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# JUBILEE IS NOT SPECIFICS, BUT ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

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By Jim Jordal

The more I learn about economic bailouts, stimulus packages, and the conditions leading to them, the more I'm persuaded that they will have only limited success until they come to include the ageless universal principles of biblical Jubilee. Unfortunately, even knowledgeable Christians often reject biblical Jubilee on the grounds that it is outdated, inappropriate to modern conditions, and unworkable. But that's if you consider only specific provisions of Jubilee, not the ethical/moral principles behind those specifics.

The first specific provision of Jubilee concerns Sabbath rest for persons, animals, and the earth on the seventh day and during the seventh year. Today we hear that such provisions would be impossible to achieve in modern industrial commercial society—especially the idea of shutting down agricultural activity every seventh year.

But what about the principles behind these supposedly outdated rules? They speak of respect for personal well being, something we surely don't have enough of. They value time for family togetherness and relaxation from frantic commercial activity, something modern society could surely profit from. And they speak of respect for the earth and intelligent use of her gifts rather than profit-driven exploitation of natural systems.

President Obama's stimulus package urges a "Green Revolution" providing new jobs developing non-polluting energy sources and decreased use of non-renewable energy. It is even beginning to seriously consider devoting funds to reducing or at least controlling of global warming. So if we look at it this way, perhaps Jubilee isn't so outdated after all.

The second set of Jubilee specifics centers around land holdings given to each family and the provision that every fiftieth year these family holdings—even if sold or lost to debt foreclosure—would revert to the original owners. Mention this in the average Bible study class (I have) and the howls reach the skies—Impossible! Socialistic! Stupid! Dictatorial! And worse!

But again, the basic principle behind this provision is that every human being has a God-given right to a fair (not equal) share of the planet's wealth, and that society has an obligation to structure itself so that this condition is met. The recent stimulus package falls short of this principle by offering massive aid to banks, local governments, big business, and almost any other institution or group at the top of the economic food chain, but not nearly enough to the victims at the bottom of the economy.

A third Jubilee specific entails compassion toward debtors and forgiveness of debts every seventh year, coupled with a prohibition on charging usury (interest) to fellow citizens. Again, the howls of anguish. How could we ration out credit without interest? How could banks operate? How would I get rewarded for loaning money? What would happen to our economy?

But what is the principle? It is that debt should never become a source of oppression because money is only a medium of exchange having no intrinsic value. It should be provided by government as a convenience to facilitate commerce, never used by lending institutions as an instrument resulting in oppression. Banks would still be able to charge a small amount for loaning money to cover what economists call the lost opportunity cost for those loaning out money. They could still charge for legitimate services. And they would not go bankrupt, as many claim.

It is in this respect that the bailouts and stimulus packages fail most miserably. They add the monies given out to the national debt, the service of which passes to future generations. They use money as an instrument of control to coerce recipients into adopting desired behaviors. And they allow the banking system to continue creating and destroying credit (money, in other words) with far too little supervision.

As cultural and economic conditions evolve the application of specific legal rules must change in keeping with the times. The specific provisions of Jubilee can also be modified as economic, political, and social conditions change. But the ethical principles of Jubilee never change. As a society we must soon come to realize that the basic reason our institutions exist is to benefit people, not to make money for economic pirates. This is an ethical principle, and the specific laws and rules we now operate under need to change to accommodate that principle. Let's get to it!