

PROCLAIMING A JUBILEE FOR A NEW GENERATION

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TIM THORLBY AND MATT WILLIAMS FROM THE JUBILEE CENTRE EXPLAIN HOW THE BIBLICAL JUBILEE REMAINS A RADICAL VISION FOR THE CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

For nearly 40 years, the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge has been shaping and promoting a biblical vision of society. Much has changed in this time and we are now renewing the charity so that it remains 'fit for purpose' for the future. We also have the clear intention of increasing our impact on the UK.

Whilst our strategy may be changing (more on this later), our mission remains the same. We remain inspired by the Jubilee Centre's original biblical vision of a nation defined by economic justice, a strong society and environmental sustainability - all built upon strong and healthy relationships. At the core of our vision is the Old Testament idea of the 'Jubilee'.

We believe that the time is right to rediscover this idea, in all its fulness, and work with a new generation to bring Jubilee to the UK.

In this article we explain what the biblical Jubilee was and why it mattered. At the end, we conclude by outlining our new strategy for making this a reality today.

jubilee noun

a time for celebrating | a year of liberation and restoration

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THE SABBATH

The Law in the Old Testament set out a clear and integrated national framework for the people of Israel to live by. It wove together the legal, religious, political, social and economic rules to govern the nation, with the purpose of establishing a land of peace, prosperity and harmony.

A core feature within this vision of a 'good society' was the idea of a 'Sabbath' which created an important rhythm for the people to live by. The Sabbath operated on three different time horizons; it was much more than a weekly pattern, it had longer term implications too:

- **A Sabbath Day** - Every week the seventh day was meant to be a holy day, a day of rest when no work was to be done and, by implication, the land itself was allowed to rest also (Exodus 20:8-11).
- **A Sabbath Year** - Every seven years, Israel was also instructed to give their land 'rest' and

not to work the fields for the whole year (Leviticus 25:1-7). They would live on food harvested previously or on what grew naturally during the year.

- The book of Deuteronomy also adds to this. This 'fallow year' was to be accompanied by the cancellation of all debts between Israelites (Deuteronomy 15:1-3). This seventh year was called 'the year of release'.
- **A Jubilee Year** - Finally, after every 49 years (after every seven Sabbath years), in the fiftieth year, the trumpet was to be sounded at the close of the Day of Atonement and a 'Jubilee Year' declared (Leviticus 25:8-55). The trumpet used was traditionally a ram's horn, with the Hebrew words for 'ram's horn' and 'jubilee' sounding very similar: 'Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you' (Leviticus 25:10a).

In the Jubilee Year, the Israelites were told to let the land rest fallow, to return to their ancestral family properties and to release anyone working as a bonded labourer. It was a major national 'reset'.

THE JUBILEE YEAR

The arrangements for the Jubilee Year were unusual. The Israelites were given three main instructions about the Jubilee Year in Leviticus, chapter 25:

- **Rest for the land** - It was to be another year of rest for the land; they were not to sow and reap as normal.
- **Return to their family land** - Everyone was asked to return to their 'family property'. Where land had been bought and sold in the past, these arrangements would lapse in the Jubilee Year and families would return to their ancestral lands. In modern terms, you would say that there was no selling of freehold, only the leasing of land and all leases terminated in the fiftieth year and ownership reverted to the original owner: 'The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants' (Leviticus 25:23). There were different arrangements for properties in cities which could be permanently bought and sold, but these were houses, not farms for sustaining livelihoods.
- **Release those in debt bondage** - Anyone who had become so poor that they had to give up their land and 'sell themselves' to another to pay their way through work, was treated as a 'bonded labourer'. They were housed and fed by an 'employer' in return for their work; they were



supposed to be treated as hired labourers. In the Year of Jubilee, these people and their families were free to leave their employer and return home to their former property, with their family, to start again with their own land: a year of liberty. (Deuteronomy 15:12-18 also adds provisions for some bonded labourers to be released between Jubilees, after six years of work, but the Jubilee applied to everyone.)

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WHAT DOES THE JUBILEE MEAN?

There are several features of these arrangements which are worth highlighting.

Firstly, the framework which God called Israel to live by integrated religious concerns with social, economic and environmental considerations in one holistic approach. A person's relationship with God also shaped their relationship to their family, community, work and the land. The Sabbath arrangements (all together) not only pointed the people of Israel to God and reminded them of their reliance upon his provision, they also provided a practical and just set of rules for how they would do business with each other. At the root of this integrated vision of national life is the reminder from God: 'the land is mine...and you are...my tenants' (Leviticus 25:23).

Secondly, the vision for national life is powered by God's grace and generosity to his people. It is no coincidence that the Jubilee Year is announced on the Day of Atonement - the day when the people ask for and receive God's forgiveness for their waywardness. It is only that strong sense of forgiveness from God that empowers the nation to participate in a radical act of wealth redistribution, as properties are returned to their original owners. To those being set free and given a second chance, this is a day of liberation, but to those who had done well for themselves but who were called to give properties back, this was a day of sacrifice for the benefit of the community. Only the deepest and strongest motivation would have enabled this kind of action - only a call from God no less.

And what prize is gained from this national act? As the people's relationship with God is restored, so all other relationships are put right also - with each other and the land itself. All of the Law - the religious and the practical - points to one ultimate purpose; the desire by God to live happily with his people: 'I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people' (Leviticus 26:12).

Thirdly, what are we to make of the practical social and economic actions taken in the Jubilee Year? What do they mean? We believe that there are four key elements to the practising of Jubilee:

- The Jubilee recognises that the land itself (the 'environment') has limits that must be respected. The Sabbath years and the Jubilee Year gave the land of Israel regular periods of rest and recovery from their farming practices, providing for ecological flourishing.
- The Jubilee prioritises the long-term stability and rootedness of families and communities over the accumulation of material wealth. The buying and selling of land was clearly both normal and acceptable, but it was only ever temporary. Land could not be sold permanently, only leased until the next Jubilee when it reverted to its original owner. Anyone who had moved or lost their land would return to 'the land of their forefathers'. To modern eyes this is the most radical - and perhaps bewildering - part of the Jubilee.

The clue to understanding this requirement is in the repeated warning in the passage about land (Leviticus 25:14-17); twice God says 'do not take advantage of each other'. Marketplaces have a tendency to operate unfairly - differences in starting position, negotiating power and circumstances can lead to greatly unequal outcomes. Fifty years of buying and selling would have generated winners and losers. The solution was not to outlaw markets, which serve a useful purpose, but to place limits upon them, to ensure that social purposes ultimately outweighed financial purposes. The Jubilee provided a 'reset'.

Those who had lost their land (the main means of providing an income for your family) were given a chance



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to start again. There was to be no permanent landless class of people who could not make a living for themselves. Every generation was given hope for the future. And those who had accumulated land and wealth (and workers) were reminded that this was not the national priority and required to relinquish some of their assets.

The return to family lands also brought extended families back together again, and restored their links with the land that God had originally given them (for example, see Numbers 33:54). Every family had a permanent home.

- The Jubilee puts God on the side of the market's 'losers'. The Leviticus passage says '...proclaim liberty throughout the land...' (Leviticus 25:10). The emphasis on liberty assumes that God is talking directly to those who are burdened and oppressed and need to be set free. It is perhaps hard to see how a wealthy family would welcome the Jubilee Year, as they handed back the keys, free of charge, for the properties they had amassed - although of course they retain their own property. Does this seem unfair to us? It squarely addresses the hubris of our modern 'meritocracy' where the winners reckon to deserve their enhanced lot in their life, regardless of their starting points, the work of others and, often, sheer luck. It underlines the message that the accumulation of material wealth is not the ultimate purpose of national life. In terms of land and wealth, there is such a thing as 'enough'. It also protects the market's winners from the dangers that too much wealth can pose for a healthy faith in God.

A JUBILEE FOR A NEW GENERATION

These issues are more than just matters of history.

The prophet Isaiah goes on to reference the Jubilee Year (Isaiah 61:1-2) as he looks forward to the coming of the Messiah who will 'proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'. It was an idea that lived on.

Jesus himself then chooses this same passage to announce the start of his public ministry, not only reading it out but announcing 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4: 14-21). Jesus declares to the stunned crowd in Nazareth that the year of the Lord's favour has arrived, quoting that same passage in Isaiah. Jesus brings the fulfilment of that holistic relational restoration promised in Leviticus - liberation and release.

So, what does it mean for us, today?

We believe that the biblical vision of society, and the idea of Jubilee, still have relevance and power today. In a post-Christendom state we are clearly not about to shape and impose a national framework as in the days of the Old Testament, but the vision still has power to shape ideas and motivate action. Much can be achieved through grassroots movements.

As part of the Jubilee Centre's renewal, we are moving to focus our efforts in order to achieve greater depth and impact.

We are returning to the marketplace. From 2022 we will be working with Christians, churches and others to build a movement for 'good business, a fair economy and dignified work'.

We will combine theological reflection, research and collaboration with practitioners in the marketplace to experiment with new ways of working. We will be rolling up our sleeves, taking a few risks and innovating in our new 'Jubilee Learning Labs'.

Our new working agenda, 'Beautiful Agenda' is on our website and sets out the biblical principles for enterprise, drawing on the Jubilee. We are also finalising the report from our current research project which identifies and celebrates those Christians already pioneering purpose-driven enterprises in the UK. This pioneering work is already happening. We look forward to working with a growing movement of people to accelerate and expand this work and to deliver radical action.

We believe that the Church in the UK has a key role to play in engaging more fully with businesses, workers and the marketplace. Millions of Christians work in the private sector already. There is great potential for the Church to deepen its discipleship and contribute to the cultural renewal of our nation. Join us!



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Dr Matt Williams is the Head of Biblical Insight at the Jubilee Centre and specialises in biblical and theological research, particularly around socio-economic issues. Most of his working life has been spent in higher education (both learning and teaching) as well as practically addressing poverty. Outside of the Jubilee Centre, he works in community organising, is involved in African development work and is a founding director of a social enterprise.

JUBILEE CENTRE

You can find out more about the work of the Jubilee Centre, and read 'Beautiful Enterprise' at Jubilee-Centre.org