

Engage



Quarterly comment from the Jubilee Centre

September 2015



Photo credit: D. Sharon Pruitt

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Nurturing the next generation of Christian leaders

Jonathan Tame

During my gap year I travelled overland across Asia, in the 'unconnected' days before mobile phones and the internet. I had plenty of time to witness poverty close up, and also to receive extraordinary hospitality from strangers far poorer than me. This led to a personal revolution at university, culminating in my becoming a Christian and changing degree so I could get involved in development work.

I struggled at church though, because I found very few people who shared these two passions: knowing Jesus and tackling global poverty. In time I came to realise the evangelical church was coming out of a long period of separating the gospel from issues of poverty and injustice. But during the 1980s evangelical scholars and development practitioners wrestled through these tensions and came to affirm and articulate once more the 'gospel of the kingdom' – which sees personal salvation and social transformation as inseparable parts of authentic mission.

Now I rather naively assumed that every Christian would have followed this debate and embraced the same conclusions, passing that wisdom on to others. So I have been surprised and perplexed recently to meet young Christians who are struggling to reconcile some of the same tensions between evangelism and social justice that I was grappling with in the nineties.

This is one reason why the Jubilee Centre is committed to invest in each new generation of Christian leaders. We want to help them embrace a biblical view of mission which weaves together sharing the gospel, tackling injustice, planting churches, transforming social and economic institutions, and loving the least and the lost.

We are currently doing this in three ways. First, we are supporting a new student movement called Just Love, which aims to inspire Christian students to pursue social justice through advocacy, action and prayer. Just Love started a couple of years ago at Oxford University, and Andrew Lawrence,

one of the Cambridge student leaders, spent a month with us over the summer, writing a pamphlet on the integration of evangelism and social justice (see page 6).

Secondly, we are preparing to open a 'Jubilee Lounge' alongside our new offices in the heart of Cambridge (see page 4). This is a place where students and other Christian leaders can come and learn about the biblical vision for society, taking the opportunity to study and discuss with others how God's word might work, like yeast, through their academic discipline, profession or industry. Please would you consider helping us with a gift towards furnishing and equipping the Jubilee Lounge?

Finally, 2 Timothy 2:2 emphasises that we are responsible for passing on all the Lord has taught us to the next generation of Christians – while giving them space to do things differently and pioneer new initiatives. Our new online training course (page 4) seeks to do just that – and there is still time to sign up before it starts in October!

The famine, the foreigner and the threshing floor: faithfulness in the book of Ruth

Guy Brandon

The book of Ruth has prompted much discussion and controversy. It's an unusual book, dealing with themes that other biblical authors don't treat with such sympathy, including the integration of foreigners and sexual norms. Hollywood might interpret it as a happily-ever-after romance, and Christians also typically present the book as a biblical love story. This is, of course, an over-simplification that stems from our cultural obsession with romantic and sexual love as the highest form of relationship and misses the real importance of the book.

The famine

The narrative takes place 'In the days when the judges ruled' (1:1), when 'Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.' (Judges 21:25) Elimelech and his family – his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion – leave Bethlehem for Moab because 'there was a famine in the land' (Ruth 1:1). Israel had had a mixed relationship with their immediate neighbour over the years. Moab was known for its pagan fertility rituals (Numbers 25:1-3) and human sacrifice (e.g. 2 Kings 3:27), and Moabites were excluded from Israelite religious life for their opposition to the conquest of Canaan (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). However, the situation was not always this clear-cut in practice. David sent his parents to stay with the king of Moab until he was safe from Saul (1 Samuel 22:3).

Ten years after leaving Israel, Naomi returns to Judah. Ruth, one of Naomi's daughters-in-law, decides to stay with Naomi, despite this meaning she will have to leave her home country. It also means a change of faith (1:16-17). She apparently did not convert to Yahwism when she first married into the Israelite family, with Elimelech and his sons presumably assimilating to Moabite culture and religion to some degree instead. Notably, it is Ruth's loyalty and love for Naomi that brings about both her journey and her conversion.

The foreigner

There are broadly two kinds of foreigner discussed in the laws of the Hebrew Bible. One is the *ger*, the vulnerable migrant who is generally willing to integrate with Israel's culture and religion. The *ger* is repeatedly mentioned in the Bible alongside other groups of poor and marginalised people



'Ruth Gleaning', James Tissot 1896

– the orphan, the widow, the hired worker (e.g. Zechariah 7:10). Then there is the *nokri*, the 'true' foreigner, who is economically independent and who has little interest in becoming a part of Israel. (In fact, the *nokri* – especially *nokri* women – are treated with extreme caution because they represent a threat to Israelite religion, as in the case of Solomon's hundreds of foreign wives.) With no family inheritance of land or means to support herself, Ruth definitely falls into the category of *ger*, though she describes herself as a *nokri* (2:10), implying she views herself as an outsider to Israelite life. Although Ruth's Moabite roots are kept in plain sight, nowhere is any explicit criticism of her made; the reader is left to draw their own conclusions.

As a *ger*, Ruth is dependent on the goodwill of others. Welfare in biblical times was not a matter of state provision, though tithes would be centrally collected and given out. Like many 'public services', welfare was distributed across all levels of society, from the extended families who adopted migrants, day-labourers and other poor people, to the laws that governed the provision of interest-free loans and the overall structure of the economy.

One of the ways in which the poor were supported was by communities leaving crops at the side of the fields for the poor to collect, though this was plainly seen as a dangerous business. The book acknowledges the risks routinely experienced by women without family or advocates to protect them, who are gleaning out in the open field. 'Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed."' (2:22)

The threshing floor

Hoping to secure provision for Ruth in Boaz's house, Naomi instructs her daughter-in-law to 'go down to the threshing floor... Then go and uncover his feet and lie down.' There is much discussion about what Ruth actually does and particularly the meaning of 'uncover the feet'. Euphemistically this means to have sex with (Jeremiah 2:25), and there are overtones of Canaanite fertility rites about the threshing floor (Hosea 9:1). Given the statement in Ruth 3:7, 'when he had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits...'; the book's early audience might also be keenly aware that Ruth was from Moab, a nation that supposedly came about through a drunken and incestuous encounter (Genesis 19:30-38).

Whilst this is the kind of question that exercises biblical critics, the fact that Ruth waits for Boaz to wake up after 'uncovering his feet' suggests that they're on the wrong track (though the fact she is present at all makes her intentions clear). She then asks him to 'Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer' (3:9). The same term is used for marriage in Ezekiel 16:8, 'I spread the corner of my garment over you...' and also in Malachi 2:16.

Boaz recognises that Christmas has come early, but there is a due process to be followed: 'there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I.' (3:12) It must first be established that this man (he is identified only by the term *Ploni Almoni*, the biblical equivalent of Joe Bloggs) does not want to take on Elimelech's estate, including his former wife. (The role of the kinsman-redeemer is described in Leviticus 25:25-28. Although this is not a levirate marriage, since Boaz is not Ruth's



brother-in-law, there are similarities with the process described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.) Joe Bloggs is willing to buy the land but not take on the dead man's wife, leaving Boaz free to marry Ruth.

Faithfulness

Love is a theme of Ruth, but not romantic love. It is the term *hesed* that occurs repeatedly and that underpins the narrative. *Hesed* is often translated 'mercy' in English, but means something more like 'loving-kindness', 'faithfulness', 'Covenant love'. It is a core character trait of God himself, describing his relationship with Israel and humanity (Exodus 34:6-7).

Naomi uses the word *hesed* of Ruth and Orpah's kindness towards her. 'May the Lord show *hesed* to you, as you have shown to your dead and me.' (1:8) Naomi recognises Boaz's kindness in his treatment of Ruth (2:20), and Boaz praises Ruth's kindness (3:10). 'This *hesed* is greater than that which you showed earlier.' It is noteworthy that both the subject and object of this *hesed* is not an Israelite, but a Moabite woman.

Application

Ruth is often described as a 'biblical love story'. The marriage is clearly seen as a blessing in itself (3:10; 4), but there is far greater significance to it. Ruth is a story of *hesed*, faithfulness or Covenant love, and its themes point to a series of applications for us today.

Immigration. Ruth is a migrant: the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, without family or provision. Not only that, but she comes from Moab, a country towards which the Israelites were hostile. She relies on the dangerous and hard business of gleaning and the goodwill of strangers to gather what she needs to support herself and Naomi.

The journeys to Moab and back in the book of Ruth are driven by the most basic needs. Elimelech and his family leave their country, their property, their extended family and community to go to a foreign land that practises pagan religion, simply because they are hungry. It is a reminder to us that most

people don't leave their own countries and homes lightly. Many routinely face hardship and danger. They may have been displaced or be fleeing persecution or natural disaster, or perhaps they are just unable to support themselves or their families. According to the UN, more than 50 million people are now living under forced displacement. The majority of the world's migrants – more than 232 million in 2013 – simply travel to seek better economic conditions. Seeing people primarily as migrants or basing our view of them solely on their country of origin overlooks their stories, motivations, intentions and behaviour.

Conversion. Ruth's strong relationship with Naomi drives her conversion to Israelite religion, rather than an intellectual argument. It is also interesting that religion – especially conversion – plays almost no overt part in the book. But perhaps it has greater impact for the fact that it stays between the lines: Ruth is repeatedly identified as 'Ruth the Moabite', tacitly reminding the reader that she might be expected to play by different rules. In fact Ruth, a foreigner from a hated land that practised the worst kind of pagan religion, turns out to be an exemplar of godly living. Anyone who read the book of Ruth and judged her on her nationality at the beginning would have had to rethink their assumptions by the end.

Hesed. Modern interpretations often suggest that Ruth was very beautiful, though there is little to support this in the text. What apparently impresses Boaz at first is Ruth's loyalty to what remains of her family (Naomi), and her work ethic (2:6-12). In 3:11 he calls her a 'woman of noble character', *eshet chayil*, a term also found in Proverbs 12:4 and 31:10, 'A wife of noble character who can find?' The same passage in Proverbs goes so far as to say, 'Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.' (31:30)

Similarly, the emphasis on a romantic plot to Ruth overlooks God's blessing in the story. Rather than only showing God's concern for the couple, Ruth and Boaz, the significance of what happens is that through Ruth, Naomi has a son to continue her family line in place of her own dead sons (4:16-17). 'A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in his holy habitation. God makes a home for the lonely; he leads out the prisoners into prosperity.' (Psalm 68:5-6) Ruth thereby becomes the great-grandmother of King David, and the ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5-6).

Thus Ruth's acceptance by the community in Bethlehem and the redemption of the land and its owner's widow not only foreshadows but enables the unification of Israel under David, and ultimately the redemption of humanity as a whole through Christ, demonstrating God's *hesed* through that of an unlikely human couple's *hesed*.

Jubilee blog highlights

Personal politics vs public policy: Farron and faith

As the new Liberal Democrat leader and a Christian, Tim Farron has encountered immediate and hostile media attention over his views on same-sex practice and marriage. It is nonsensical to claim that faith should have no impact in politics. Every political position betrays a worldview of one kind or another, whether religious or secular. It is simply that as a Christian, the thought-framework that underpins or at least contributes to those decisions is made explicit. The question is not whether faith should or shouldn't be a part of public life. The real question is how we live together whilst acknowledging others' differences in a just and open society that no longer has a unifying vision, Christian or otherwise. (Guy Brandon, 20 July 2015)

Labour: New, blue or torn in two?

Call it victor's spoils, blame it on Murdoch's might but the in-fighting within the UK Labour party following their defeat in May has had senior Tories near-giddy with glee. History has shown us that deep divisions within established institutions are rarely resolved without a considerable degree of suffering on either side. Even so, the Labour party is not a nation-state, nor is it a religion with adherents. In seeking a way forward, it would serve the party well to assess its responsibilities to the country as an effective Opposition and credible future government and resist being defined by the outcome of its leadership contest. For true comrades, to unite does not necessarily mean to agree as demonstrated by Paul's plea to the church in Romans 14. The Labour party would be wise to reflect this truth for the remainder of the leadership campaign and beyond. (Njoki Mahiaini, 30 July 2015)

Read the full posts and more blogs at www.jubilee-centre.org

European Christian Political Youth come to Cambridge

Philip Powell

Over the summer, the Jubilee Centre partnered with The European Christian Political Youth (ECPYouth) for their annual Summer School in Cambridge on 9-14th July. ECPYouth is a political association of youth organizations from all over Europe with a mission to train, develop and empower young European Christian leaders to work towards the transformation of European society. Cambridge provided the ideal location for these leaders to learn about Christian engagement in public life, on this year's theme of 'Moving toward a more relational society in Europe - putting relationships at the heart of the economy'.

This year there were over forty participants from across fifteen nations. The teaching input for the Summer School was provided by the Jubilee Centre, with Philip Powell giving the opening introductory lecture on Relational Thinking. John Ashcroft from Relationships Foundation spoke on family at the heart of the relational society, Dr Paul

Mills gave a very engaging talk on relational economics focusing on the impact of debt on future generations, and Dr Jonathan Chaplin from KLICE spoke on the role of government in a relational society. The participants also went on the Christian Heritage Walking Tour around Cambridge, which was a valuable opportunity to learn about how God has led Christians in the past to be his agents of transformation.

The Summer School then headed to London, where one of the highlights was an event in Parliament, at which we were given a tour of Westminster Palace by David Burrowes MP. This was followed by a session with David and two other MPs, Fiona Bruce and Jeremy Lefroy, to discuss issues of religious freedom, social capital and right to life issues like abortion and euthanasia. The Summer School ended with the graduation ceremony and a gala dinner in London.

The Jubilee Centre has been working closely with ECPYouth for several years now.



Many of the participants have joined our online courses to learn more about Relational Thinking and the biblical basis for Christian social engagement. At a time when debate in the media has been polarised over the European Union, the Jubilee Centre is seeking to promote an alternative, more relational view of Europe as a family of different nations rather than a centralised institution. Collaboration with our European partners remains a key aspect of our work.

Evangelism or social justice?

Emily Shurmer

Should the Church be focusing on evangelism above all else, or is social justice an integral part of our faith too? How can we resolve the tension between both making disciples and loving our neighbour?

Over the summer, the Jubilee Centre welcomed intern Andrew Lawrence of Just Love, a movement in universities across the UK which encourages Christian students to pursue social justice. Whilst here, Andrew tackled these important questions and searched for a biblical response to the evangelism vs social justice debate. The result of his research is an 8-page pamphlet, 'Evangelism and social justice', which examines this tension and concludes that, as

integral components of the same faith, the answer is not either social justice or evangelism but always both together.

Whilst the practical applications are written mainly for Christians in a university context, this booklet gives an important biblical apologetic for social justice as a core value of Christianity and challenges us to live out our faith in practice as well as in words.

For more information about Just Love, visit their website at www.justloveuk.com.

To order a copy of this booklet, please use the enclosed form or order from our website.



About Jubilee Centre

Jubilee Centre was founded in 1983 as an organisation to promote Christian social reform. Through our ongoing research, publications, training and events we seek to inspire and equip Christian leaders with the theology, strategy and confidence to work for social transformation.

Jubilee Centre is a charity based in Cambridge, where it collaborates with some of the other organisations launched by Michael Schluter, including the Relational Thinking Network and Relational Research. Our office has been in the heart of the city centre since July 2015.

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A Gift of God: Biblical Reflections on Marriage

Philip Powell



Detail from 'Le Paradis', Marc Chagall, 1961

In our latest Cambridge Paper, husband and wife duo David and Heather Jackman reflect on the biblical importance of marriage in a culture which has lost its way. From showing that attitudes towards marriage in our society have reached crisis point, they go on to provide a biblical alternative and practical suggestions for how to protect and promote God's vision for the flourishing of human marriages.

Marriage is in crisis in the UK, as 42% of all marriages now end in divorce and cohabitation becomes the norm. Relationships are increasingly viewed as a means to personal fulfilment, rather than a lifelong commitment. The recent Ashley Madison phenomenon shows a worrying insight into the zeitgeist – the dating site offers millions of married users the chance to have an extra-marital relationship, with the slogan “Life is short: Have an affair.” It seems that personal enjoyment and sexual freedom are highly valued, whilst being ever more dissociated from commitment or emotional engagement. Traditional marriage is often dismissed as a religious quirk, or simply one option among many.

The Bible, however, has a different vision for society, in which committed, lifelong relationships are paramount. The significance of marriage runs from Creation to the presentation of the Church as the bride of Christ in Revelation. The marriage debate takes us to the core of biblical theology, and requires a total Spirit-led change of heart from one of self-fulfilment to the divine priority of self-sacrificial love.

From the very first chapter of the Old Testament, marriage is presented as the chief building block of society and reflects

a dynamic inter-relationship of love, later disclosed as the very nature of the triune God. Throughout scripture, Israel's relationship with God is frequently described in terms of a marriage covenant, underlining the permanence of the marital bond from God's perspective.

The New Testament reaffirms the sanctity of marriage, starting with Jesus' celebration of lifelong, exclusive marriages and rejection of divorce. The apostolic letters draw out the full theological implication of the parallel between Yahweh and his people and a husband and wife in marriage, thus deepening the mystery of marriage as a mystical representation of Christ and his Church. Biblical marriage is constantly counter-cultural, not least in that it focuses on our responsibilities and giving of ourselves towards the other, rather than our rights and achieving personal self-fulfilment.

The paper ends with practical guidance on how to sustain and safeguard marriages, from prioritising our relationship with God and developing in maturity, to emphasising the importance of effective communication with each other, as well as the role the local church should have in supporting marriages. It also gives guidance on bringing up the next generation with godly attitudes towards marriage, such as encouraging a healthy attitude towards sex as well as providing positive role models of marriage within families. In order to transform our society and show light to a dark culture, we must first get our own house in order and aim to demonstrate God's covenant love towards one another.

You can read or download the full paper on our website, or order a printed copy using the enclosed response form.

Biblical thinking on the front line of politics

Njoki Mahiaini

If there's one thing this year's general election taught us, it was that anything can happen in politics. The surprise result of an outright Conservative majority was credited in part to 'Shy Tories' – voters who had confidence in Cameron but were reserved when it came to expressing their political views. Yet they were counted when it mattered – on Election Day. This was a lesson reinforced by the 'Show Up' campaign whose slogan, “Decisions are made by those who show up”, sought to mobilise Christians to engage in politics at the ballot box and beyond.

So, while our pre-election book *Votewise 2015* was our flagship project in the run-up to polling day, another, quieter movement gathered momentum behind the scenes. Having identified the unique discipleship needs of young Christians working in the political sphere, the Forum was established as a means by which they might be supported and equipped in applying biblical thinking to their roles in public life.

Now one year old, the Forum serves Christian researchers and assistants in both Houses of Parliament. The group meets termly to discuss a particular theme and respond to input from visiting speakers. Discussion topics have included a biblical approach to public policy and the art of biblically-faithful compromise. Debate takes place in the majestic setting of Methodist Central Hall, a stone's throw from Parliament with conversation continuing over dinner at a restaurant nearby.

Although numbers have been modest we've been greatly encouraged by the consistently high quality of the conversations had, as well as the professional impact of individual members of the Forum in their respective spheres. Having bid farewell to a couple of regular members post-election we look forward to welcoming several new faces this autumn. We would value your ongoing support for this important initiative.

Jubilee Lounge

Jonathan Tame

Jubilee Centre had to relocate this summer following the sale of Jubilee House. After a period of prayer, reflection and consultation, we decided to move to the centre of the city, for two key reasons.

Firstly, the proximity of the Cambridge colleges and city centre churches will bring us closer to students and people working in the city. In the past, our investment in Cambridge graduates has been highly fruitful; for example, Jonathan Burnside, Paul Mills and Julian Rivers all spent time with Jubilee Centre as research assistants, and have since risen to the top of their professions while continuing to write and speak for Jubilee Centre.

The second advantage of the move is that it paves the way for closer collaboration with some of the other evangelical groups in Cambridge. Organisations such as Christian Heritage and KLICE are also committed to helping people think biblically about issues

in society and have expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of partnering with us.

To make the most of these opportunities, we are setting up a multi-purpose room next to our office, called the 'Jubilee Lounge', where people can come and explore the interface between the Bible and contemporary society. We'll do this in four ways:

Hospitality: Extending a welcome and building relationships as people come and see an exhibition illustrating the biblical vision for society and the work of Jubilee Centre.

Events: Hosting talks on thinking biblically about academic subjects, the workplace, or major issues in the news; arranging art exhibits and other events illustrating the Bible's relational message and its application today.

Community: Offering people membership of the Jubilee Lounge, providing a place to



read, study, think and talk through issues with others.

Training: Running courses and workshops, and making video recordings for wider audiences through our website and online training programme.

Our new contact details can be found on p6.

Biblical Foundations for Public Leadership course

Philip Powell

This innovative new programme trains early-career Christians via a nine month online course followed by a three-day Summer School in Cambridge. The curriculum reflects 30 years of Jubilee Centre's research; it unpacks the biblical vision for society, and introduces the idea of thinking relationally. Through the programme, participants will grow in understanding and confidence as to how the Bible can influence and shape public life for the common good.

Programme structure

The online course comprises six modules, each with four lessons; the final module is a choice between two options. The subjects are Foundations, The Economy, Politics, Law & Justice, Family & Sexual Ethics, Science & Technology/The Arts.

The 'blended learning' approach combines personal study with periodic Skype discussions and reflective essays; in general, participants will need to spend around 15 hours on each module. After the online

course has been completed, participants will gather for a Summer School in Cambridge, where they will design a project to apply what they have been learning in their own context.

A self-study version of the course is also available, without any group discussions, reflective essays, or interaction with the tutor. This is for people who want to study independently at their own pace.

Outcomes

- You will have the ability to discern and interpret what is happening in society from a biblical, relational perspective.
- You will develop the skills and confidence to apply the knowledge gained to the context of your work, church, city or nation.

Who is it for?

The programme is designed for recent graduates, young professionals and others in business or public services, who want to see their faith impact wider society.

Dates: The 2015-16 course begins in October, and participants should register by Friday 9th October.

For more information or to register, please email Philip Powell at P.Powell@jubilee-centre.org

What others say

"The course has had a large impact on how I read the Bible. I've started to read the Old Testament with renewed interest and I find a lot of relevance and meaning in verses which, frankly, I previously found irrelevant or simply distant." Gabor Gyura, Economist at the Central Bank of Hungary

"Learning with the Jubilee Centre has been a revelation: It is possible to not merely strive for social reform as a Christian, but to think Christianly about social reform." Jonathan van Tongeren, Netherlands

Costs

Full course: £10 registration plus £190 course fee (excluding Summer School). Self-study option: £10 registration plus £40 course fee. Scholarships are available for people on low incomes; if you would like to do the course but cannot afford the full fees please write to Philip (p.powell@jubilee-centre.org).