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GOD'S RULES FOR LAND

Leviticus 25:8-25

MICHAEL SHLUTER

In the late 1970s I was working with the World Bank in Tanzania, and I heard about a meeting that the Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops were invited to with President Nyerere. I can't vouch for the truth of it, but the story went that he invited them to give their comments on his policies. This was at a time when the economy was in a complete shambles, following a policy where all the peasants had been forced off their land, compulsorily, to live in villages; where agricultural production had plummeted; where there were no medicines for the sick (not even aspirin, let alone anything for malaria). Nyerere asked if they had any comments or criticism of his policies. The story goes that they had nothing to say. So he said, "Well, if you have no criticism of my policies, please support what I am doing."

Why did those bishops have nothing to say about a country that was following such a radical and unique set of policies? I suggest that they had been taught by their western missionaries to read the Bible as if it had nothing to say about public policy. The Bible was for my personal relationship with God. I look for a word of encouragement, or a word of rebuke: but I never ask the question of Scripture, "What is this passage saying about public policy - about the way we organise our nation's affairs?" To quote a word that is in vogue today, I think the interpretation of the Bible has been privatised.

The issue in front of us today is the issue of land, its ownership and distribution. Last night I went to see a film about the Mau Man uprising in Kenya, where I spent many years. The issue of that uprising was the issue of land; and SO Europeans and 14,000 Africans died because of it. In the U.S.S.R. we know that millions of people have died about the issue of land. In my view, in South Africa the issue is very much about land. Daily our papers cover the story of the Palestinian problem - which is very much about land. And of course we are aware about Northern Ireland, which again is an issue of land - who owns it, who controls it. In our history the great enclosure movement underlies the urbanisation that we have had in Britain, bringing many problems.

Now what, as Christians, do we say about land? Do we really have anything more to say than that we must have justice in its ownership and distribution? Does Scripture tell us what justice means in the ownership and distribution of land? I suggest that this morning's passage gives us a set of more detailed principles that we can use when we are looking at land issues. And it's not an academic exercise - if you're convinced by what you hear this morning, it is going to change your political views radically for life!

Jesus means the word of God to be obeyed; and when it comes to issues like land, which involve politics, if you're going to change things, in the end it means political involvement and political action. I'm aware of the historical danger to the Church of adopting a 'social gospel'. If you socialise and collectivise religion exclusively, it seems to me you lead down the road of nominalism. But if you privatise religion, as I believe evangelicals have done in this century, it leads to gross injustice going unchallenged and the gospel becomes irrelevant to very large parts of the population. That's why I think we have to look at this passage and take it really seriously. I want to look at it under three headings.

1) The Jubilee and the Family (vv. 8-12)

The jubilee came once every fifty years. It may have been just a short period of three months, to allow the calendar to catch up, because they don't seem to have had any Leap Years. It may have been a three months 'slot' inserted between the 49th and the 50th year, and counted as a full year, or it may have been a

lull calendar year which came after the seventh of the seven years. The goal of it was a year of rest (v. 11): "The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow, do not reap. . ." No commercial activity, no work; and verse 10 says: "You shall . . . proclaim liberty." Now that word 'liberty' is a very strong Hebrew word and it comes in Isa. 61:1, "He sent me to proclaim release to captives ... to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," That is the verse Jesus uses (in Luke 4) to preach at Nazareth about His own mission. 'Release' is the same Hebrew word that is translated 'liberty' in Lev. 25:10. I think that this, therefore, defines Jesus' ministry. Of course that raises questions in our minds as to whether Jesus completely re-interprets the concept of liberty in spiritual terms. Does the idea of liberty in human terms, in our human society, fall away as Jesus brings in the concept of spiritual liberty and release from our sins, and salvation? I shall return to that point. From verse 9 we note that the year of jubilee started on the day of atonement. If you were here two weeks ago you will remember that the day of atonement was a national day of fasting and repentance. Now once the nation repents, in the year of jubilee, they have to go out and put things right. Repentance is about saying, "Sorry", to God and then about putting things right. And that principle is true both personally and nationally. After they have blown the trumpet (v. 10) everybody is to return to his family property and to his clan.

When the people went into the land of Canaan the whole country was divided into twelve tribal blocks. It was then divided from tribal blocks into clan blocks (each clan had probably about 2,000-10,000 people in it) and then each household was given a piece of land within the clan block. The intention was that those blocks would remain unaltered. There was to be no re-distribution of the blocks. The purpose of the year of jubilee was that the same clan (a group of people joined by a blood and kinship relation) that owned the block in 1,000 B.C. would own and operate the same piece of land 500 years later. So returning people every 50 years to their land was also returning them to their relatives.

So the jubilee is about families. It is about strengthening these wider families – the son of family that Paul talks about in 1 Tim. 5. And when the New Testament describes the Church as a family, as it so often does (it's the most frequently quoted model in the New Testament), the kind of family it's got in mind is not our western type of family, but this wider type of family - a much larger group. I suggest to you, that the first major principle we have to think about is that God is concerned about roots. To get a clear idea of the nature of the problem ask an American where he comes from. "Oh, I was born in New York, I went to school in Florida, I went to university in Chicago, I now live in San Francisco. My parents live in Atlanta." So where does he come from? That's a very real problem for many, many Americans; and it's increasingly a problem for us in this country. Have a look at 1 Kings 21 sometime - where King Ahab offers to buy Naboth's vineyard for cash or for another piece of land, and Naboth says, "No way! This is my ancestral land, and I'm not giving it up!" If it had just been about assets, or cash, or property, on its own - then surely Naboth could have accepted another piece of land. Naboth said "No" because these were his roots; this was the framework in which all his relationships were developed. So I'm suggesting that economic policy - the way that we treat land - should protect family properly and rootedness.

The most common objection to this is that Jesus said that we should give up our family and our land for the gospel. When you suggest to people today that roots matter - that our economic policies should protect people's roots - the objection is, "Surely Jesus did away with all that. He said that we should give up our family and our land for the gospel. Doesn't a Christian have his or her roots in Christ? Don't we have an inheritance in heaven? We don't need this 'roots on the earth' any more." Well, of course, it is true that we do have our roots in Christ, and an inheritance in heaven. But does the New Testament totally replace and invalidate the Old? Does it mean that we no longer have an interest in what happens on the surface of the Earth - because our minds are totally set in heaven? Jesus said that He had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it; and I suggest the New Testament emphasis is that we have a foot in two ages - one in the age of humanity, with all us politics, economics, and social relations; and one in the new spiritual and eternal age. But the same principles apply in both ages, because the same Creator made them both. Human personality, modelled on the personality of God, requires roots in order to be happy and fulfilled - in order for relationships to flourish. And if we, as Christians, recognise our need for roots in Christ, are we incapable of recognising that the mass of the world out there also has a need for roots? And although their rootedness will always be second-class if it is rooted only in land, it is good that they have those roots for their own happiness and well-being. In fallen societies, where few people know God (and I think Israel, for most of its history, was like that), we need to encourage rootedness. Let me remind you of Mr. Lawson's speech at the end of the Conservative Party Conference last October, where he laid great stress on the need for population and labour mobility. He didn't seem to have any awareness of the costs of the elderly

people left behind; of the depressed areas as young and better educated people move away into the more prosperous areas; of the sense of decline and hopelessness that then pervades those situations.

And a second principle which is equally revolutionary, I suggest, is that land ownership should be vested not in the individual but in the extended family. In Israel, an individual could not sell property. If there was even going to be leasing of property it was a group decision; and this was a key factor in family solidarity because they depended on each other financially. Money was the 'glue' that God provided in Israelite society. Now money is not our 'glue' any more, in Britain. If you want to start a business you go to see your Bank Manager. If you need some welfare in old age you go to the D.H.S.S. The family has got sidetracked out of these things. That is because the family, in a sense, has already disintegrated. The foundation of western individualism is individual ownership of property and land. As long as individuals have the right to buy and sell property then you are going to have loneliness and alienation - which so marks western societies in the late 20th century. How we would get back to group ownership of land is a subject I haven't got a chance to address in detail now, I'm afraid. But I assure you that we are not ducking it, down at the Jubilee Centre.

2) The Jubilee and Land Redistribution (vv. 13-17)

"Everyone is to return to his own property" (v. 13). If everybody had property after they entered Canaan and couldn't sell it on a permanent basis, it must always be true that every family had some property. And that is the key foundation of the whole political and economic system of Israel. Verses 14-17 forbid the freehold sale of land. They are allowed to lease land, and all leases expired on the same day - and that day was the day of atonement in the year of jubilee (it's a little like making Whit Sunday in the year 2,000 the date on which all leases might expire in Britain). When they expired, everyone went back to his land and laid claim 10 K; and the important point was that the original family owners got it back free. It is implicit in verses 14-17 and explicit in verses 28 and 29.

So a person who buys land is not buying land itself: he is buying the use of it for a certain period. So the price is determined by the number of years that the lease has to run (something we are quite familiar with). Now what principles can be derived from this? Let me suggest two that we cannot derive.

- 1) That everybody should have an equal amount of land or property, in a society. There is a strong trend towards equality in these passages – if you look at Numbers 33:54, it is, to some extent, made explicit. But if you look at Lev. 25:29-31, you find that a person can own two homes, not just one; he could have a property in a walled city, which he could buy and sell on a normal basis (with some safeguards), as well as property in the country. Also there is no effort in this passage about the jubilee, or anywhere else in the Mosaic Law, to redistribute cattle - and cattle were a very important part of people's assets in those days. So, I think, there was no effort to create a kind of rigid equality, in these verses.
- 2) That property rights should be frozen - because what the jubilee was doing was freezing all property rights. I don't think that that is what we should do if we want to apply the passage either. The problem is that if you are in Argentina, about 2% of the population owns about 90% of the land; and in Britain today about 5% of the population owns some 80% of the land. So if you bring in a jubilee and you freeze the current unjust distribution, then all you are going to do is to upset the intention of the Law, which is to bring in justice. So what can we do? I suggest one principle that we should aim for is that every family, in a modern society, should own a piece of land - a piece of property. It may have to be urban property rather than rural property today; but I think that should be a Christian goal in public policy.

This was a part of Israel's social vision. In Micah 4 there is a discussion of what will happen when the Kingdom comes: all nations will come to Zion to learn the Law; swords will be beaten into ploughshares. And the prophet says that every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree. It was an ideal in the thinking of Israel that every family would have that measure of economic independence. I don't think this is a call for all of us to return to agriculture: but I think it is a call for all of us to consider carefully what the implications are, in a society, when about a third of our own people, in Britain in the 1950s, will never be able to own a piece of property, never own a home. According to the opinion polls, the vast majority want to own a home (something like 95-96%, I think). And as we sit in our rather comfortable middle-class homes

and middle-class pews, I suggest we don't reflect enough on what it is like to be in that situation. We just accept it as part of the status quo. We don't question it - because we don't think the Bible questions it. I'm trying to convince you, this morning, that the Bible does question it; and it does need to be on the policy agenda. And the only way it is going to get there is if Christians make up their minds that this is what the Bible leaches, and get after it.

3) The Jubilee and God's Sovereignty (vv. 18-24)

God answers an objection and (in vv. 18 & 19) gives a promise: that if you obey this law (if you carry out your land reform), then He will give you security in your land. I think security is about protection from foreign attack, and freedom from domestic upheaval in national politics - the things that people were afraid of then and still are today. There is a promise of security if you redistribute the land faithfully in the jubilee. It is very interesting that land ownership, property ownership and distribution, are closely tied to long-term political stability. Verse 20 anticipates an objection: "What are we going to eat" if we do this? How is the economy going to survive? There is going to be no sowing, no commercial harvesting - how are we going to survive? And God promises very special blessing: He promises enough food - through miraculous intervention, I suggest - to last through the two years between the last sowing and when they are able to sow again. Obviously that depends on obedience.

Now, in the end, there is one overwhelming reason for being obedient: "The land must not be sold permanently," God says, "because the land is mine; and you are but aliens and my tenants" (v. 23). Theologians have used this verse extensively to limit the application of the passage. They say, "Surely Israel is special. Israel was a theocracy. Israel's land belonged to God in a special way. Britain is different: we are not a theocracy - our land does not belong to God in the same way." I certainly agree that the very unique relationship between God and Israel means that we simply cannot transplant large amounts of the Old Testament into the 20th century. But I think we have gone to the other extreme. Like the Pharisees in the New Testament, we have tried to find excuses for limiting the application of the Old Testament Law so that we don't have to do anything about it. But Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." The word translated 'earth' there is the same word translated 'land' in this passage. The psalmist is saying that all the land in the world belongs to God: it is under His Lordship. And in Colossians 1:16,17 we read: "All things [including the land] were created through Christ and for Christ. Christ is before all things and in Christ all things hold together." I think that 'all things' means our political and our economic and social order as much as it means our spiritual salvation and eternity. The right of every family to own property is something given by God. It is derived from God, as Creator of the land, and it doesn't depend on the views of our political leaders and our political parties.

So Leviticus 25 is sharply at odds with the major ideologies and thought-systems which are being promoted in this university town in the 1980s. It is sharply opposed to western liberalism - which attaches little or no importance to land or roots at all, and insists on individual ownership and use of property. It is equally opposed to socialism and Marxism - which wants to see land ownership vested in the State and in the collective, and not in the family; which wants to see the family as a servant of the State instead of seeing both the family and the State as servants of Christ. In the New Testament, Jesus insists that we must follow God's Word and not contemporary culture. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). In Mark 7:9-13 He accuses the Pharisees of making void the Word of God in order to honour their own culture - their own tradition. I suggest to you that that is what evangelicals are doing today: we are setting aside the Word of God, with its radical teaching, in favour of following the culture and tradition of our own western individualistic way of doing things.

If we were asked (like the bishops of Tanzania) to evaluate the government's policies on housing and property and a whole range of other things, what, as Christians, would we have to say? Like the bishops, would we have nothing to say at all? We have to first decide whether this part of God's Word in Leviticus 25, is indeed part of God's Word. If so, I suggest, we have to repent, as Christians, for ignoring it for so long. Then we have to try and make sure that justice starts to be done in our own society, where we have the right and the opportunity to change policy and to influence the direction which society takes.