

The Jubilee Roadmap

A biblical foundation for relational
societies

Guy Brandon



The Jubilee Roadmap

How should Christians approach the call to live out their faith in every area of life, in a way that's faithful to scripture, rooted in the mission of the church, avoids the sacred/secular divide and is coherent to others in a post-Christian society?

The booklet in your hands summarises the Jubilee Centre's response to this challenge. It is based on the conviction that if we start with the premise of individualism, which is the dominant narrative in the Western world, then we simply won't understand all the Bible has to say to our society. But if we read Scripture through the lens of relationships – which Jesus emphasises in Matthew 22:37-40 – then we begin to see how it can address key economic, social and political issues today.

The Jubilee Roadmap suggests two alternative directions of travel for eight major themes: Family, Property, Community, Government, Finance and the Economy, Work and Rest, Welfare and Justice. One direction reflects the prevailing thinking based on individualism, while the other – the road less travelled – points towards a society based on good and just relationships.

This concise introduction offers a wealth of wisdom and insight to Christians seeking to be salt and light in today's society.

'I am delighted to see this handy and helpful summary of the ways in which the biblical and relational work of the Jubilee Centre could impact church and society. May it prove informative and inspirational to many and enhance the transforming power of the salt and light of those who seek to live by, and to live out, the values of the kingdom of God.'

Christopher J.H. Wright

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Foreword

From its foundation in the 1980s I was privileged to have a connection with the Jubilee Centre, both through personal friendship with its founder, Michael Schluter, and also through a shared understanding of how the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, relates to contemporary ethical issues. My own work on Old Testament ethics found very practical application in the publications and campaigns of the Jubilee Centre.

For three decades the Jubilee Centre has been active in bringing a biblical perspective to the public arena of social policy, legislation and reform. Key to the Centre's theological position is the use of the Old Testament as a normative authority for Christian social ethics: New Testament texts such as Matthew 5:17-20 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17 require that Christians are obliged to search the Old Testament scriptures for ethical guidance, and confining the relevance of Old Testament law to Israel BC is fundamentally misguided.

This holistic approach regards the whole social system of Israel as a normative model. That is, rather than take isolated laws and attempt to derive moral principles from them, we need to see how individual laws and whole categories of law, as well as the many social, economic and political institutions of Israel, functioned together. God did not just give arbitrary laws to an otherwise 'neutral' community; God created that community, moulding them out of an unpromising crowd of escaped slaves into a people with distinctive structures of social life in relation to the historical and cultural context in which they lived. It is this total community that was to serve as God's model for the nations. Therefore, any principles we derive from different parts of the model must be integrated and be consistent with the whole.

I am delighted to see this handy and helpful summary of the ways in which the biblical and relational work of the Jubilee Centre could impact church and society. May it prove informative and inspirational to many and enhance the transforming power of the salt and light of those who seek to live by, and to live out, the values of the kingdom of God.

Christopher J.H. Wright
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I. Setting the scene

1. Why this booklet?

The decades since the Second World War have seen far-reaching developments that have profoundly changed the way we live, communicate and do business – from cheap travel and the sexual revolution in the 1960s through to the expansion of the internet and rise of mobile technology in the '90s, to today's profusion of smartphones, email and social media. 21st century consumer culture, with its emphases on sex, shopping, celebrity and the self, represents a very different landscape to that of 50 or even 20 years ago.

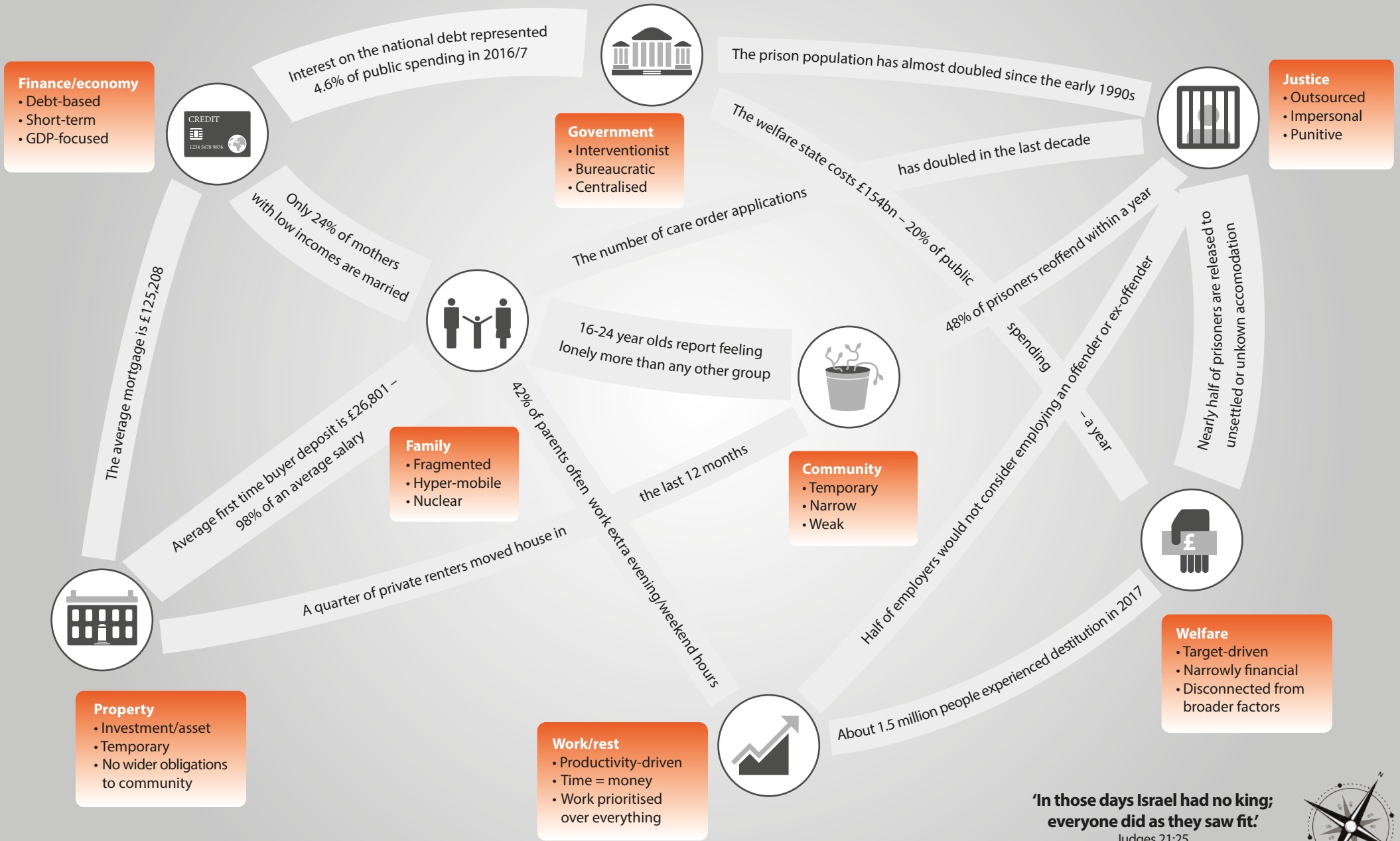
Social, economic and political problems

Alongside these developments have arisen social problems which defy easy solutions: family breakdown, crime, health and material inequality, as well as high levels of public and private debt. In 2007/08, the Global Financial Crisis marked a watershed in our history. As the events of the Credit Crunch and following recession unfolded it became increasingly clear that the economic system we had taken for granted for so long is broken, and that fundamental changes have to be made to avoid even worse consequences. Whilst the impacts of the financial crisis continue to make themselves felt across the world, the problems facing our society cannot be reduced to the health of the economy alone. The loss of faith in Capitalism and the period of austerity that has followed the financial crisis prompted the recognition that some profound changes – political, social and economic – were long overdue. Consequently, there is an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the world in which we live: to reassess our values and start again with fresh priorities.

A Christian response

This booklet was written to articulate a positive vision of society rooted in biblical ideals – most notably the practices and impacts of the Jubilee year. The immediate context of this was the 2008 financial crisis, and the accusation that the Church has not been able to offer coherent answers to the many problems facing our society. Properly understood, though, we believe that the Bible has much to teach us about how we can go about changing society for the better – actively bringing about justice and living faithfully to God in the decisions we make as individuals, churches and as a nation.

Setting the scene: a web of interconnected problems



2. Joined-up living

It is tempting to think that the problems facing our society can be fixed quickly and simply. Lowering interest rates stimulates the economy. Raising the retirement age generates more taxes and lowers government expenditure. Adjusting child benefit encourages more parents back into work. In purely economic terms, these make some sense.

Complex, interwoven problems

The catch is that society is a complex system. As the previous diagram shows, nothing exists in isolation. Every problem we fix by these means creates a range of side-effects. Like bubbles under the wallpaper, if we push one down it often leads to unintended consequences elsewhere.

If we really want to address our social and economic challenges in a lasting and meaningful way, we need a holistic vision.

Policies that affect employment also impact couples and family structure, since they influence who works where, for how long, and for how much money. Family structure affects the welfare budget, which picks up the costs of broken and struggling households. Interest rates impact employment, but they

also affect how much families pay on their mortgages and credit cards and the financial problems or freedom they experience as a result – either at the time or perhaps many years later.

The messages we receive about these interlocking aspects of society also play a role in shaping our cultural standards, what and who we value and prioritise: whether the opportunity to move for work is more important than stable, rooted communities; whether sexual freedom is more important than strong families; whether my personal choices are more important than the welfare of society as a whole. None of these things can be viewed in isolation. But that is the basis on which public policy – so often short-term, single-issue and fragmentary – tends to operate.

The need for a holistic answer

If we really want to address our social and economic challenges in a lasting and meaningful way, we need a holistic vision rather than just single-issue political campaigns. We believe that the kind of society the people of Israel were called to be, described in both the Law and the prophets' critique of their failures, serves as an inspiring example of how a society can 'walk in the ways of the Lord' – offering unique insights into the untidy collection of interconnected problems we face.

3. The biblical vision for society

The verse that epitomises the society depicted in the first illustration is Judges 21:25, 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.' Without a source of guidance society disintegrated into a collection of individuals, each going their own way: like our own, an individualistic culture that lacked overall coherence and direction.

This is diametrically opposed to the Bible's vision for the ideal society. From Creation, through the Covenant with Abraham and later Israel, to the Crucifixion and beyond, the loving relations among the Persons of the Trinity provide the basis for God's concern with right relationships.

Flourishing relationships

Jesus summarised the laws of the Old Testament in terms of flourishing relationships: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.' (Matt. 22:37-40)

God's concern for healthy relationships is the underlying theme that can inform our understanding and application of the Bible's laws: everything in the Bible is about the quality and strength of our relationships with God or our neighbour. Christianity is a relational religion. The Trinity, the idea of Covenant, the Incarnation and the Cross are all fundamentally concerned with relationships between God and human persons.

The Jubilee year

The Jubilee year (Lev. 25), was central to the nature of biblical society. Its fundamental principle was that land could not be bought or sold permanently, but was returned to its original owners every 50 years. Overall the Jubilee laws shaped the economy, limited debt and poverty, governed patterns of work, rest and welfare, and supported strong families and communities. As a whole, biblical law is designed to provide the opportunity for close relationships, and to maintain them – whether within families, in business transactions, in religious worship or between different nations.

This idea is alien to the modern mind. We are used to thinking of ourselves as individuals and in terms of our personal rights and freedoms, rather than our responsibilities to others and how we fit into society as a whole. The Bible's emphasis on right relationships is a challenge to our culture's destructive focus on the self and provides a framework within which we can apply its teachings to our situation today.

II. The biblical model

1. Israel as a model for society

Both Old and New Testaments offer profound insights for our culture, but it is the Old Testament that provides detailed information about how God wanted his people to structure their economy and society. Unlike Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Old Testament model builds in measures to account for 'hardness of heart': humans' innate tendency to go their own way. Such tough realism is essential when dealing with the realities of a secular society, over against God's ideals for the Church (cf. Matt. 19:8).

An integrated vision

Even Christians can be sceptical about the relevance of the Old Testament. It can seem so remote from our culture that we sometimes believe it cannot possibly have anything helpful to say. However, one reason that the vision of society described in the Old Testament is uniquely relevant is because it was so highly integrated. Different types of relationship and themes of public policy worked in harmony, rather than in competition. This is important because looking at a single topic from a biblical perspective – perhaps debt, abortion or workers' rights – is not enough. Even if the whole span of biblical thought is applied in detail to a specific issue, the idea still needs to be connected to the other interwoven strands of society, first in the historical, biblical setting and then in the application for our own day.

To understand how to apply a principle drawn from the Bible, then, we first have to understand how the different laws fitted together for Israel to create the relational ideal. Otherwise, it risks becoming disconnected from related issues, potentially leading to unintended and perhaps harmful consequences. Understood as a whole, the model of Israel offers a 'paradigm' or comprehensive template we can use to tackle the problems that face our own society.

Eight themes

The illustration and the sections below illustrate the relationships between some of the most important themes of biblical law and the sections of society they impacted: **Government, Community, Family, Finance and the Economy, Property, Work and Rest, Justice and Welfare**. Although there are other themes that are important to life today – such as education or the environment – the significance of the strands addressed here is indicated by the amount of space they occupy in the Bible.

2. Overview of Biblical law

The Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25 are fundamental to understanding this paradigm and thus we have treated them as iconic for the system as a whole. These laws were given to Moses on Sinai, to be applied ‘when you enter the land I am going to give you’ (Lev. 25:2). The section of the book of Leviticus in which this chapter is found is intensely focussed upon the idea of holiness as a condition of staying in the land (cf. Lev. 26). Leviticus 25 lays out some of the core principles that shaped Israel’s society and economy – interconnected values and priorities that provided the foundations for the kind of society that God wanted his people to build. ‘Holiness’ has social and economic dimensions, as well as those which are religious and sacrificial.

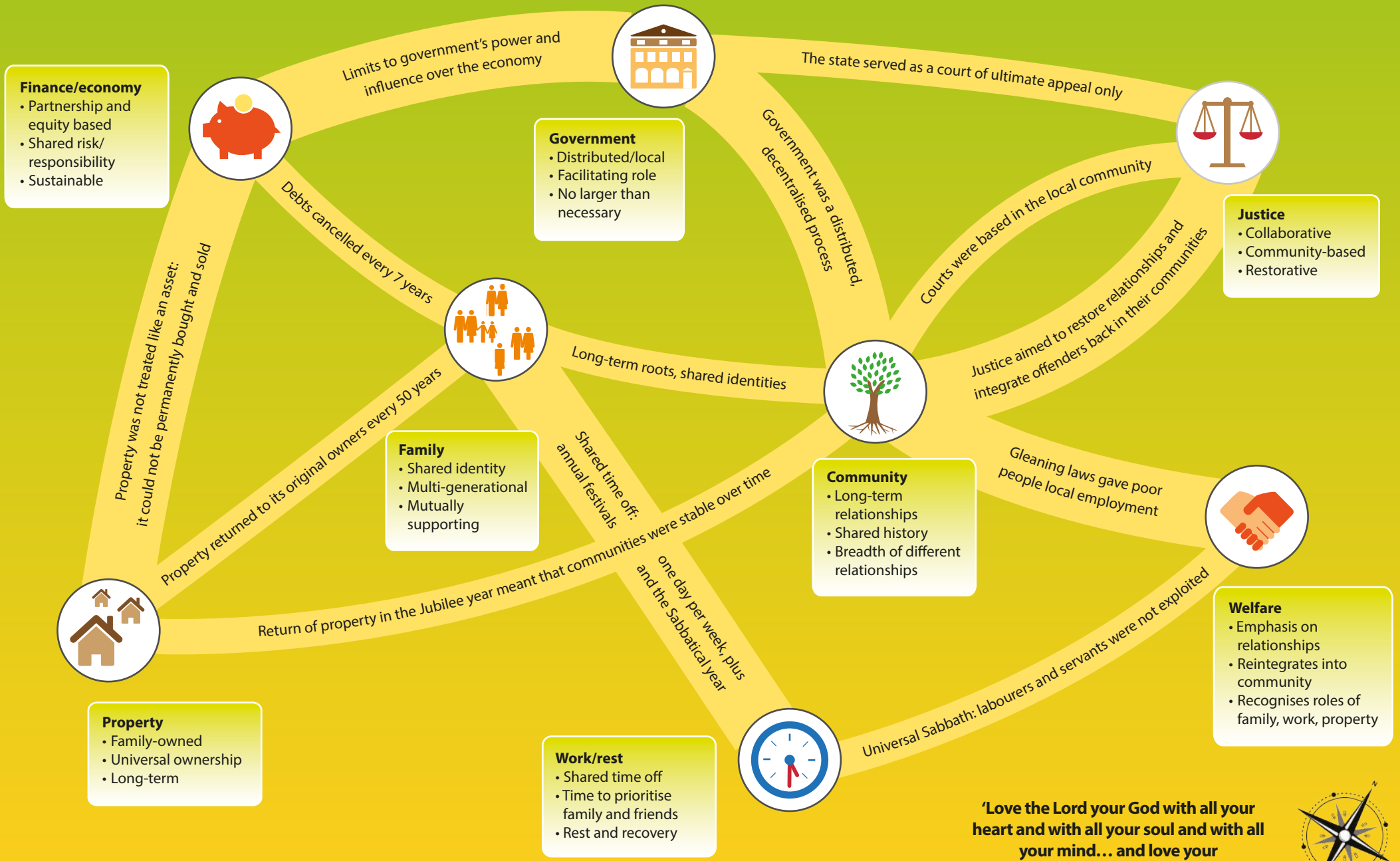
Interconnected laws

Beyond this, the laws described in the Old Testament – many of them in Deuteronomy – address many different areas of life. Some laws are fairly narrow, relating predominantly to one area. Nevertheless, because society is so interconnected, these could have wide-ranging effects – as the next illustration demonstrates. So, for example, laws around marriage are most directly relevant to the integrity of the family, but this had major consequences for the family’s relationship with the wider community, the economy, the environment and much else besides. Other laws are cross-cutting, addressing several areas of life simultaneously. The laws about the Sabbath encompass the strength of the family, workers’ welfare and the health of the economy, as well as the nation’s relationship with God.

As with the other strands, the laws governing the Israelites’ relationship with God were not inseparable from other areas of life. Some of the laws in the Old Testament – such as those applying to sacrifice and festivals – are more obviously relevant to the nation’s spiritual life. However, there was no distinction between sacred and secular law: society as a whole was ordered according to God’s instructions, and keeping the Law was a critical element of Israel’s relationship with God.

Jesus’ coming changed the status and form of observance of certain regulations. Therefore we do not observe sacrifices or commands about exclusivity today (such as the food laws), since Jesus’ sacrifice has rendered these obsolete in that form. However, he placed the highest importance on the Law as a whole (Matt. 5:17-18) and was adamant that he had not come to abolish the Law.

The biblical model: a holistic vision for society



'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... and love your neighbour as yourself.'

Matt. 22:37-40





The extended family

The *extended* family was the building block of society. Unlike our nuclear families (for which there is no word in the Old Testament), which comprise only parents and children, these were much larger units of perhaps 20 or 30 people consisting of the descendants of a single living ancestor – typically several related families over three or four generations, living in a cluster of buildings on their shared ancestral plot of land. As well as blood relatives, in wealthier families these groups would include hired workers, servants and adopted children.

Networks of support

It was within the extended family that a person's primary needs for provision and belonging were met. These units were economically self-supporting, and also acted as a safety net for those who did not have families of their own.

Because of the way the family was integrated with so many other parts of society, these laws... also had the broader purpose of influencing the character of the nation as a whole.

The three-generational family was the fundamental unit of society, but it was also part of much wider networks of relationships: the village or clan, the tribe, and the nation of Israel as a whole. Each of these groupings would have met various needs – protection, justice, trade, finance, welfare, employment, education, worship – as required.

Safeguarding family

A large number of the Bible's laws were designed to protect and strengthen the family because it was so important and played such a central role in social, political, military and economic life. Because of the way the family was integrated with so many other parts of society, these laws – whether economic, sexual or ceremonial/religious – also had the broader purpose of influencing the character of the nation as a whole, shaping it from the ground up.



Property

Closely linked to the status of the family was Israel's rootedness in the land. The vision was that each extended family had its own plot of land, which had been allocated when the Israelites first entered the land of Canaan (Josh. 13-19). This enabled each family to remain economically self-sufficient, and provided a platform of equality across all the different families in Israel. It also helped to strengthen and maintain the inter-generational relationships that existed within the extended family.

No family was faced with permanent loss of their land and, at least once in a person's lifetime, there was a chance of prosperity and independence for everyone.

However, the land did not belong to the Israelites outright: it was loaned to them by God. Most land could not be bought or sold on a permanent basis, 'because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants' (Lev. 25:23). If a family fell on hard times, it could sell its ancestral plot to another family, but only until the next Jubilee Year, every 50th year. These factors – ultimate ownership by God and long-term stewardship by extended families – also helped to foster a sustainable approach to the environment.

A permanent inheritance

In the event that land had to be sold, its value was therefore limited because it could only be sold on a leasehold basis: the value was directly dependent on the number of years of crops the new tenant would receive before the next Jubilee year, when the plot reverted to its original owners. (The exception to this was urban property – and even then, the seller was allowed to buy it back for up to a year.)

This meant that no family was faced with permanent loss of their rural land and, at least once in a person's lifetime, there was a chance of prosperity and independence for everyone. It also meant that the wealthy could not amass land at the expense of the poor. As well as this redistribution of land every fifty years, citizens who had pledged to work for others due to debt or poverty were released to return to their families every seventh year.



Community

Another effect of the Jubilee laws was that families had strong collective roots in their plot of land. The land was their means of production, and their shared stake in it meant there was a strong incentive to stay together.

The Jubilee laws, therefore, supported both the stability of the extended family and relationships within the wider community. Populations were relatively fixed and mobility was limited. It was recognised that poverty and the need for employment were common reasons why people would leave their existing communities, and various measures aimed to make this unnecessary. Where someone was forced to move to find work, there were periodic opportunities to return home, with debts written off every seventh year, and land returned to its original owners every fiftieth year.

Long-term roots

This was important because family and community could not perform their functions properly if they were scattered and fragmented. Long-term roots meant that there were opportunities for strong relationships to be developed across many different areas of life and across generations. Under these circumstances trust was easier to establish, since two parties did not exist in isolation but might have generations of shared history, plus many family members and friends in common.

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The reciprocal arrangements this enabled had benefits throughout the community and underpinned a healthy economy and welfare system, as well as dramatically reducing the need for outside intervention by more centralised (government) authorities.



The role of government

The Bible is extremely cautious about centralised power of any kind. This was partly a reaction against the abuses the Israelites had experienced in the highly centralised and bureaucratic state of Egypt, where Pharaoh was viewed as a god. Similarly, the Assyrian, Babylonian and Roman empires come in for heavy criticism on the grounds that they are prone to corruption, violence and injustice at their citizens' cost.

Limited power

Samuel warned the Israelites that establishing a king and state apparatus in Israel would entail a loss of their freedom and would require heavy taxation to pay for it all (1 Sam. 8). Unlike neighbouring countries, in Israel the power of the state over its citizens was carefully circumscribed to prevent the worst abuses from occurring (Deut. 17:14-20). The king was not to amass money and possessions, or military hardware, and was to be subject to the Law, not above it – including its requirements for land ownership and economic sustainability.

Central government did not have a major role in the early period of Old Testament Israel. Its task was rarely to intervene directly, but more routinely to enable the different groups in society to carry out their roles most effectively.

Decentralised government

Consequently central government did not have a major role in the early period of Old Testament Israel. Its task was rarely to intervene directly, but more routinely to enable the different groups in society to carry out their roles most effectively. Power was passed down to the local level as far as was possible, with families and communities governing themselves and higher authorities only being involved when a problem became too large to deal with. The immediate form of government for most citizens consisted of the 'elders at the gate' of the city, who judged local matters (e.g. Ruth 4:11).

State intrusion was kept to a minimum; instead responsibility and initiative were encouraged at a local level where they would have the effect of helping people bond together through their collective involvement.



Economic sustainability

Family and community relationships were further supported by the Bible's approach to the economy, debt and interest – though these were not consistently observed through Israel's history (Neh. 5; Jer. 34:8-11). The Jubilee laws were intended to ensure that inequalities could not occur as a result of a wealthy elite opportunistically buying up large tracts of land from the poor and effectively enslaving them.

An interest-free economy

Debt was carefully regulated. The Israelites were not allowed to charge one another interest (Deut. 23:19), and loans were cancelled every seventh year (Deut. 15:1-6). This meant that debts could not spiral out of control, pushing people into long-term poverty. The wealthy were not able to exploit the vulnerability of the poor in this way, meaning that inequalities would not become entrenched.

Biblical law... expects a close link between an investment and its return – rather than money multiplying simply through the passing of time.

Debt was seen as a last-ditch solution to hardship, not something routine and trivial. Jesus frequently used debt as an image for sin, including in the Lord's Prayer. It was recognised that debt always entailed an

element of enslavement, with the resentment that could easily follow: 'The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender' (Prov. 22:7). Similarly, interest was a tool by which the rich unjustly extracted further money from their debtors: 'He who increases his wealth by interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor' (Prov. 28:8).

Putting money to work

Biblical law sets out a different framework. It expects a close link between an investment and its return – rather than money multiplying simply through the passing of time. The familiar picture is that people should only reap where they themselves have sown; people have to work for an income, or make some contribution through their involvement when their money is invested (Luke 19:22-23). Together, these measures helped to promote relational independence, economic sustainability, and prevented long-term inequalities from arising and being perpetuated. In turn, this protected families from having to sell their land, or people being forced to move away from their communities to find work elsewhere.



Welfare

Stable families and communities, rooted together in the land they owned, formed a vital strand of the welfare system. Gleaning laws required that the Israelites left some of their harvests so that the poor could collect the remainder (Deut. 24:19-22). When someone fell on really hard times, they could temporarily sell themselves to another family – though this effectively meant being treated as a hired worker, rather than as a slave (Lev. 25:35-43).

Relational poverty

However, poverty was not understood solely in financial terms. The people who are repeatedly mentioned in the context of welfare are ‘the alien, the fatherless and the widow’ (Deut. 24:19): groups who were poor because they tended to be marginalised and might not belong to a family of their own. Financial poverty was often a symptom of ‘relational poverty’. This is why there was such an emphasis on providing for the poor in a way that enabled them to continue living within their families, communities and existing networks of support (Lev. 25:35).

Poverty was not understood solely in financial terms... Financial poverty was often a symptom of “relational poverty”.

The yearly and three-yearly tithes of agricultural produce were set aside for the poor, landless and those without families (Deut. 14:22-29). Additionally, those experiencing hardship could ask for a loan at zero interest, rather than an outright gift, with the condition that the loan would be written off in the seventh year (Deut. 15:7-11). This incentivised the poor to work in order to pay the money back, but maintained their self-respect and protected them from mounting debt.

Protecting the vulnerable

In the worst case scenario, when someone had to sell their land or labour in return for provision, there were always limits on the extent of this. ‘Slaves’ had far more protection than elsewhere in the Ancient Near East, including in Egypt, where the Israelites had experienced harsh treatment under Pharaoh. Periodically, the system would be reset with the cancellation of debts and slaves being freed every seventh year (Deut. 15:12-15). Additionally, *everyone* enjoyed a day off each week. It was a system which ensured dignity, not dependency, and a culture of mutual obligation rather than entitlement.



The Sabbath

The Sabbath – as well as the related Sabbatical year (when slaves were freed and debts cancelled) and the Jubilee year (when land was returned to its original owners) – were powerful influences in the life of Israel, reinforcing some of its strongest ideals. They were a key part of the covenant between God and Israel: a way of honouring God and their neighbours.

All of Israel was instructed to rest on the Sabbath... workers' right to rest had to be respected.

All of Israel was instructed to rest on the Sabbath, but it was far more than a day off (Deut. 5:12-15). Yet again, the commandment was a response to the Israelites' background as slaves in Egypt, where they had no choice but to work every day of the week (Deut. 5:15). Because the laws applied to everyone,

Israelite or foreign, slave or free, it also meant that workers' right to rest had to be respected.

Work-life balance

The Sabbath laws affected many different areas of life. First and foremost, the Sabbath had religious significance as a way that the Israelites were consciously to prioritise their relationship with God over work. It was also a means of promoting justice, since when work and financial gain become more important than anything else, dishonesty and injustice soon follow (e.g. Amos 8:4-6). The Sabbath enabled families to have time together without work.

As a whole, the Sabbath, Sabbatical year, Jubilee year and three annual ten-day festivals all reinforced Israel's identity as God's people, as well as the ideals of freedom from slavery and poverty, family economic independence and economic justice. In addition, they helped to ensure proper 'work-life balance', to prevent people becoming materialistic and workaholic.



Justice

If right relationship is the unifying theme of Old Testament law, then the purpose of justice was to restore relationships where, for one reason or another, they had gone wrong. This did not preclude punishment or restitution as part of the process, but they were means to this end, rather than ends in themselves. The relationship requiring restoration might be between the offender and the victim, between two individuals or groups in a civil case, between an individual and the community, or between an individual and God – or any combination of these.

The Law served as a boundary marker, indicating the way individuals were to act if they wanted to remain within the community.

The law codes of the Old Testament outline the framework for the kind of society that God wanted in Israel. The Law served as a boundary marker, indicating the way individuals were to act if they wanted to remain within the community.

Local justice

As with everything else, justice was administered locally wherever possible and only the most difficult cases were dealt with centrally (Deut. 16:18; 17:8-13). Ideally, individuals and communities were to avoid relying on the courts and were to settle disputes amongst themselves without outside intervention – also the principle that Jesus emphasises in Matthew 5:25-26. This placed responsibility and justice in the hands of the people, rather than with a small group of professionals, and encouraged engagement and a relational solution between the two parties.

Where an official decision was necessary, the Levites played a key role in settling disputes and judging legal cases. Unlike the other tribes of Israel, the Levites were not given specific land of their own. Instead, they were given towns and pasturelands in the other tribes' territories, and received tithes and 'firstfruits' (see Deut. 26:1-15), and a portion from the people's sacrifices (see Lev. 7:28-36), in return for carrying out their various 'public services' – roles in health, education, the criminal justice system and constitutional law, as well as regulation of the money supply by standardising weights and measures (see references to the 'shekel of the sanctuary', e.g. Lev. 27:25). In this respect they were not the landed and wealthy elite that the Egyptian priesthood/bureaucrats were; they were reliant primarily on donations from 'the public' – that is, on the Israelite people – and served them.

III. How the world could look different

1. From the past to the present

Early Israel provides an overview or ‘paradigm’ of a whole system of relations at a given time which can help us to understand what God’s purpose is for society today. This is not to ignore the historical development which has taken place between then and now – both in the history of Israel in providing the context for the coming of Christ, and for the extension of God’s purpose from the people of Israel to the entire world.

Different cultures

There is an enormous challenge in applying biblical principles to life in the 21st century. A significant criticism of this approach is that they represent such different settings: the Bible describes a simple, agriculture-based economy whereas we live in one which is complex and technologically advanced. For example, the rise of the market economy, industrialisation and the more recent challenge of the information revolution have led to a far greater complexity of human relationships than has ever existed before. Amongst other things this complexity has involved changes in the character of the state, and has provided new cultural challenges and opportunities which the people of Ancient Israel did not face.

Applying underlying principles

However, the theme of flourishing relationships gives a broad framework within which to re-envision our society. Beyond this, it is not the specific laws themselves that we intend to apply – such as gleaning as a means of welfare, a seven-year limit for loans, death by stoning for adulterers – but the underlying principles that reflect concerns about what God considered central. These are shown in the final illustration, which highlights the differences between our current model and the biblical vision for society.

It is important to recognise that these principles cannot always be applied to society separately. For example, if all loans had to be interest-free but no other measures were taken, investors would pour money into property and other assets, driving up the price of housing and preventing families from owning their own homes. The different strands work best as a whole and there is the danger of unintended consequences if one is applied in isolation.

2. Overview: individualism vs. relationships

Our culture views the rights and freedoms of the individual as more important than almost anything else. There are limits when our behaviour most obviously starts to harm other people, but generally my life is shaped by my desires and my choices, within my abilities. The shape of society as a whole is the result of everyone going in their direction. We expect this to work reasonably well, in the same way that the economist Adam Smith believed, rather curiously in hindsight, that individuals all acting in self-interest would bring the maximum benefits for society as a whole.

Working back from ideal to individual

The society articulated in the Bible looks very different. Rather than starting with the individual's rights and allowing society to evolve from there, the Bible starts with the call to love God, working through an ideal vision of society and back to how individuals should act to bring this about: the responsibilities they have to each other if they want to be a part of it.

This recognition of the way our actions affect other people is critical to the relational approach, whether on the level of personal decisions or international events. We cannot isolate who we are and what we do from everyone and everything else. As explored in the first section, society is a complex system, and the same is true of our lives as individuals;

we cannot compartmentalise different areas of life and different relationships, as if they do not affect one another. Where we work, and for how much money, affects and is affected by where we live, how much time we get to spend with our families, the products and services we consume and the way we interact with our communities.

Rather than starting with the individual's rights and allowing society to evolve from there, the Bible starts with the call to love God.

Personal and corporate application

There is also a balance between applying these principles on a personal level, or as churches, organisations or nations: how much should be left to personal choice or household decisions, and the way we decide to live our lives, and how much should be the domain of our corporate Christian lives or public policy. Accordingly, we have presented the core principles as pairs of alternatives to consider. The last illustration shows these broad alternatives, followed by some specific suggestions for personal and public life.

Family: independence vs. interdependence

The Bible's insights raise the question of how we see our own extended families. Depending on our approach we might view family as anything from an important source of lifelong mutual support to a temporary setting we pass through before embarking on our own, independent lives and careers, perhaps returning to it for a time as parents ourselves. The family might be integral to our lives, or it might seem more like a bolt-on extra.

The way we use our money, the purchases and investments we make – property, pensions, loans and savings, amongst others – can similarly support family or otherwise.

Starting with the end in mind

We make decisions about employment – where we work, salary, working hours – either to serve our families or at their expense. The way we use our money, the purchases and

investments we make – property, pensions, loans and savings, amongst others – can similarly support family or otherwise.

Neither can our so-called personal lives be separated from these concerns. One of the purposes of the laws around sexual relationships in the Bible was to protect both the members of the extended family and their ancestral property from being split apart. Along with high mobility, divorce and separation are the main reasons for the fragmentation of families today, undermining their solidarity and preventing them from carrying out their crucial roles of supporting and providing for their members.

Similarly, companies and the government play a role in promoting and even incentivising mobility and separation, affecting close proximity to relatives and undermining their ability to provide mutual care and support. At a time of austerity, and with a rising average population age, governments are finding it hard to raise the tax revenue to pay the welfare budget. It is, therefore, vital that families are strong enough to fill the care gap.

Property: financial vs. relational investment

A biblical approach fundamentally affects the way we view property, which is more often understood to mean houses and other buildings today, rather than land on its own. Aside from being a roof over our heads (assuming we live in the property), one of the major emphases today is that homes constitute an important form of investment – essentially a form of capital, the primary purpose of which is to act as savings, or to produce money through rental income and ever-increasing value.

Supporting family and community

But this is to turn property into something the Bible does not intend it to be. The Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 were designed to ensure that each family had an allocation of land that remained theirs forever. This was a way of rooting a family in a particular location and ensuring that they had the means to be economically independent. It was not to be viewed simply as an asset, or a means of accumulating wealth, and could not be sold on a permanent basis – thereby protecting the family's rootedness and avoiding inequalities from building up over time as the rich amassed property at the expense of the poor.

Seeing property differently

Life is different today, since agricultural land is not the chief means by which most people are economically productive. But property can still be seen in two quite different ways today: either as a way of promoting financial self-sufficiency, rootedness and cohesion for families, or alternatively as an asset against which to borrow, a speculative investment that serves no other purpose than to produce a return. In these circumstances it might be seen as a place to live, but one with little in the way of obligations to the community.

In addition to personal circumstances and investment choices, the ideal of universal property ownership is also affected by inheritance and capital gains tax, as well as settlements in the event of divorce or separation. Government has a role in fixing these, and therefore in determining the likelihood that properties will stay in families over the generations – affecting mobility and community cohesion in the process.

Property can still be seen in two quite different ways today: either as a way of promoting financial self-sufficiency, rootedness and cohesion for families, or alternatively as an asset against which to borrow, a speculative investment that serves no other purpose than to produce a return.

Community: mobility vs. roots

The permanent allocation of land meant that whole communities as well as individual families were rooted in a particular area. This enabled long-term relationships to be established more easily and for people to build up and maintain networks of support.

Building trust

The strength of the community had a widely-felt impact throughout society. Instead of being fragmented and anonymous, relationships within a local area could be closer and more accountable. Welfare and justice were more likely to be activities that were carried out at a personal, family or local level, rather than administered centrally.

We can commit to an area, putting down roots and cultivating relationships, or we can value mobility.

For the same reasons, the way we understand both family and community inevitably affects many other areas of our lives. The choices we make can strengthen or undermine them. As with family, we can commit to an area, putting down roots and cultivating relationships, or we can value mobility – perhaps for

the anonymity, the freedom from obligations to relatives, or the economic opportunities it can bring.

Life decisions

But appreciating the value of roots goes far beyond this, affecting the way we think about employment, property and finance. These can all be things that are viewed within the context of strong relationships, or areas of life that we dissociate from the themes of rootedness and commitment to communities. The idea of roots also intrinsically affects the way we engage with 'government'. We may see our community – including our relationships with neighbours, local businesses and other organisations – as something we use for our personal advantage when we want to, without having any responsibility for the task of shaping the way it operates. Alternatively, we may recognise that our 'community' is something that necessarily reflects the investments of time, thought and effort that we put into it. The challenge today for Christians is to make this a priority when there are so many other demands on our time and resources.

Government: central vs. local control

The Bible carefully limits the role of national government, because it is realistic about the abuses that arise when power is centralised. At its worst, big government is expensive, bureaucratic, coercive and unresponsive to the needs of those it should serve. In all cases, it leads to non-involvement and disengagement of citizens in the decisions which most affect their lives.

Facilitating local activity

In the Bible's ideal, 'government' was a distributed process that occurred primarily across regional and local levels. Central government was only required to carry out activities that could not be fulfilled on these levels, such as foreign policy. Wherever possible, responsibility was located within local communities and even families. The task of government was to enable each group to carry out its role as effectively as possible – not to intervene directly to do everything for them. Only when this was not possible did the responsibility for action move up the chain to a more centralised authority.

Wherever possible, responsibility was located within local communities and even families.

This has implications for our own government, particularly at a time of austerity. Big government is expensive, but it is also inefficient and can only address the symptoms of social problems, not their roots. Greater openness may help to hold government to account, but it does not avoid the underlying problem that transferring power away from citizens robs them of decisions that they are best informed to make, and lowers their commitment to implementation and enforcement.

The part we play

But it also has implications for the way we engage with local politics and the way we take part in the decision-making processes that shape our communities. This may include making use of, and being a part of, local organisations such as schools, churches, voluntary sector care services and businesses, beyond simply voting every few years. We also need to regain the initiative that started co-ops, credit unions, friendly societies and trades unions, which have been in decline in recent decades, and re-engage with the political process through membership in political parties.

Finance and the economy: damaging vs. strengthening relationships

In the biblical model, money was intended to build or serve relationships of one kind or another – rather than relationships being, at best, irrelevant when people make financial investments, and collateral damage at worst. The laws around debt and interest prevented financial capital from being multiplied by the rich at the expense of the poor, increasing long-term inequality in society. Debt was viewed as a last resort – a solution to desperate need rather than a means of temporarily increasing consumer spending, or as a short-cut to capital accumulation in companies.

Debt was viewed as a last resort – a solution to desperate need.

Connecting borrower and lender

There was also a close connection – both materially and relationally – between the investor and user of funds. This is rarely the case today. Banks offer savers fixed rates of interest, but we seldom know what they are doing with our money and we have little idea of whether our capital ‘earns’ its return in a useful way. There is no obvious connection between the interest we receive and the contribution we make towards the profitability of the business where our money is deployed – something the Bible implies is ‘reaping where you haven’t sown’ (Luke 19:22-23). The same is true when the banks lend us money, perhaps for a mortgage or to fund a business. Share ownership also generally comes with no responsibility; we may not even know what we own if a pension company or fund manager handles it for us.

Debt and interest are central to the way our economy works – and also the way it has failed. Disconnection between the borrowers and the ultimate lender was a major contributor to the financial crisis in 2008. The disproportionate power of the financial institutions deemed ‘too big to fail’ led to them receiving huge bailouts funded by us, the taxpayers.

Investing in relationships

At an individual level, we rarely consider how a financial choice such as an investment or loan may affect others, whether they are close to us or on the other side of the world. Instead, we generally look for the most favourable interest rate above any other concerns. However, it may be possible to invest that money closer to home, taking some responsibility for how the money is used, by attending shareholder meetings, and strengthening family and local ties – thus generating a return which is both financial and relational.

Welfare: financial handouts vs. tackling relational poverty

Whilst realising the importance of material provision for those in need, the Bible also recognises that poverty goes far beyond a lack of financial resources. Financial poverty tends to go hand-in-hand with ‘relational poverty’: it is those who have few family members, little support from friends, who lack roots in their communities and who are on the edges of society who are also most at risk of financial hardship. This is why the laws concerned with provision for the poor were designed to enable them to stay in their own towns and villages, rather than compelling people to relocate to find work. The laws banning the charging of interest on loans were repeated in the context of land ownership (Lev. 25:35-37), since the landless were, and are, at risk from moneylenders, making their situation even worse.

Redefining poverty

Our own approach to poverty is often narrowly financial, typically seeking to use welfare benefits to nudge people over a certain minimum threshold of income. High-interest debt disproportionately harms the poor, and mobility and family breakdown mean that fewer people have the community ties that might provide both relational support and employment opportunities. Debt can increase relational poverty by creating great stress in households; it is frequently associated with marriage breakdown and even domestic violence.

Our own approach to poverty is often narrowly financial.

These factors further reinforce financial poverty and, unlike in the biblical Jubilee, there is no mechanism today to reset a fair distribution of property and start again. Neither are there many modern equivalents to the ‘edges of the field’ (Lev. 19:9-10) – the practice of leaving some land unharvested so that the poor could glean food, thereby earning a small income rather than receiving a handout. There may be initiatives today that could provide occasional or part-time work in the community in return for benefits.

A holistic view of poverty

The biblical model recognises that welfare should be a part of a much broader picture – an interconnected vision of society. We cannot solve poverty by reducing it to its financial dimension. Whilst the state can offer a safety net and ensure that everyone has a minimum level of material provision, relational poverty requires a broader and longer-term approach.

Sunday: material gain vs. rest

Our culture increasingly treats Sunday the same as every other day. Shops are open and employees are often expected to work. Some have a choice; others do not.

The biblical Sabbath was a day of rest from work that had far-reaching significance. It was a way of honouring God by placing Him above economic productivity, and celebrating what he had done in rescuing the Israelites from slavery (Deut. 5:12-15). It was also a way of protecting low-income workers and giving families the chance to spend time together.

A culture of work

Extending unnecessary work to a Sunday means that we have lost our shared day off, and whether through choice or poverty we are now in a form of work slavery, and/or debt slavery, to the big corporations. Those with large debts are more willing to work overtime or antisocial hours to pay them off – or

Even if all employees are given one day off each week, there is no guarantee that couples will have the same day off.

feel unable to refuse long hours. Additionally, extending ‘working hours’ across the whole week has a profound effect on the nation’s psyche. There is no regular interruption to the pursuit of wealth and our culture consequently prioritises this above all else.

Even if all employees are given one day off each week, there is no guarantee that couples will have the same day off, or that parents will be able to spend time with their children at weekends. This is on top of already long working hours during the week, which take their toll on family life and are a major factor in family breakdown. As well as the relational impact on families resulting from a lack of shared time together, family breakdown and dysfunction have financial consequences for the economy as a whole and for taxpayers.

Threatening the vulnerable

We can see Sunday as an opportunity to rest, to go to church if we are Christians, and to spend time with friends and family – as a time to strengthen our relationships with God and those around us. Alternatively, we can see it as an opportunity for further financial gain or purchase of ‘stuff’ – something which may well have a negative impact on our relationships. Many, though, are not in a position to make the choice for themselves. If they refuse to work, they can lose their job and may well face great difficulty in finding another.

Justice: punishment vs. restoration

Biblically, the primary purpose of justice was to restore broken relationships between offender and victim, and between offender and society, to the extent that this was possible. Criminal justice was carried out at the local level wherever it could be through town courts; if a case was too difficult it was passed up to a higher authority. In this way victims were compensated and penalties could be harsh, but offenders were not excluded from the community – except in the very worst cases where their continued presence represented a threat or affront to religious and public life.

The same approach applied to civil law, which sought to compensate the harmed party and maintain their relationship with the offending party and with wider society, ensuring the fairest outcome for all.

Offenders are punished but – with some exceptions – are not required to repair the broken relationships with the victim and community.

Accessible justice

This grass-roots approach to justice, as well as regular public readings of the Law and the role it played in the everyday life of the family, meant that the whole community was involved in keeping order. Everyone was aware of their responsibilities; the law was not the preserve of experts but was accessible to all.

Today we are more likely to see dealing with crime as somebody else's responsibility. The breakdown of community relationships means that we are more comfortable 'outsourcing' justice to police and prisons, even for relatively minor offences.

Fixing broken relationships

Moreover 'justice' is rarely restorative, in that offenders are punished but – with some exceptions – are not required to repair the broken relationships with the victim and community. Instead, criminals are frequently ostracised, finding it hard to secure employment when released from prison and remaining on the margins of society.

Some initiatives today to implement local justice and a restorative vision might include resisting efforts to save money by reducing the number of local courts, so that family and witnesses can continue to attend cases easily. For prisoners, key issues are to teach relational skills in prisons, and to provide employment opportunities so that prisoners are better equipped to reintegrate into the community.

IV. Conclusion

1. Public life

The Bible's vision of an ideal society is very different from our own. Despite this enormous dissimilarity of settings, the principles that lay behind the Old Testament's laws as affirmed and interpreted by Christ in the New Testament have permanent relevance. This is because, far from being concerned primarily with matters of economic productivity or any other single issue, their aim was to establish and maintain flourishing relationships across every area of life.

Empowering smaller groups

In public life, this was achieved by fostering responsibility and engagement at the level of the family and the local community, rather than making decisions centrally by default. The king and state apparatus had an important role, but their job was to support and empower smaller groups and organisations, only intervening when these could not manage on their own.

Different institutions were thoroughly integrated so that their different aims were in harmony, rather than in competition.

Different institutions were thoroughly integrated so that their different aims were in harmony, rather than in competition. This booklet identifies a number of areas of importance in biblical law, indicated by the relative amount of material on each of them. These can broadly be translated into equivalent areas of policy today. Central to

the health of the biblical social order was the extended, three-generational family, since this was most people's source of lifelong support and financial provision. Families and communities were generally rooted and stable, something that was encouraged by the permanent allotment of land, as well as the laws around debt, finance and employment. Where things went wrong, either through crime or hardship, the aim of the Law was to enable people to remain part of their communities and networks of relationships, and to be able to take responsibility for tackling the problems they faced.

Biblically-informed social reform recognises that society is complex, and that we need to address each of these interlinked areas together to bring about genuine and lasting change. This then provides a coherent and integrated agenda for public policy.

2. The Church

In the New Testament the Church adopts Israel's calling to be a light to all nations (Isa. 49:6), instructed by Jesus to be salt and light to the world (Matt. 5:13-16). It is the Church's responsibility to model intimate, healthy relationships – not just for their own members but for society as a whole. The Greek word *koinonia*, often translated 'fellowship', is found many times in the New Testament and includes a sense of both intimacy and business-style partnership. Churches need to practise and model these two aspects of relationships to provide a platform for social engagement.

Engaging with others

Many churches are already at the forefront of social action and engagement in their communities, and are involved in a wide range of programmes. Others may see new opportunities in the needs of their local areas. These may be financial in part, but there will always be a relational component to them as they seek to bring those who are isolated for one reason or another back into fellowship – for example through community lunches; groups for older and unemployed people; and parents and children's mornings. There may be specialist advice services and various kinds of practical support offered. In some cases this can take place in partnership with local businesses, charities and even the public sector.

How we engage with the world around us is key to our corporate identity as believers: whether we meet primarily for our own interests or as part of a mission to reach out to others.

Depending on the resources available, churches may be able to start initiatives such as social enterprises and credit unions, allowing their members to access loans at below market rates. There may be counselling and relationships guidance, debt advice and budget planning, practical skills workshops – activities that would appeal to large proportions of the community – as well as social events and courses with a specifically Christian purpose, such as Alpha.

The purpose of church

How we engage with the world around us is key to our corporate identity as believers: whether we meet primarily for our own interests or as part of a mission to reach out to others and draw them into fellowship. The teaching given in churches also helps determine how we engage with these different aspects of life at a personal level.

3. Personal challenges

The final response is the set of personal choices we make in each of these areas. The decisions we make about family, community and employment, spending and investing money, housing, and time off are not irrelevant to one another. As in the public sphere, they are interconnected and the effects in one area have profound implications for others. The challenge is to make sure our lives are integrated, with the many effects of these choices pointing in the same direction.

A relational lens

That means we have to start seeing things through a different 'lens' – in terms of relationships, not money or other lenses. Whereas it is all too easy to make decisions based on their immediate financial implications, there are often hidden costs, both financial and relational, that may not become evident for many years.

Some of the biggest decisions we make will concern our employment.

Some of the biggest decisions we make will concern our employment. Where we work – both the location in the country and the distance from our homes – and the expectations we have in terms of pay, promotion and mobility over the course of our careers, will have enormous

and far-reaching consequences in other areas of life. They affect the time and energy we spend on our spouses, children, extended families and communities, and receive from them; the properties we purchase and the way we understand their role in our lives; the amount of money we have and our long-term financial decisions – mortgages, pensions, loans and major purchases, such as cars; even our physical and emotional health.

Building relational capital

All of these areas of life are inextricably interlinked, but it is all too easy to make one decision – perhaps our career path – and allow the rest to follow, rather than planning things more holistically. We rarely think where it will lead us in terms of our relationships in ten, twenty or even fifty years' time. But although these are decisions best made at the beginning of our careers, it is never too late to start prioritising relationships. The idea of a 'relational pension' illustrates the need to invest time as well as money for the future – building relational capital for retirement rather than just a pot of stocks and shares. That means being deliberate with the choices we make: seeking out long-term and strong relationships across every area of life, even if it costs us in time or money. Our starting point may be our family, or church, or work, or even where we shop and which businesses we use locally.

About the Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre started in 1983 with two staff and two unshakeable convictions. The first was that biblical law is the place in the Bible where God reveals his will for the social order, and the second that the key to unlock its meaning and contemporary relevance is the theme of 'love', which is a quality of human and divine relationships (Matt. 22:34-40). Putting these together, slowly it became clear how biblical law is the design of a relational God for a relational society. Because relationships have changed little over the centuries, unlike technology, the Ten Commandments and all the other laws have contemporary relevance if carefully traced.

In this booklet, Guy Brandon has expressed clearly and succinctly many of the major findings of the Jubilee Centre's research over the last thirty years. From the early insights of Roy Clements stretching back to the 1970s in Africa, to more recent research on subjects as diverse as finance, mobility and welfare, the 'Roadmap' shows how the different themes are inextricably intertwined. Both social policy and our personal lives are like that: one part affects all the rest. Single-issue politics must always take account of both its wider context and its wider consequences.

The name 'Jubilee Centre' was chosen because the Jubilee was felt to be iconic for the framework as a whole, and indeed Jesus seems to refer back to it in describing the purpose and impact of his own ministry (Luke 4:19). My prayer is that as Christians rediscover the relevance and power of this part of God's revelation, there may be renewed vision for social engagement, and renewed momentum for social reform, in many countries around the world. For God himself has promised, 'my word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it.' (Isa. 55:11)

Michael Schluter
Founder and Life President of Jubilee Centre

Further Resources

The Jubilee Centre publishes the findings of its work regularly. If you are interested in learning more about how a biblical worldview could shape life in the 21st century, email info@jubilee-centre.org or visit the Jubilee Centre website: jubilee-centre.org. Engage Magazine (which includes short articles and news) and Cambridge Papers (essays exploring a contemporary issue from a biblical perspective) are distributed by post each quarter. Email updates are sent out on a regular basis. We also have various training opportunities for individuals and groups to develop biblical thinking for public leadership, including a graduate programme for emerging social reformers. Find out more on our website.

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