

## A BIBLE STUDY ON LIBERTY

Liberty and freedom relate to jubilee property redemption and return (Leviticus 25:10). Isaiah proclaimed liberty to the Israelite captives in Babylon (Isaiah 61:1) promising the possession of the land (61:7) and rebuilding the city (61:4). Jesus begins his ministry reciting Isaiah 61:1 and 58:6 on "release-to the captives" and even adds "setting at liberty those who are oppressed"(Luke 4:18-19). The words of Jesus were very revolutionary and helpful to the Israelites. They were earthy and would best be understood for recovering the land from the Romans and religious leaders in the tradition of Isaiah 61 and Leviticus 25. Biblical liberty includes both personal liberty from slavery and family possession of land and a village house.

1. Read Luke 4:16-30. Was Jesus talking about spiritual, political or economic liberty and release? Or all of the above?
2. Read Leviticus 25:1-55. Would the jubilee decentralize economic power into families rather than with the government or with the wealthy corporate few?
2. Read Numbers 33:50-56 and Leviticus 25. Is the Bible teaching for or against equally distributed family-owned property?

***Bible Study Notes - "The acceptable year" of Isaiah 61:2 exhibits a strong verbal resemblance with the jubilee law. These are in turn applied by Jesus to his own time in Luke 4:16. Therefore the jubilee law is typically, though not literally (as a mere symbol) messianic." (Robert North, S.J., in SOCIOLOGY OF THE BIBLICAL JUBILEE, 1954, p.3). "The seventh sabbatical year or the year immediately following, i.e., the fiftieth year, was the year of Jubilee. During the year the land was to lie fallow. More importantly, liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land. All Israelite slaves were freed, and every patrimony that had been leased out was returned to slaves were freed, and every patrimony that had been leased out was returned to its owner. The goal of Jubilee was to maintain the solidarity of the various clans in Israel by keeping alive the ideal of the equality of all Israelite citizens under the covenant. From another perspective, this legislation sought to prevent the rich from amassing property into large estates (cf. Isa 5:8) and reducing the poor to landless tenant farmers. Thus it attacked head-on the dehumanizing powers of debt and landlessness." LEVITICUS by John E. Hartley, Word Bible Commentaries, Vol. 4, Word Books, 1992.***

## A BIBLE STUDY ON CHURCH AND STATE

In recent years Western Christians have generally adopted a church-state relationship of a rather blind subjection of the church to the state. (Rom. 13:1, 5-6) Little effort has been made to discern whether the government is actually the power ordained by God (13:1) and whether it truly supports those doing good and whether it prosecutes those doing evil (13:3-4). Seldom is the other major New Testament passage on government (Revelation 13) lifted up for study alongside Romans 13. Certainly there is less risk to be totally subject to the government, but Nazi Germany points out that blind allegiance to any government is irresponsible and unchristian. READ ROMANS 13 AND REVELATION 13

1. Do they seem at odds? How do we resolve this apparent tension?
2. When is a government legitimate and when illegitimate?
3. Does our personality have anything to do with how we view government?

***"If Romans 13 may be said to designate legitimate political authority, Revelation 13 may be said to describe illegitimate authority? ...I am not one, however, inclined toward using the conditioning of history to explain away discrepancy or incongruity in the Bible. At the same time, I harbor no compulsion to neatly harmonize Scripture .... The militant character of the Word of God in history refutes any canon of mere consistency in the biblical witness." from CONSCIENCE AND OBEDIENCE by William Stringfellow, 1977, p. 39 & 10***

## A BIBLE STUDY ON FREEDOM & DEMOCRACY

On democracy, Miller Burrows writes, "Democracy as a form of government is neither taught nor exemplified in the Bible." Reinhold Niebuhr traces democracy to 18th Century bourgeois ideology yet considers it a "valuable form of social organization" despite its control by the "commercial classes." Christians living this side of the 18th Century often have failed to transcend the rhetoric of democracy by relating scripture to the 20th Century.

Political, economic and personal freedom were proclaimed by Jesus when he announced his ministry (Luke 4:18-19). This freedom of God provides true personal and social freedom as the offer of salvation (2 Cor 3:17-18). So we are called to freedom as seen in the commandment to love our neighbor (Galatians 5:1, 13-15). Karl Barth writes, "In the act of confession, we step out into the freedom of God in which, we, too, may be free."

Questions:

1. Read Luke 4:18-19; Lev 25:10; Is 61:1-7; Jer 34:8-17. Do you understand the gospel relating to personal, political and economic liberty and democracy?
2. Read 2 Cor 3: 17-18. What does it mean "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom?" Can you talk from experience?
3. Read Galatians 5:1,13-15. Personally and societally what is our call "for freedom" and "to freedom"?

*"In relation to the calling of God the vocation of humanity can never be understood.., as a kind of prison.. .. According to Gal 5:1,13, however God calls us to freedom,.., the place of our responsibility, i.e., our vocation, is for every, person a special one, just as the divine calling is for every one a special calling." Karl Barth in CHURCH DOGMATICS, III:4,606,600.*

*"In the case of Marxism, Freudianism, and existentialism, atheism is rooted in the conviction that these two realities - that of human freedom and of God - cannot coexist, for the God of religious belief is perceived as an accuser, dominator, and destroyer of human freedom rather than as a liberator The atheism of natural science, by contrast, questions not only the reality of God but also the reality of human freedom ... the counter culture does not share the atheism of modern science, technology, and philosophy; but its quest for human freedom has led it to embrace the religions of nature rather than the historically oriented religious tradition of the West The distinctive structure of Christian freedom (essential, bound, liberated, and final freedom) set it off from the rival meanings of freedom, however much it also overlaps them and incorporates their concerns." Peter C. Hodgson in NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM, 1976, p. 101-104.*

## A BIBLE STUDY ON POLITICS

When Christians consider electoral politics, they must look at how they value government and power. William Stringfellow gives us excellent guidance on government as does Hans-Reudi Weber (POWER, 1989) on power. Should Christians obey their government, elect candidates, resist their government, or only consider direct action or revolutionary change? "In the final analysis it is all a question of power," writes Weber.

### QUESTIONS

1. Read Romans 12:21 - 13:3 and Revelation 13:1 I- 12, 16-17. Are these two views of government? Can both be true? In different situations? How do you view our governments (federal, state, local, etc.)?
2. Read Judges 8:22-23. How many military heroes rule over us? Before Israel's monarchy was their equalitarian relationships with only one ruler? How can God rule?
3. Read Amos 2:6-8. Did the 8th century prophets defend the poor against government and the wealthy? Should we do the same?

***"Any efforts to read the Bible as a treatise abstractly constructed or conformed usurps the genius of the Bible as testament of the Word of God active in history. If the biblical witness were internally strictly consonant, after the mode of ideology or philosophy, the mystery of revelation in this world would be abolished; ... Romans 13 bears an explicit eschatological context. Revelation 13 focuses upon the politics of the passing age, concretely exemplifying the tactics of witness of the biblical people," (William Stringfellow in CONSCIENCE AND OBEDIENCE, 1977.)***

## BIBLE STUDY ON PUBLIC CEREMONIES

During the times of biblical Israel, all set times of communal observance were called "feasts". In sevens the ceremonies from law were the Sabbath (Ex 16:22-30), the Day of Atonement in the 7th month (Lev 23:22-32), the Sabbath Year every seven years (Ex 23:11, Dt. 15), and the Jubilee as the year after seven sabbatical years (Lev 25:8-17). There were also pilgrimage feasts of Passover (Ex 13:3-10) Feast of Weeks (Dt 16:9) and the Feast of Booths (a harvest festival) - Ex 23:16. Finally there are two feasts not from the Books of Moses - Hanukkah (I Mac 4:52-59) and Purim (Esther 9:24ff). In our nation we celebrate Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Memorial and Labor Day, etc.

### QUESTIONS

1. Try to relate our ceremonies to biblical ones. How does the church's separated tradition (church and state) affect public ceremonies'?
2. Why do we have no comparable ceremonies to the Sabbath and Jubilee years? How does bankruptcy fit in?
3. Is Christmas our most celebrated American holiday? Who do we worship, God or mammon (Mt 6:24)?

*"At the center of the great pilgrim feasts were the festal sacrifices. These sacrifices were mainly communal meals, eaten with great joy ... the great feasts were occasions of 'covenant renewal' at which the bonds that held Israel together as the people of God were reknit."*  
*INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE, "Feasts and Fasts" by J. Rylaarsdam, 1962, p. 260-264.*

*on mammon - "the word's derivation most likely comes from the Hebrew amen = 'that in which one trusts' . . . the original Aramaic of the saying in Lk 16:10f would thus contain a pun. for pistis, pisteusei, ta alethinon also belong to the stem amen. That the community did not render it by the Greek word ousia is perhaps due to the untranslatable ethical and religious nuance." Kittel's THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, IV, p. 388-90.*

## BIBLE STUDY ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

In our nation there is very little support in society or in the Christian community for civil disobedience. Generally most Christians follow the teachings to be subject to the government (Rom 13:1-7, I Pet 2:13, 17). In recent years there have been books on Romans 13 (Cullmann) and Revelation 13 (Stringfellow) which open an alternative to traditional American Christian obedience. Resistance to civil authority, constitutes a test case for Christians regarding their allegiance to Caesar or God ( Mt 22:17-22), or to God or men (Acts 5:29). Even Paul refused to obey the civil authority and leave jail, instead insisting on his day in court (Acts 16:37). Probably the most spectacular example in the scriptures is Daniel who refused to worship the golden image (Dan 3:17-18). Most would agree that civil disobedience is a last step action after failure of other acts of witness to faith.

1. Read Acts 5:27-32. Peter and the apostles stood before the Sanhedrin, the highest religious and political body of Israel. Was their response religious or political or both?
2. Read Luke 6:1-11, Mt 12:1-8 and Mark 2:23-3:6. Does Jesus lift up a basis for approval of civil disobedience - to do good or save life (Lk 6:9)?
3. Read Daniel chapter 3. Where was God in it all? Did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego commit civil disobedience?

"The problem of civil disobedience is of course as difficult as it is ancient, and I may as well begin with my conclusion: on paper there are no answers, only in life are there solutions. I do not think any person ever has the right to break the law, but I do think that upon occasion each human being has the duty to do so. In reaching this conclusion I have been greatly helped by the New Testament treatment of what St. Paul calls 'principalities and powers.' If we assume that these include the legal order, then there are three things we can say about laws in general. In the first place they are good, even God-given, for without them creation would be chaos. But secondly, as with individuals so with laws, they become rebellious. Instruments of order, instead of serving, begin to dominate. Servant structures become independent semi-gods claiming allegiance to such a degree that people become more loyal to the law than to the persons the law was designed to serve. It was this situation that prompted Jesus to remark - Jesus who broke the holy as well as the civil law - 'the Sabbath belongs to man, not man to the Sabbath.' ... Thirdly the New Testament concludes that people must respect but never worship the law; respect what is legal, but be more concerned with what is right." LAW, ORDER AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, Coffin, William Sloane et al, 1967, p 30-1.

The New Testament seems to have another thread which is not No and not Yes, but more qualified. It might be called the New Testament Perhaps to the state. ... The Perhaps of Jesus is obvious in his well-known reply to the question about the lawfulness of paying tribute money (to Caesar). ... He confounded his questioners by his pronouncement (Mk 12:13-17). ... At the time of the writing of 1 Peter the legal position of the church was such that to be a Christian at all put one in a position in which suffering at the hands of the state was a real possibility. In a sense, to profess Christian faith openly was already a kind of 'civil disobedience'. One might paraphrase: 'The state is certain to be uncomprehending and likely to be brutal; but obey it anyway.' Obedience here is not part of an unqualified Yes to the state; it is part of an agonized Perhaps. (see 1 Peter 2:13-25; 3:14-17; 4:12-19 on suffering and obedience) CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN by Daniel B. Stevick, Seabury Press, 1969, p 31, 35-6.

## A BIBLE STUDY ON OPPRESSION

Powerful and rich oppressors "devise wickedness" to seek greater wealth (Micah 2:1-2). They are worshippers of false goods. They are oppressors of the poor and crushers of God's people (Isaiah 2:8; 3:14-15). Surrounded by false prophets these oppressors practice legally institutionalized violence against the poor (Micah 3:1-5).

The world's oppressors exploit workers (Ex 1:11; Jer 22:13) and kill and murder (Ex 1:16; Ps 94:5-6). These people create a myth of idleness (Ex 5:8-17) and offer deceitful concessions (Ex 8:26-28, 10:8-11, 24-29). They meet unequal foes (Judg 4:3), plunder (Judg 6:3-6), impose tribute (2 Sam 8:2), take captives (Jer 50:33), practice fraud (Hos 12:7-8; Dt 25:13-16), charge interest (Ez 18:10-13), take bribes (Is 5:23), practice pious deceit (Is 58:3) and violate women (2 Sam 3:12-15; Dt 22:28-29, Ez 22:10-11).

The above summarizes Elsa Tamez's study of 9 Hebrew words meaning oppression. In the New Testament oppression is rarely used (James 2:6). Crying out relates (Ja 5:1-16). But it is the oppression of the poor and their liberation which is highlighted in Luke. Luke especially addresses the wealthy and powerful (1:46-53, 68-71; 2:10; 4:18-19; 6:20, 24).

Questions:

1. Read Exodus. chapters 5-10. Study the tactics of the Pharaoh and the response of Moses. What does this say about contemporary tactics amidst oppression and liberation?
2. Read Micah 2:1-2; 3:1-4. How does the repossession of family farms and urban homes, or the victims of Colombian paramilitary squads differ from those days'? Are banks/S&Ls and death squads oppressors?
3. Read Luke 6:20-26. Is this passage about oppression'? Why does the American church always stress the beatitudes (Mt 5:1-10)?

*"For the Bible oppression is the basic cause of poverty... There is an almost complete absence of the theme of oppression in European and North American biblical theology. But the absence is not surprising, since it is possible to tackle this theme only within an existential situation of oppression. As a result, the theology of liberation, which came into existence in Latin America, regards this historical experience of oppression and liberation as the root of all its theological work (Tamez, Elsa. BIBLE OF THE OPPRESSED, 1982, p. 3-4)*

*"Oppression is historical in character and the basic points of reference for understanding it are two identifiable and opposed groups. The oppressors are rich and influential people who never feel satisfied with what they have; their basic concern is to accumulate wealth. They turn to oppression and make use of various methods that bring them gain in one or another fashion. Oppressors are idolaters who follow false goods that can lend an aura of legitimacy to their actions; Yahweh, the God who demands that justice be done because he is himself justice and love, will not serve their purpose." (Tamez, p. 53)*

## A SECOND STUDY ON OPPRESSION

When we think of oppression, we generally don't think of the Bible. Yet, the Bible is filled with teaching that is relevant to today regarding oppression. In the Old Testament there are sixteen root words for oppression, oppressors and the oppressed. Two Biblical scholars, Elsa Tamez and Thomas Hanks (both from Costa Rica) have provided us the basic biblical studies on oppression. These scholars argue that the Bible teaches that oppression is the fundamental cause of poverty. When one roots biblical societal teaching in oppression and poverty, then we see class struggle, the story of the Exodus, liberation, democracy, revolution, land/property, the wrath of God, and salvation/sanctification/hope in a new light.

Read Exodus 5:6-17 and 3:9? How are the Israelites oppressed. How do we oppress other countries?

Read Isaiah 19:16-24. Is this a hopeful passage about oppression? How does God act today?

Read James 2:1-7; 5:1-6. What does James teach about the rich? Have America's riches rotted?

*(on 9 Hebrew words of oppression) "The experience of oppression involves a) anah: the degradation of the human person; ashaq: ruthless violence; lahat: the smashing blow and outcry; nagash: violent exploitation; yanah: deadly violence; ratsats: the crushing of the poor; daka: the grinding effect of oppression; dak: the vexation of the poor; and tok: the tyranny of the oppressor. (on Ex 5) "noun nagash means 'overwhelm with work', v. 6, 10, 14; (on Is 19) in the process of total liberation these steps will follow one after the other: first, the oppressed people will rise up against its foreign rulers (v.17); they will come to know Yahweh, they will cry out because of oppression (lahats; v.20) and will be heard and set free." BIBLE OF THE OPPRESSED, by Elsa Tamez, 1982, p. 8-9,17. "James places himself firmly in the ranks of the prophets who viewed oppression as the basic reason for poverty. Never does he shift the blame to the poor themselves, because of racial inferiority, laziness, vices, or other reasons. The rich bear the basic guilt, because they exploit and oppress (5:5)." GOD SO LOVED THE THIRD WORLD, by Thomas Hanks of the Latin American Mission, 1983, p. 46.*