

CHRISTIANS
ON THE **LEFT.**



PRESENTS

Truth to Power series



Five Videos and Additional Study Resources for Group and Individual Use

4/5 ECONOMICS AND THE 99%

Welcome



Welcome to The Truth to Power Series, five videos and accompanying resources especially commissioned and produced by and for members of Christians on the Left.

Throughout the series you can see the influence of members of Christians on the Left who are just like you; members who are councillors, committee members, teachers, retail workers, nurses, parents, business owners, fundraisers, administrators and church leaders. Each member brings their own perspective and we hope they inspire you to ask more and better questions as we grapple with some big topics and policies.

A great many people invested their valuable time in this project, so on behalf of the Executive Committee and Truth to Power team, thank you all for contributing.

We hope you find this new resource a valuable tool and can benefit from it alongside your friends and colleagues.



Shona Elliott - Vice Chair, CotL
Truth to Power Project Leader



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USING 'TRUTH TO POWER'

This is the fourth in a series of five studies:

Housing and Homelessness
 Justice and Prison Reform
 Refugees Welcome?

Economics and the 99%

Love not War

Each study features a 10-15 minute video, which can be watched in sections to aid reflection and conversation.

This PDF resource includes thought-provoking questions about the video content and additional resources for group leaders.

We recommend reading some of the content beforehand, then beginning with a prayer or praise before watching the video together, then using some of the questions from the red sections to inspire discussion and prayer.

“

**What does the LORD
require of you? To act
justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with
your God.**

MICAH 6v8 (NIV)



“As a Christian I believe I should care about issues of justice and peace in our world and I should try and do something about it where I can. But I do that because I believe in God, not because of a political bent. I don’t think I am politically minded because hopefully I am God minded.”

But is this Christian misguided?

Shona writes: This was an actual email I was sent from a faithful Christian after they had read an article I had written. **It cut me to the core** because it made me desperately sad that someone who had grown up in the church believed that their faith had nothing to say about politics, and therefore potentially the whole world around them.

Politics was simply not a God issue for them.

Our Christian faith is our starting point and naturally informs our understanding of justice, but to engage in issues of injustice is to actually model our faith authentically. A holistic understanding of the Kingdom of God develops into a response to human need (Psalm 82v2-4) for we have been enlisted in the joyous task of enabling God's kingdom to come in all areas of life. It is God’s gift but our task; we work for it, even as we wait for it. It is not a self-righteous theology but a humble recognition of God’s wisdom and active love already present in the world.

Christians are called to be a very part of God's story to restore, redeem and reconcile all of creation. What an awe inspiring call on our lives!

Christians on the Left stands firmly in a tradition which has always proposed that the gospel should be lived out in the political and economic structures of society. This short course has been put together to help you reflect on policy and political issues from a theological and biblical perspective, to excite you to discover what God might have to say about the pressing issues of our day.

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO
BE A CENTRAL PART OF
GOD'S RESTORATION STORY.
WHAT AN AWE-INSPIRING
CALL ON OUR LIVES!

Truth to Power strives to help you chart this journey with friends, to **prayerfully wrestle** with the questions it will inevitably raise but to help us avoid dualistic thinking, where God has little to say about the material world. In ancient Hebrew, there was no distinct word for "spiritual" – a hint that we could be in danger of creating an unhelpful secular/spiritual divide in our thinking.



WHY NOT PRAY INTO EACH QUESTION BEFORE YOU ASK IT?

The accompanying videos share the thoughts of some of our members on different policy areas. We have chosen to look at subjects such as housing and finance to ensure this is more than just an academic exercise over a coffee but a start of a deep conversation about bringing God's truth to bear upon politics. Is rehabilitation more important than punishment? Is housing a public good? Should states have a nuclear arsenal?

Truth to Power is about helping us reflect upon how we can apply biblical and theological truths to fundamental questions about how we should structure society and govern well, and to suggest this should form part of our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

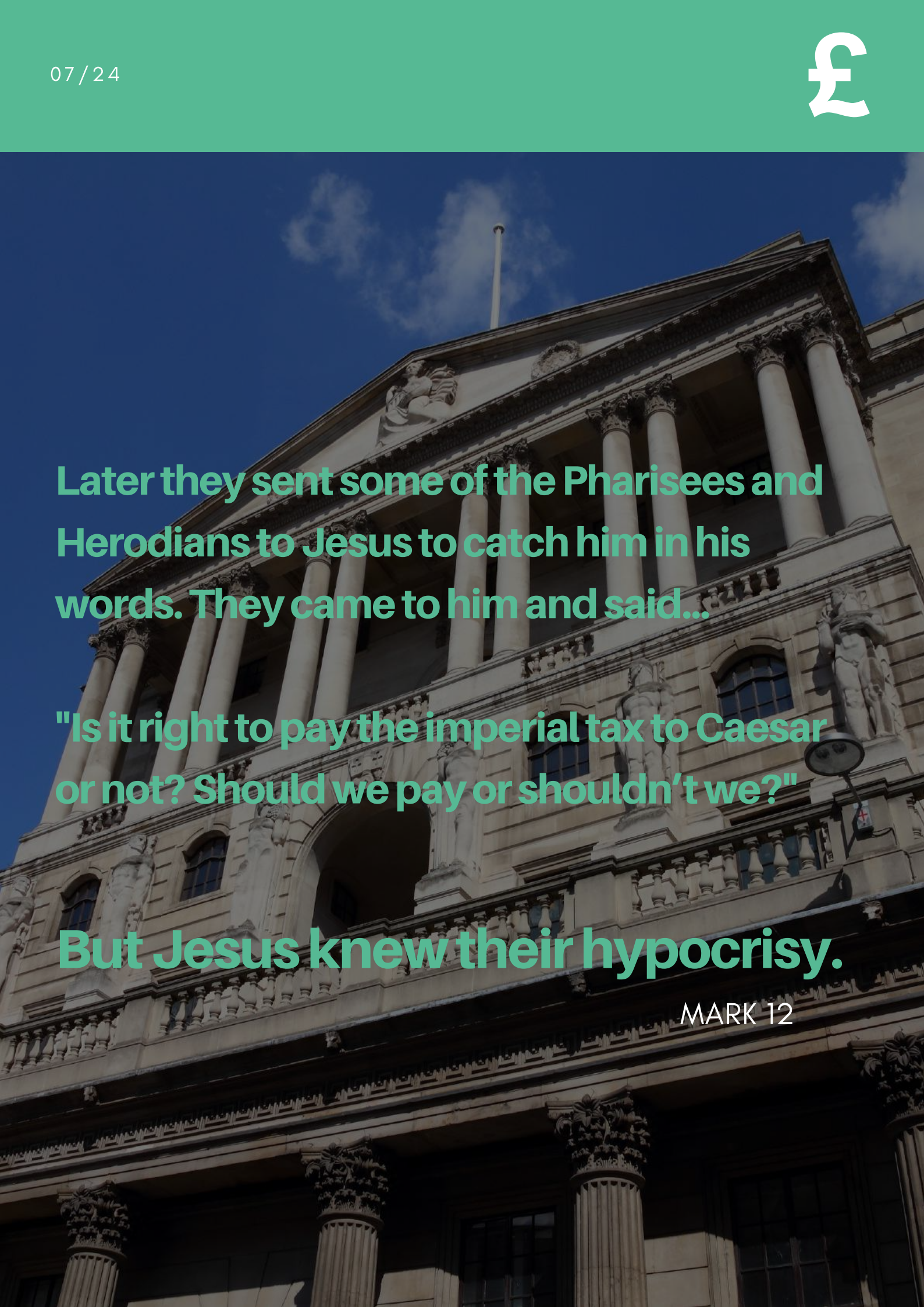
FOR THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD IS WISER THAN MEN (1COR 1:25)

More importantly, I hope and pray this course could be a way for you to join us as we seek to provide support, resource and fellowship for those who are engaging politically.

It may well encourage you to share truth to power or perhaps to go and be the truth, modelling the Kingdom of God within the political realm. Politics is indeed holy ground, where God is calling faithful men and women to serve.

As John Newton wrote to William Wilberforce in July 1796 :

"You have the [far greater] honor of being a Representative for the Lord, in a place where many know him not, and an opportunity of showing them what are the genuine fruits of that religion which you are known to profess."



Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said...

"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy.

MARK 12



THE 99%

"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS ON ME,
BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO
PROCLAIM GOOD NEWS TO THE
POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO
PROCLAIM FREEDOM FOR THE
PRISONERS AND RECOVERY OF
SIGHT FOR THE BLIND, TO SET THE
OPPRESSED FREE, TO PROCLAIM
THE YEAR OF GOD'S FAVOUR"

LUKE 4:18-19 (NIV)





“There should be no poor among you”

Deuteronomy 15:4 (NLT)

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) commission on economic justice (Report 2018[1]) paints a picture of rising inequality throughout Britain and shows the financial health of our nation is divided along the lines of income, geography, gender, ethnicity and age. It ranks the UK as the fifth most unequal country in Europe.

In a recent article in the Guardian commenting on the report, it said:

“More than a fifth of the population live on incomes below the poverty line after housing costs are taken into account, even though most of these households are in work. Nearly one in three children live in poverty and the use of food banks is rising.

There is a sixfold difference between the income of the top 20% of households and those of the bottom 20%. Wealth inequality is much worse, with 44% of the UK's wealth owned by just 10% of the population, five times the total wealth held by the poorest half.” [2]

As Christians we need to ask, does this have anything to do with the gospel? Is God only concerned with a salvation that secures our place in heaven in the afterlife or does he care about the everyday lives of people, including their economic situations?

M Douglas Meeks argues for another metaphor for God as ‘an economist’. Within the understanding of God’s economy Meeks argues:

“EQUALITY MEANS THE THRUST TO ABOLISH THE DIFFERENCES THAT RESULT FROM WEALTH, RACIAL AND SEXUAL SUPREMACY, ECOLOGICAL RAPE, AND MERITOCRATIC PRIVILEGE. EQUALITY WORKS AGAINST THE EXPERIENCE OF SUBORDINATION. IT WORKS AGAINST SOME PEOPLE HAVING TO FAWN, DEFER, BOW, AND SCRAPE BECAUSE OTHER PEOPLE OR GROUPS HAVE POWER OVER THEM. THE EQUALITARIAN IMPETUS OF GOD’S ECONOMY IS AGAINST ALL FORMS OF DOMINATION BY WHICH THE POWERFUL “GRIND THE FACES OF THE POOR.” IT INTENDS THE END OF THE MASTER-SLAVE RELATIONSHIP; ALL DOMINATION OVER OTHERS”. [3]

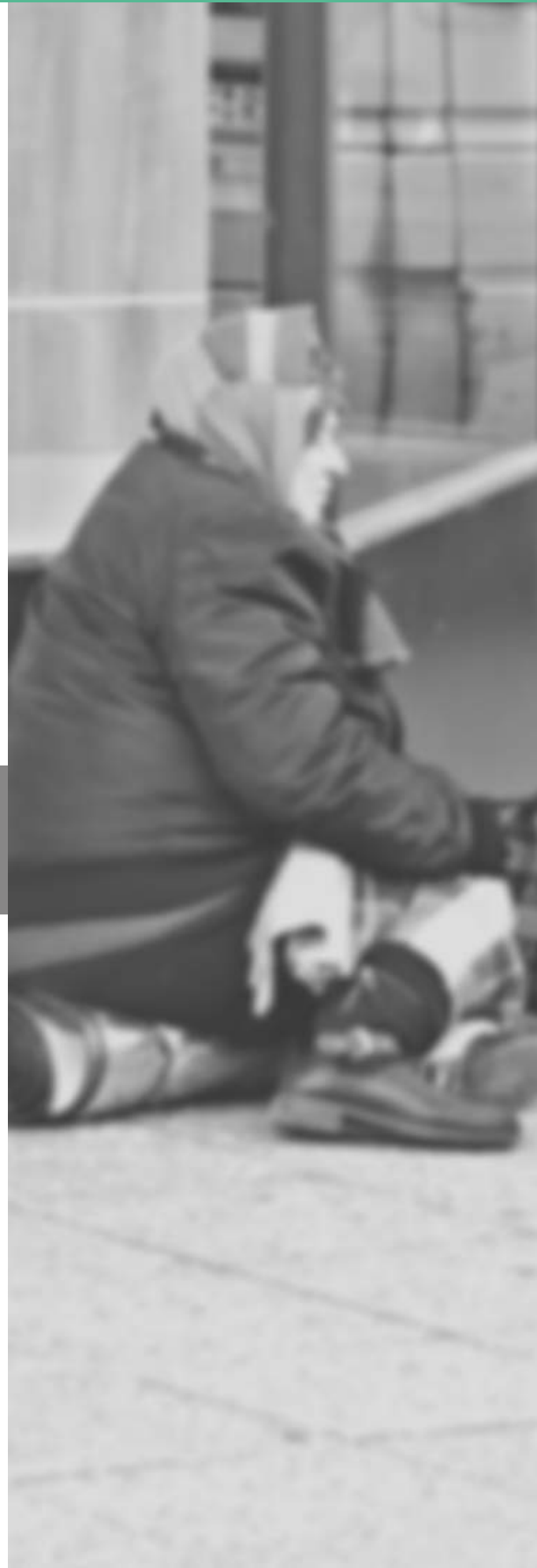
M DOUGLAS MEEKS



If we describe God as an economist, it would be good to look at what his economy looks like. In so doing, we will take a look at what is commonly known as “Sabbath economics”. Scripture uses the term ‘Sabbath’ to mean rest, to stop working and it is this vision that was given by God for social and economic justice. This will include the introduction of the Sabbath at creation, the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year and Jubilee. We will finally explore if this was extended into the life and teachings of Jesus.

SABBATH & CREATION

The first mention of Sabbath comes from the mouth of God himself. God creates the world and declares it as “good”. In the original Hebrew, the word would better be described as incredible, delightful or amazing. Yet as the creator comes to the climax of his creation, the culmination of what he describes as ‘very good’, he does so by resting or stopping from his work.





Yet as the creator comes to the climax of his creation, the culmination of what he describes as 'very good', he does so by resting or stopping from his work.

"And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested (verb) on the seventh day from all his work (noun) that he had done" (Genesis 2:2)

Good work is followed by rest. Good work is followed by a Sabbath.

SABBATH DAY

To understand the economic principles of the Sabbath day there needs to be an understanding of where the people of Israel had just come from. They had recently been liberated from slavery and the oppression of Egypt.

As much as anything else, it was economic slavery. It was an economy of deprivation and subjugation that had enslaved them for years. And in Exodus 16 we are introduced to God's alternative economy and society.

The Israelites had been liberated from their captivity and now find themselves in the wilderness. After the initial celebration they are now facing the harsh realities of life.



They complain about the lack of food (Ex 16:2-3). In response to this the Lord provides manna in the morning and quail in the evening (v4). He then gives them explicit instructions:

- They were not to hoard
- They were to gather each day only the portion
- necessary for the members of each household

In Egypt, wealth and power were defined by surplus accumulation (see Ex 1:11). The idea of wealth accumulation is what dominant empires do but under God's economy they were to keep the wealth circulating. This was and is God's alternative economy where there is enough for everyone's need but not for their greed. In his economy everyone has enough. There is no such thing as too much or too little. There is no such thing as the 99% and the 1%. God places limits on our accumulation and he punishes his people when they exceed those limits (see Num 11:32-34).

We are reminded of this principle by Jesus when teaching his disciples how to pray he says;

"Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11)

"Do not be anxious about your life" (Matt 6:25-34)

This is not something that is taught much about today. And for most of the church we're still pretty ignorant as to the theological foundations and what the implications are in terms of economics.



Sabbath Year



The Sabbath year is a deepening of the concept of the Sabbath day. Again we see the idea that there is enough for everyone and that the hoarding of wealth that leads to inequality is prohibited. The poor and the marginalised have basic inherent rights.

The first reference we see in respect to the Sabbath year is found in Exodus 23. Here we see a series of instructions concerning justice to all people including the alien or foreigner (Ex 23:9). There is a continual reminder of where the people of Israel have come from. They must never be allowed to forget that.

“For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard” Exodus 23:10-11 (ESV)



It is as if God is saying 'for six years you can call the land your own but on the seventh year your ownership is revoked and the land returns to the commonwealth.'

Therefore, those who have been marginalised or excluded by the economy in this time will be returned to an equal footing. What we are seeing here is God's concern for the poor. This agriculturally makes good sense but it also stops the predatory nature of humans who would seek to control nature by maximising the forces of production. The land is God's gracious gift to us and we must not turn that gift into our own private possession. And the fruit of the land should not be hoarded but should be fairly distributed.

(see also Lev 19:9-10)

In Deuteronomy 24:14 we see that this extends to wage justice as well. Wage justice and people being 'wage slaves' is a major concern when it comes to economic justice in the bible.



Would you describe this as charity, or justice?

What makes them different?



**"You shall not oppress
a hired worker who is
poor and needy,
whether he is one of
your brothers or one of
the sojourners who are
in your land"**

Deuteronomy 24:14 (ESV)

Jubilee

The Jubilee is the fullest expression of Sabbath. It is a full and complete remission and cancellation of debts and it takes place every 50th year. There are 7 x 7 Sabbath years then on the 50th year there is the jubilee. The year of Jubilee would be proclaimed with the sound of the trumpet and its simple aim is to dismantle structures of social and economic inequality.

This dismantling was to be done in three ways;

- Returning of the land to its original owners - land distribution. No one should become permanently homeless (v 3)
- Releasing each community member from debt (v35-42)
- The freeing of slaves (v47-55)

What we see here in the Jubilee is the resetting of the economy, which provides the ultimate solution to exploitation, monopoly and marginalisation. In this great act of Jubilee, we see hope brought to the oppressed and the marginalised.





Jubilee

R H Lowery [4] points out that the Sabbath Jubilee vision is diametrically opposed to our modern assumption of capitalist economics. He argues that we have just accepted that the natural condition of scarcity and the unlimited pursuit of human appetite, as being true.

These he said "Breed resignation to systems of distribution so unequal as to guarantee homelessness and starvation....." Sabbath economics however, he argues, based on ".....the principles of abundance and self restraint and turn this classical economic approach on its head.

If you assume that resources are abundant, sufficient for the survival and prosperity of human life, and that human needs and wants are limited, then no one need starve or suffer the elements through lack of housing or clothingTherefore long term systemic hunger, homelessness and poverty can be viewed only as a failure of human will." [5]

And contrary to God's will.

Jesus

We now move on to the New Testament and in particular the life and teachings of Jesus. I believe that in those teachings there are some very strong echoes of Sabbath/Jubilee teaching.

We will look specifically at one passage - Luke 4:16-21

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of God's favour."*

Here Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2 at the beginning of his ministry and claims the text as his mandate. The passage ends with the words:

"And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to tell them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"



When Jesus spoke about the year of God's favour, this is a direct reference to the year of Jubilee. In Mark's account of this we are not told who the good news is for. Luke makes it clear. The good news is for the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. Or as Walter Brueggemann says 'all those left behind by the dominant economy.' [6]

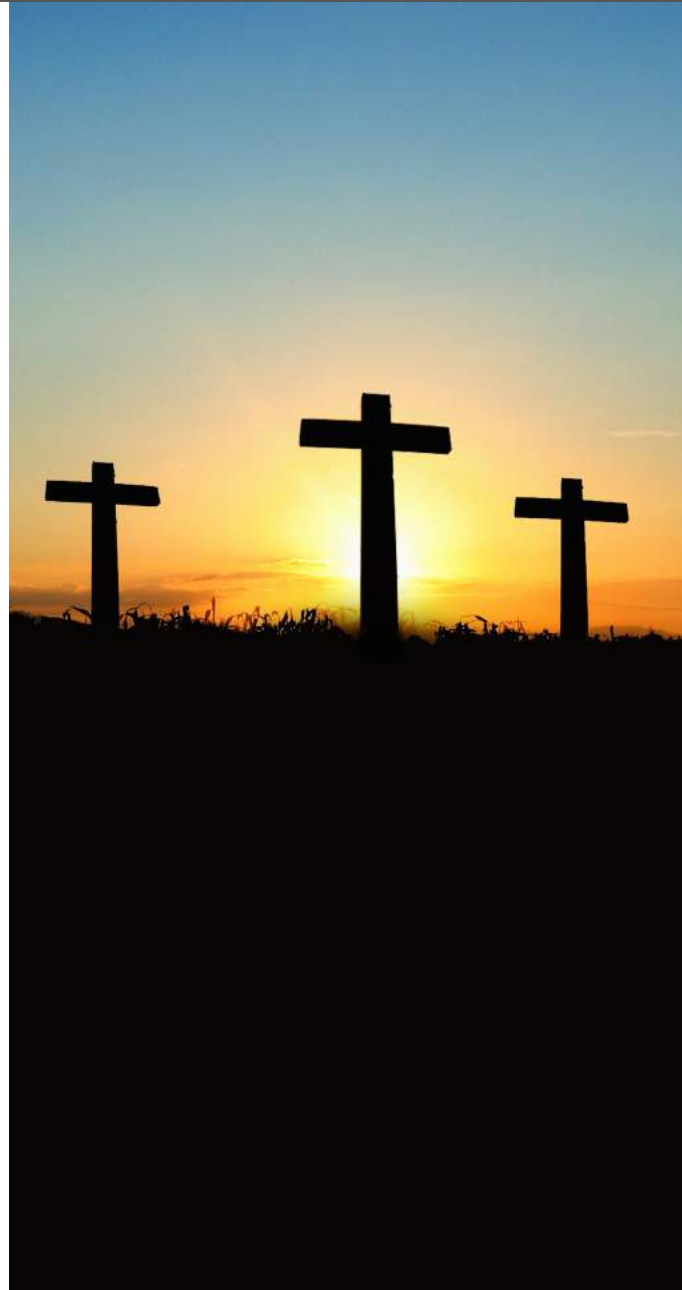
Jesus was speaking into the socio-political context of his day

Jesus

So, included within the Jubilee is proclaiming release to captives (economic or otherwise), recovery of sight for the blind and those under oppression going free. All of this can and needs to be unpacked in more detail but suffice to say, this is good news to the poor!

And for those of us who see that our mandate as followers of Jesus is saturated with the implementation of justice, this becomes a key New Testament text that acts not only as Jesus' mandate but also for all those who call themselves followers of Jesus.

Jubilee is an expression of God's generous heart. Chris Glibaud describes Jubilee as a description of how to live the good life: life where everyone's needs are met and the community is developed and sustained generation after generation. [7]





Questions

1. In what way would you see Sabbath as a resistance to our current economic system of production, accumulation and consumerism?
2. How can Sabbath act as an alternative to our current economic system?
3. What Sabbath Old Testament scriptures show God's position on debt?
4. What Sabbath Old Testament scriptures show God's position on debt?
5. What Sabbath Old Testament scriptures show God's position on redistribution/circulation of wealth/land?
6. In what way does Sabbath instruct us regarding God's care for and concern for the earth?
7. How does the idea of 'enough for everyone' speak to us today?

Questions

8. How would you say the frenetic lifestyles that many people live in the West is destructive to us physically and emotionally? And what does Sabbath have to say about that?

9. In Exodus 16 God tells his people that they should not store excess bread. They should only take enough for the day ('our daily bread'). Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in Luke 12:14 warns against storing up for the future. Today this teaching would be considered as shocking. Discuss the radical nature of Jesus' teaching and lifestyle and how applicable is this for us today?

10. It would seem that the economic and moral system we live in today is counter to the message of the gospel. How do we challenge 'the powers that be' in our age?

11. If Jesus' mission was 'good news to the poor' and he came to enact 'the day of the Lord's favour' (Jubilee) Luke 4:18-19, how should this impact the message and the mission of the church today?

Credits and References

- [1] Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy. IPPR Polity Books 2018
- [2] The Guardian theguardian.com How Unequal is Britain and are the Poor Getting Poorer. 2018
- [3] God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy. M Douglas Meeks. Fortress Press 1989 (p 11)
- [4] & [5] Sabbath and Jubilee. R H Lowery. Chalice Press 2000 (p36)
- [6] Interpretation: Money and Possessions. Walter Brueggemann, John Knox. Press 2016 (p 186)
- [7] Jubilee Letters: Fifty Steps Towards a Generous Economics. Aldeo Publishing 2016 (p 11)

Recommended Reading

Brueggemann, Walter
"Interpretation: Money and Possessions"

Heschel, Abraham Joshua
"The Sabbath"

Hughes, Dewi
"Power and Poverty: Divine and Human Rule in a World of Need"

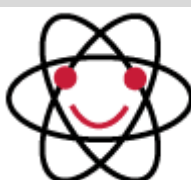
IPPR
"Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy"

Kinsler, Ross & Gloria
"The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life"

Meeks, M Douglas
"God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy"

Another key reference to the Sabbath year can be found in Deuteronomy 15:1-18.

A simply huge thanks to CotL Members Matt Wilson, Shona Elliott and Daniel May-Miller for pulling this all together. Also to Tim Morley and Nathan Lechlar for producing much of the content, as well as many other wonderful contributors. Daniel runs our Office and Communications day-to-day, Shona is one of our two busy Vice-Chairs and Matt runs Goodlabs, as well as shooting videos in his spare time. Visit www.goodlabs.uk to find out more.



Goodlabs
 Helping you to do good better

CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT.



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Bringing biblical perspectives, key thinking from members of Christians on the Left and the Executive Committee, alongside thought provoking questions and additional resources for group leaders, the videos can be used at home, with friends or colleagues, at an event or individually to inspire further study around five key topics:

Housing and Homelessness
Justice and Prison Reform
Refugees Welcome?
Economics and the 99%
Love not War

The series focuses on how our faith should guide the principles underpinning government policy, preparing us to speak the Truth to those with Power. This will look different to each member of Christians on the Left, as we live out the calling God has for our lives.

Visit our website for the complete series and additional resources:

christiansontheleft.org.uk/truth_to_power_series



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