through prayer for provision. Paul extended this principle numerous times in his writings.

The prophets and the apostles are, it tends to follow this principle of God's supernatural provision, yet with certain communal sanctioning of the processes. The manna is sufficient for the day but not for longer. Though on the sixth day there is provision for the Sabbath.

For the priests (equivalent to today's pastors of local flocks in contrast to the mobile apostles), this is usually well-structured and mandated for the people of God to provide for them regularly through the regular worship – a different process to that of manna. They lived off a portion of the tithe (the majority of the tithes were for the poor, but portions were for the priests). There were various regulations that occurred as the priesthood developed and changed.

Similarly, in the New Testament, the pastor of the local congregation is worthy of *double honour* (i.e. financial remuneration above just honour), especially *those who labour in teaching and preaching.*<sup>xiii</sup> This is not the young Bible College graduate, who feels entitled to enter a paid job, but the preacher and spouse who have raised their family, provided well for them, and at the same time worthily preached the word. They have seen fruitfulness such that they need to be supported by the church in order to give time to leadership. Denominations develop systems to enable such processes.

William Carey, known as the founder of modern missions, lived by the principle (derived from the Moravians) of *business as mission*. From his business enterprises he supported his apostolic roles and those of his team. Hudson Taylor by contrast, chose to *live by faith*, forming what is now Overseas Missionary Fellowship on the basis of covenant with God that God would provide in answer to prayer alone, coupled with wise communication, but non-solicitation. Both approaches provide an expandable base for new workers to come into the apostolic bands, self-funded, not dependent on past sources of funding.

These are not the same as the fundraising of the American society. Nor are faith missions the same as faith-based organisations of the American society dependent on a whole system of accessing grants from foundations and government, in a government – church symbiosis. This is a worthy process of institutionalised redistribution.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, *give us this day, our daily bread.*<sup>xiv</sup> In our context, where society is based on monthly or yearly provision, there is sufficient for each month or year.

Thus, those who live by faith are often seen to be struggling. They do not have money put aside. But in reality, they are constantly amazed at the provision of God.

## ***Rest Reinterpreted***

Both Paul in the epistles, and the author to the Hebrews reinterpret the principle of rest dramatically. Paul speaks of some holding one day sacred while others in their new found freedom hold all days as being holy.<sup>xv</sup> Some would understand him as not speaking of the Sabbath, but of other holy days. Others take this as a liberty to hold all days alike.

Hebrews 4:1-11 speaks of entering our spiritual rest, no longer striving to earn salvation or acceptance, but enjoying the free grace of a salvation bestowed. It is an extension of theme of rest to a perpetual state of rest. As with the rest of the Jubilee principles we are now in continuous Jubilee.

These open the door to a diversity of Christian interpretations. Yet the normative view is to keep Sunday (not a Biblical norm, but a historic cultural choice from Roman times based on celebrating the day of resurrection) as a day of revival through worship (spiritual rest), recreation (physical rest) and restoration (emotional rest), and to seek to sustain national enforcement of this day as beneficial for all – believers or not.

## **Redistribution**

Prov 3:9,10 tells us to give the first fruits of our hands, first and foremost, to God. It is generally considered that the tithe is a workable amount to give, though the New Testament nowhere commands this. As my father used to say,

*Give 10%, save 10%, then live within your means.*

The first priority with the tithe is giving to the poor. In the New Testament the portion for the poor was given to the apostles, who distributed through the deacons to the poor.

A portion of the tithe was to be used for the priest (the equivalent in many churches today being the minister or pastor). But not the whole tithe – many of our churches consume most of the giving on pastoral salaries and buildings rather than delivery of services to the needy. Only a tithe of the tithe was given to sustain the temple and priests. Yet, while we no longer have a temple, we also have a collective responsibility for sustaining our worship places and pastoral leaders.

It cannot be affirmed that the Old Testament law of tithes is binding on the Christian Church in the New Testament, nevertheless the principle of this law remains, and is incorporated in the gospel.<sup>xvi</sup> If the motive to liberality is greater now than in Old Testament times, then Christians ought to go beyond the Jewish people in consecrating both themselves and their substance to God.

There is no teaching on tithing in the New Testament. But there is teaching on sacrificial giving. A good starting point for giving is to follow the Old Testament principle of tithing for the poor, plus a tithe of a tithe for the full time Christian workers, such as pastors. We can move money to the poor as we have workers among the poor, so the support of missionaries is a critical part of our redistribution.

The location of where that giving goes is complex, and very culturally defined. Many pastors believe the tithe should be given to the church. In the book of Acts, it was given to the Apostles for redistribution. Today apostles lead large movements, so there is a basis for giving and redistributing through the denominational structures. The apostle Paul, appreciated very much the Philippian gifts to his mission work.<sup>xvii</sup>

From all of the above it can be seen that there is no one way that financial structures should be developed in churches and denominations and missions, but there are clusters of principles.

There are also aberrations I face globally among the poor. Poor pastors struggle to survive, so put more and more pressure on their poor people to give. This is supported by the Prosperity Gospel, which says if they give to this pastor's need, God will bless. There is a question as to whether one must first provide for one's family. In the Pacific Island community, as in poor communities globally, the pressures to give to the church can be very intense where in the words of one of my friends, people beg, borrow or steal at times to contribute to the church!! This ought not to be! The widow's mite is to be voluntarily given, not coerced!

## ***Jubilee and International Redistribution***

The principles of Jubilee as evidenced in Jesus' apostolic community, then in the Acts community, are further extended globally in Paul's teaching on global redistribution between the churches in II Cor 8, 9. What does this mean for us? We are to share from our resources so that others are uplifted, so all come to some level of equality and justice. God didn't intend exact equality but he did intend justice and levels that feel equal and free and creative.

We can marry this principle seven of *redistribution* with the principle of social justice into a principle of *distributive justice at national levels*. There will never be a clear Christian consensus as to the extent Government should be involved in such distributive justice as it is a balancing act between the Biblical imperative, affirmed multiple times in the Psalms, for rulers to make sure the poor are provided for, and the Biblical theme of limits on the authority of government which the prophet Samuel enumerated. Penk<sup>xviii</sup> and Thomas<sup>xix</sup> seek to balance these principles in their evaluations of the New Zealand taxation regime. Throughout the last century, most theologians have argued for the importance of governmental care for the poor. Right-wing American theologians tend to err towards limiting government involvement.

## **Simple Lifestyle vs Addictive Consumption**

*But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*<sup>xx</sup>

Jesus tells us to step out of the world, the desire for other things, the delight in riches. Addiction to consumption requires drastic surgery if we are to be holy. Generally we use the phrase a *Lifestyle of Simplicity* to speak of the Kingdom opposite to the greed that controls our society. This principle has been developed for Kiwis going to live in the slums in my earlier writings, *The Lifestyle and Values of Servants*, and follows,<sup>xxi</sup> See also Murray Sheard's work, *Living Simply*, for an expansion of these ideas.<sup>xxii</sup>

## **Non-Destitute Poverty**

*The Master not only chose poverty in birth, in life and death, he also calls his servants to such a lifestyle. We recognize our basic needs for food and clothing (I Timothy 6:6-8, Matthew 6:25-33), which may include tools of our trade, children's toys.*

*We recognize the just need, inferred from the Scriptures for each family to own its own home, although some, like the Master, may choose a mobile, apostolic life with nowhere to lay one's head (Luke 9:58). In putting our treasure in heaven, we covet the unsearchable riches of Christ.*

*We desire to possess nothing that cannot be shared with those around us. Regarding what we have, we hold it not as our own but rather as lent to us for a season. We will seek to exclude from both our personal and communal lives the cares of the world, the delight in riches and the desire for other things (Matthew 4:19).*

*We will avoid the abundance of communal properties or wealth. Buildings, administration and ministry shall be developed in the simplest manner consistent with good health and with efficient, well-pleasing work.*

## **3. Inner Simplicity**

*Renouncing possessions is an outworking of an inner simplifying of our lives which lead to the openness, gentleness, spontaneity, and serenity that marked the Master.*

*In renouncing possessions, we seek to simplify our external lives in order to simplify more clearly our inner lives and focus on knowing our Lord.*

*Along with outward poverty, we desire an inner humility; along with servant works, we seek the spirit of a true servant.*

*In caring little for this world where we are strangers and pilgrims, we set our hearts on that spiritual home where our treasure is being saved up, and on that glory which we shall share with our Lord, provided we suffer with him.*

*We encourage middle-class Christians to such simplicity of lifestyle. For some it means earning less, and using their time for the kingdom.*

*For others it means to earn much, consume little, board nothing, give generously and celebrate living. Such lifestyles are infinitely varied. We refuse to judge others in such areas.*

## **The Choice**

What is the action you need to take regarding finances? Is it to make the basic decision to put first his Kingdom? Is it to get out of the terrible grasp of riches or debt? Is it forsaking all, in order that you might proclaim the gospel? Is it to work harder in order to help those in need? Is it to share the possessions you have?

God is very creative. There are many alternatives. Which is the alternative he is speaking to you?

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## ***Chapter 5: Jubilee and Economics in the Early Church***

<sup>i</sup> Matt 26:9.

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 2:46.

<sup>iii</sup> 1 John 3:17.

<sup>iv</sup> James 1:9.

<sup>v</sup> 1 Tim 6:6-8.

<sup>vi</sup> Matt 6:25-33.

<sup>vii</sup> Acts 28:23,31

<sup>viii</sup> 1 Thes 4:11,12.

<sup>ix</sup> Acts 20:35.

<sup>x</sup> Matt 9:37,38.

<sup>xi</sup> 1 Tim 5:18.

<sup>xii</sup> Matt 6:25-33.

<sup>xiii</sup> 1 Tim 5:17.

<sup>xiv</sup> Matt 6:11.

<sup>xv</sup> Rom 14:5-6.

<sup>xvi</sup> 1 Cor 9:13-14.

<sup>xvii</sup> Phil 4:14,15.

<sup>xviii</sup> Penk, 2008.

<sup>xix</sup> Thomas 2008.

<sup>xx</sup> I Timothy 6:6-8.

<sup>xxi</sup> Grigg, 1983.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sheard, 1999.

## ***Ten Principles of Economic Discipleship***