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THE LIBERATION OF CREATION AND THE MYTH OF UNLIMITED GROWTH

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THE LIBERATION OF CREATION AND THE MYTH OF UNLIMITED GROWTH

Report of a Consultation sponsored by The Lutheran World Federation

edited by

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PREFACE

The "capitalist" free market economy is in full swing. Despite periodic crises—as predicted by Marx—the worldwide triumphant march of the capitalist economic system appears to be unstoppable. The model of a socialist planned economy could not keep up with the sudden, immense progress especially in terms of innovations of the means and methods of production. In the meantime, most of the governments under "real socialism" have collapsed and had not much choice other than to accept the economic superiority of the free market economy.

The social and ecological effects of modern industrialized society as such prove to be far more problematic than the difference in systems, which did not play an important role at the consultation anyway. To what extent capital, know-how and the resulting political and economic power in the "developed" industrialized countries is responsible for the pauperization of the Two-Thirds World remains debatable. The fact, however, that the indebtedness alone of the Two-Thirds World is at the origin of an estimated capital transfer of 35 billion dollars per year from the poor to the rich serves as a vivid illustration of the international social crisis caused by this economic system.

The ecological consequences of the global "pricing" of all natural and human resources are dramatically illustrated by the long-term change in climate, the destruction of the ozone layer, erosion of the soil, depletion of the rain forests, etc.

The attempt of the wealthy and powerful industrialized countries to let the so-called underdeveloped nations and the ecosystem pay the price of their own increased material wealth, must be regarded as having failed. Thus more than ever before the economy has become a challenge to the ethical responsibility of humanity. In biblical times, regional economic injustices gave rise to

prophetic pronouncements and the enforcement of religious laws. Today this type of reaction can take place only in international bodies and in ecumenical solidarity.

The churches have either individually or in ecumenical community made certain statements on the ever new burdens that the economy places on society and the environment. They have primarily focused on one or the other aspect of the problem such as the debt crisis, the Amazon region, unemployment, etc. The Department of Studies of the Lutheran World Federation invited its member churches to engage in common reflection on the validity of Christian ethics in the economy. This is all the more necessary since traditionally there has been a certain "Protestant" abstemiousness with regard to political and economic developments. It is thus a matter of recovering the ethical competence of the churches in questions regarding the economy. The competence of Christians and the churches in economic matters is constituted in the ethical substance of the Christian witness.

Hence two Bible studies serving as the theological justification of this point of departure are at the core of this publication. The studies were first presented at a consultation of the Lutheran World Federation held in Mariaholm near Oslo in March 1989. Both technical and financial reasons have unfortunately prevented us from including the New Testament Bible studies by Irene Henning (FRG) and the extensive systematic theological paper by Anna Marie Aagaard (Denmark). Instead we have included a paper by Richard Hordern, lecturer at Luther College, University of Regina (Canada), made available by the author for the preparation of the consultation.

The group reports are above all a response to the various case studies on crisis situations that were presented at the consultation. The ethical challenge was approached via the Brundtland report rather than from a biblical and theological perspective. Therefore the initiators deem it to be important that this study process be continued in the sense of an ethic of the economy

guided by the Bible and based on concrete ecclesial and theological grounds. This publication is intended to give some suggestions for this process.

The material contained in this booklet was intended to stimulate further reflection with a view to the Eighth Assembly of the LWF held in January/February 1990 in Curitiba (Brazil). The same applies to the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, in which the restructuring of the world economy plays a decisive role.

The editor would like to express his appreciation to all those who participated at the consultation and especially to the Church of Norway who hosted this meeting. Iris J. Benesch and Dorothea Millwood merit credit for some of the translations and the production of the manuscript and it is due to their good cooperation that the English version of the German publication which appeared in December 1989 is now available.

Götz Planer-Friedrich
Geneva, July 1990

THE LIBERATION OF CREATION AND AN ECONOMY BASED ON GROWTH

Götz Planer-Friedrich

I.

The following statement was formulated at the 1980 World Mission Conference, held in Melbourne under the motto taken from the Lord's Prayer, Thy Kingdom Come:

> In the consumer societies now flourishing in the rich centers in many lands, good Christian people and others are now, with "cruel innocence", eating up the whole world. A vast fertility cult expects a wild, egotistical, statistical increase, demanding human sacrifice as the price of building and sustaining our industrial cities....[1]

What is striking is the religious language used in this passage not only to judge but actually to denounce the political and economic state of affairs. It makes the retreat to naive innocence impossible, and neither inherent constraints nor the iron laws of nature can be used to excuse the destruction of nature and the pauperization of large parts of the population. Even a moral judgment does not suffice. The concepts of good and evil can only be identified against a metaphysical background. In situations where the belief in the charitable God of the Bible fails, other

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1 *Witnessing to the Kingdom: Melbourne and Beyond,* ed. Gerald H. Anderson, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1982, p. 150.

gods sneak in. The sacrificial rituals of certain long forgotten fertility religions emerge from the past as means of comparison. The mythological rivalry between Baal and Yahwe is updated from a political and economic perspective. By remembering religious notions human beings attempt to interpret their confused situation in today's secular world.

Some might now legitimately object that all this is a bit too glib. Before bringing up the heavy artillery of religious categories, they claim, one must analyze closely what is happening both in the economic and political arena. Is there indeed one uniform economic theory and practice that can be squeezed into the Procrustean bed of religious alternatives? Does not the field of economics have its own instruments to correct possible undesirable developments? Does not a religious exultation of admittedly complicated economic and political decisions in the end lead to an untimely mingling of religion and politics or state and church?

As stated above, these reservations are justified. It could well be possible that the churches use this line of argument to close themselves off against an interdisciplinary debate, and thus make a mockery of those who, under totally different assumptions and with different convictions, are interested in bringing about a change in the political and economic situation.

Mandated by a worldwide association of Lutheran churches it is our aim at this consultation to discuss economic and ecological questions. We need the experience of experts in these fields. It is not the aim of this consultation to serve simply as a forum for exchanging different points of view, but rather to try and clarify the following three issues:

1. to create a greater awareness of the dilemma of economic strategies in the light of their social and ecological incompatibility;

2. to try and de-ideologize as far as possible the systemic conflict between socialism and capitalism in order better to

assess realistic future perspectives for both systems;

3. to give guidance regarding a theological judgment and to evaluate the possibilities for action by both the churches and individual Christians.

Without trying to pre-empt the contributions or our discussions I would like to reflect on the three elements of the consultation in order to:

- clarify the choice of topic and expound upon the decision of the preparatory group which met in Geneva in September 1988;
- develop guidelines for the work in groups, which we hope will result in a joint document for follow-up by the LWF;
- set certain emphases for the actual discussion in order to define certain pragmatic limits to the many problems.

II.

1. Growth

When formulating the topic "The liberation of creation and an economy based on growth", our starting point was that the fascination with the concept of economic growth is a crucial factor in the economic dilemma. As early as 1972 the Club of Rome published a report entitled "The Limits to Growth"[2] which drew attention to the fundamental difference between natural and economic growth. Natural growth is designed in such a way that it always tends towards an equilibrium within an ecological system. If this natural equilibrium becomes destabilized—as for instance seems to have been the case with the dinosaurs—the "species" is condemned to dying out having previously, however, done such damage to the ecological system that this too, needs to recover its stability.

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2 Dennis E. Meadows et al.: *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind,* Universe Books: New York, 1982 (2nd edition).

The most influential economic concepts aim at perpetual growth rates whose excesses the Club of Rome characterized with the statistical term "exponential growth". The contrast between natural and economic growth rates is a sign of the alienation of economic thinking from the natural givens of its material basis; even more than that: a blindness regarding the destructive impact of its ideology of growth. In the same way as a cancerous cell gives misinformation to its healthy neighbors and leads them to uncontrollable growth, economic theories of growth with their utopian promises spread and in so doing destroy the social web of living together as well as the vital bases for human existence.

The fantasies of growth propagate a feeling of life and affluence and thus suppress the perception of destruction and compassion for the victims. Economic growth in the rich industrial nations produces suffering and destruction in other parts of the world. Moreover, growth produces violence. It is a fact that economic expansionism is closely linked to the production of arms. Already before World War I the military recognized that a competitive and efficient armaments industry and technology are the backbone of an army. Thus, in an age of deterrence by weapons of mass annihilation military security depends on economic capacity and technological innovation.

This also sheds some light on the civilian industry which is determined to a far greater extent by the potential of violence inherent in the production of armaments than is commonly believed. It is not true that war is the father of all progress. On the contrary, arms technology and their production seem to turn the civilian economic sector into a battlefield. Here I do not simply mean the competition between individual companies but rather the production and the products themselves which embody concepts of violence which go along with the production and invention of weapons.

The civilian alternative to the atom bomb is provided by the energy industry in form of a nuclear reactor. In spite of acknowledging the proponents' good will, this has the same deadly poten-

tial as the bomb. This was clearly illustrated by Chernobyl.[3] We owe the discovery and production of herbicides, pesticides and fungicides to research in the field of chemical weapons. A variation of what had been invented to annihilate enemy armies is now poured over our fields, meadows and forests—the enemy being weeds and vermin. The enemy image has stayed with us. Economic and military security entertain the same notions of threat and develop the same potential of violence. The "peaceful" application of agricultural chemicals can be altered and become warlike. Every nuclear reactor produces the critical mass for the bomb. The only difference is that atomic war means rapid death; economic violence accomplishes the same thing—only more slowly.

2. Conflict of systems

Both Marx and Engels criticized the social incompatibility of capitalism. They concluded that the conditions of production would have to be changed by revolutionary means. According to their theory of history, socialist society had to come about as a matter of course once the means of production had developed further.

This is not the time nor the place to deal with the philosophical background and the political effects of dialectic materialism. There has been for 70 years, politically effective since World War II, a socialist social system that regards itself as being an alternative to capitalism. The ideological confrontation of the Cold War turned this into an irreconcilable opposition. The areas of influence of both sides seem to be definable only under the threat

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[3] Professor Dhirendra Sharam, one of India's leading nuclear critics stated that "Our country has spent billions of rupees on the development of nuclear technology—a tremendous waste if one considers how little energy the hazardous nuclear power stations have actually produced up till now. The billions that have been invested make sense only if there is an arms program at the bottom of it."

of mutual destruction. It is not quite two years since the chairman of the GDR State Council, Erich Honecker, has said in an official statement during his state visit to the FRG that capitalism and socialism were like fire and water. The West German chancellor Helmut Kohl did not contradict him.

Today, Mikhail Gorbachev takes a different stand:

> The economies worldwide will become a unified organism, outside of which no state can develop normally today, whatever social system it may belong to and whatever economic standard it may have reached.... This calls for the development of a fundamentally new functioning of the world economies and a new structure of international division of labor. At the same time the growth of the economies worldwide exposes the inconsistency and limits of traditional industrialization whose further expansion in depth and width would lead to the brink of an ecological catastrophe.[4]

I believe that the reason why the course of history turned out to be somewhat different from what the founders of scientific socialism had envisaged is a flaw in their own theory. According to their analysis of the system, the means and methods of production play the role of an ethically neutral motor of history. It is simply the distribution of capital and labor and subsequently the distribution of the produced goods that for them has any ethical and socio-political relevance. The same instruments of production which in capitalism necessarily lead to the pauperization of the masses, the accumulation of wealth for a few and—as Marx already foresaw—to the destruction of nature, will produce social justice and societal as well as ecological harmony under socialism.

What they had overlooked was that a number of faulty decisions both in the area of ethics and society, which they had criticized in capitalism, had already passed on to the means of production and would continue to be objectified in them. All major innova-

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4 *FAZ*, 9 December 1988, p. 6.

tions of industrial technology from the weaver's loom and the steam engine to the conveyer belt and the microchip are inventions of capitalism. This is where the "spirit of capitalism" (Max Weber) has been implemented concretely. The present civilization's technology of production is entirely geared towards the expropriation of labor, the maximization of profits and the exploitation of human beings and resources no matter where the production takes place. Under different social conditions, which even in capitalist countries are not fixed once and for all, the consequences for human beings can at best be slightly alleviated and the damage to the environment only somewhat reduced by technological means.

There is something else. The hardware produced by capitalism, including the goods produced with it, exercise a fascination which so far socialism has not been able to counter. Marxist belief in progress by means of more and more refined means of production is possibly the reason why most politicians from socialist countries see the "saving grace" of socialism in taking over as completely as possible all the technological innovations of capitalism.

Yet the fact that socialism lags behind the capitalist standard in production and consumption could lead to a different conclusion: socialism needs different economic instruments. It seems rather odd that up till now Marxists and their capitalist opponents agree, of all things, on the fact that there is no alternative to present methods and technologies—unless one wants to revert to the Middle Ages.[5]

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5 Even for the critical Polish Marxist, Adam Schaff, the saving grace of "modern socialism" would be the introduction of microelectronics and catching up with technological developments. The third industrial revolution for him is a "promise of doors opened to a new paradise" *(Perspektiven des modernen Sozialismus,* Europaverlag, Vienna/Zurich, 1988, p. 82).

Already several years ago Ivan Illich established that today's health industry makes people ill and deprives them of their health. Similarly he criticized today's mass transportation. The exorbitant expenditures necessary for the building and upkeep of traffic routes and the necessary vehicles is the price we pay for the acceleration of our movements. If we were to add the time necessary for the production and organization, it would turn out that we do not move faster than in the time of the mail coaches.

Yet neither of the two systems attaches much value to this type of calculation. Only a few alternative economists, as for instance Hans Christoph Binswanger criticize the fact that in economics "the two factors of production are reduced to labor and capital".[6] However, this type of reductionism is part of the world view of today's homo sapiens occidentalis whose scientific ideal draws its evidence from fading out its uncomfortable findings.[7] This applies to physics as it does to medicine or economics. Abstract capital and anonymous labor are the criteria, devoid of all reality or personality of such scientific economics. With the aid of this reductionism economic growth can be assessed statistically, without having to do justice to "side issues" such as the quality of life, well-being, or environmental sustainability. Here both capitalist and socialist economic theories agree.

Apart from the ideological enemy images, the main difference lies in how far this reductionism can still be pushed. In his book, "Small is Beautiful"[8], E. F. Schumacher points out that the tendency in capitalism is to substitute capital for labor. The self-propagating capital would thus become the final idol of homo

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6 "Ökologisch orientierte Wirtschaftswissenschaft", in *Loccumer Protokolle* 15/84, p. 148.

7 Cf. A. M. Klaus Müller, *Die präparierte Zeit,* 1972; idem, *Wende der Wahrnehmung,* Munich, 1978.

8 *Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered,* Sphere Books: London, 1977.

oeconomicus occidentalis. At present we witness this in case of the reflux of capital interest being paid by the heavily indebted developing countries. The systematic introduction of ever more capital-intensive technology whilst at the same time reducing the labor force is considered to be great progress.

Admittedly, the reductionism of socialist economics does not go as far as that. However, the question arises of how to avoid such consequences, if it continues to reduce its balance sheets to the national income, per capita consumption and growth in productivity without taking the accompanying sociological and ecological factors into account. We must not forget that it was socialism that proved that overcoming hunger and want was due to political decisions rather than economic accomplishments. Today such political decisions no longer simply underlie national conditions. In order to give the economic processes a humanitarian and ecologically sustainable direction the political outlook needs to have international dimensions. Much better if ideologically encrusted positions do not play a role here. Gorbachev's "new thinking" seems to be a good basic approach.

3. Theological judgments

The International World Conference on Climate held in June 1988 in Toronto stated that: "Humanity is unintentionally executing an enormous, globally effective experiment, whose eventual consequences can only be surpassed by a nuclear war."[9]

What is soberly termed "experiment" by scientists is what Christians call God's creation. The execution of this creation might be unintentional seen from the perspective of the climatologists. Nevertheless, according to Christian understanding, humanity cannot take this easy way out. This is not an unavoidable fate, but rather foreseeable damage which can be attributed to human sin.

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9 *Die Zeit,* No. 29/1988, p. 9.

This should not be seen as a play on words, a substitution, so to speak, of religious for scientific language. If the world is an experiment, then human beings are free to continue or to terminate it. But if the world is God's creation, then human beings within creation are only a part of the whole and are accountable to the creator for their actions. In this case the damage that humankind inflicts on creation is to be seen as sin against the God of this creation. In cases where humankind loses faith in God the Creator, and human beings see creation as being material for their own creations, the awareness of sin is lost. However, once human beings no longer feel responsible for what they cause "unintentionally", then there seems to be no solution to this problem.

For Christians, especially theologians, the question regarding the interrelatedness of economics and creation must begin with the exposure of guilt. That is more easily said than done, for by simply denouncing individuals, groups or systems, these are not proved guilty. The Latin American liberation theologians have made an important contribution by drawing a parallel between the metaphysics of capitalism and the idolatry of the Old Testament. According to Hinkelammert[10], the abstract god capitalism is a "juggernaut that devours humans". And he continues: "A concept of nature comes into being on the basis of the metaphysics of the corporation, according to which human beings are the only disturbing factor in nature because they express their needs and defend concrete nature as the space and prerequisites for their concrete lives."[11]

Pursuing a similar line of argument the Munich theologian Falk Wagner examined the way money functions within today's economy. He writes:

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10 Franz J. Hinkelammert, "Die wirtschaftlichen Wurzeln des Götzendienstes", in ibid. et al., *Die Götzen der Unterdrückung und der befreiende Gott*, Münster, 1984, p. 146.

11 Ibid.

> Money fulfills its function as a means of exchange, of calculation, measurement and stocking up of value. But this mediating function of money can become autonomous so that the means of money becomes an end in itself. Then all matters, things, substances and thoughts which can be communicated through money are reduced to means of money as an end in itself. Money as an end in itself is like an "earthly god" that takes on the function of an all-encompassing reality. Religion and theology cannot prevent that money and God thus become comparable. But they can sharpen the awareness of the possible difference between money and God.[12]

At the same time Wagner believes that theology (perhaps he means only one particular type of theology in the FRG) does not fulfill this task, because the church and theology are too involved with the money orientation of everyday life.

Before levying accusing criticism at certain phenomena and persons in the economic process, then, we should exercise restraint and self-criticism. Allocating guilt serves little purpose, since—unless combined with solidarity and the offer of reconciliation—it only pushes the accused into a defensive and justifying position. The "distinction between spirits" (or gods) is something the church will have to solve for itself. But the church may hope that others too may experience the liberation from the idols of oppression and destruction as liberating.

Finally we have to ask again how much such ethical and theological reflections can actually achieve in the face of the grim realities of economic power respectively powerlessness. What we need to realize first is that the Christian churches themselves are in one way or another involved in the economic system both with

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12 Falk Wagner, *Geld oder Gott? Zur Geldbestimmtheit der kulturellen und religiösen Lebenswelt,* Stuttgart, 1984, p. 134.

regard to their participation in the economic wealth and its justification. Many of the effects of the economic system, which were criticized above (understanding of labor, the lack of participation, injustice etc.) also apply to the churches. Those who reap the profits as well as those who suffer under the economy are members of one or the other church.

1.
Hence, the call for renewal and change needs first of all be addressed to the church. It is in the church that new, alternative models for work, distribution, building of communities and participation can be tested. What we need to ask is where and how that actually happens.

2.
If it is true that today's economic methods and their effects endanger creation and human kind to the extent that they could actually be destroyed, the church must withdraw its legitimation of this system. The question is how to do this: in the form of a confession, a denial, or practical rejection and renewal?

3.
The more dramatic the type of protest or the withdrawal of legitimation, the more likely there is to be tension if not division in the church. Since a great number of Christians in the wealthy industrial nations identify with what for them is an advantageous system there is a danger of guilt and the demand for repentance becoming personalized.

Thus we are in need of awareness-building, which in the Christian tradition is quite rightly called evangelization. Only those convinced by the gospel will be prepared to change their ways. What needs to be considered is how this specifically Christian motivation can be communicated to non-Christian partners when dealing with specialized issues.

(Translation from the German)

BIBLE STUDY

1 Kings 21

Rainer Albertz

Our first Old Testament passage takes us back to the Israel of the ninth century B.C.—more precisely, to the northern of the two-part kingdoms. On the throne is King Ahab. The clever diplomacy of his father had resulted in Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king, which made it possible for the northern kingdom to become part of a close-knit federal alliance with its northern neighbors which at the famous battle of Karkar in 853 gave even the powerful Assyrians cause to tremble. Ahab normally resided in Samaria but he also had a secondary residence in Jezreel, about 40 kilometers to the north on the eastern fringe of the rich fertile plain of the same name. This is also the setting for the subsequent narrative.

v.1a Linking formula

After these events, what happened was this:

v.1ab Exposition

Now Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria.

vv.2-4 Preliminary action: Ahab's attempt to obtain Naboth's vineyard by legitimate means fails

And after this Ahab said to Naboth: "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance

(*nahala)* of my fathers!" And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of his fathers." And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food.

vv.5-20a Main action: the judicial murder committed by the royal family and its exposure by the prophet

vv.5-16 Part 1: The judicial murder, i.e. the apparent success of Jezebel's plan to secure Naboth's vineyard for Ahab by illegitimate means.

vv.5-7 Jezebel seizes the initiative:

But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said to him, "Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?" And he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite, and said to him, "Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it please you, I will give you another vineyard for it"; and he answered, "I will not give you my vineyard." And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you govern Israel (*meluka)*? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

vv.8-10 The queen's dissimulated death-warrant for Naboth in the king's name:

So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders (*zeqanim)* and the nobles (*horim)* who dwelt with Naboth in his city. And she wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people; and set two base fellows opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, "You have cursed God and the king" [the text says euphemistically: "thou has blessed...!"]. Then take him out, and stone him to death."

vv.11-14 The notables of Jezreel execute the royal death-warrant:

And the men of his city (*anse iro)*, the elders and the nobles who dwelt in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it was written in the letters which she had sent to them, thy proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. And the two base fellows came in and sat opposite him; and the base fellows brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death with stones. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying,
"Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

vv.15-16 Jezebel tells Ahab of her success. Her plan has apparently succeeded; the vineyard is duly taken into Ahab's possession.

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

vv.17-20 Part 2: Elijah's exposure of the judicial murder

vv.17-19a The commissioning of Elijah as messenger

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. And you shall say to him:

v.19b The prophetic sentence on the king:

"Thus says the Lord, 'Have you killed, and also taken possession?'" And you shall say to him, "Thus says the Lord": 'In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood."

v.20a The alarm of the king who has been found out

Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" (1 Kings 21:1-20a)

At this point, let me make a first pause. The ending of the text was much revised subsequently so that the conclusion of the story is somewhat unclear. More of that later.

1. The structure of the narrative

The narrative is very skillfully constructed. After the exposition in v.1ab introducing Naboth and his vineyard, the bone of contention which produces the quarrel between him and the king, the preliminary action in vv.2-4 shows how the king's attempt to obtain Naboth's vineyard by legitimate means comes to grief on Naboth's stubborn resistance. This failure forms the basis of the main action. This consists of two parts: the judicial murder ingeniously stage-managed by Jezebel (vv.5-16) and its exposure by the prophet (vv.17-20a). The first part provides a rich arrangement of scenes:

Scene 1 vv.5-7:	Jezebel's conversation with Ahab issuing in her taking over the initiative.
Scene 2 vv.8-10:	The queen's dissimulated death-warrant sent by her in the name of the king to the elders and notables of Jezreel.
Scene 3 vv.11-14:	The execution of the royal death-warrant by the sacred court of justice.
Scene 4 vv.15-16:	Jezebel's announcement of success to Ahab and the king's possession of the vineyard.

In other words, the first main part tells in detail how the royal family, employing illegitimate means deriving from the pressure it is in a position to exercise, achieves the desired ownership of the vineyard. Ahab's failed attempt to secure possession (v.4) has now been replaced by a smoothly and elegantly organized successful attempt—apparently.

But this does not bring the narrative to its conclusion, though a few scholars believe that it does (Timm, Würthwein). The narrator leaves no room for doubt that for him the success of the royal plan was indissolubly connected with a flagrant injustice in God's sight. He therefore provides a second part in which the prophet Elijah exposes the behavior of the royal family as plain murder and, in God's name, announces the divine punishment (vv.17-19). This seeming success will prove in the end a failure. The section ends, therefore, with the alarmed question of the unmasked royal murderer (v.20a).

The tension of the narrative thus consists of two sets of events:

(1) from the failure of the royal territorial ambitions to their success; this set of events begins in v.2, reaches its climax in v.4 and its goal in v.16;

(2) from the crime committed by the royal family to its punishment; this set of events begins in v.8, reaches its climax in vv.14-16 and its goal in the prophet's speech at the end, v.19.

The artistry of the narrative is shown by the fact that the second set, i.e. the aspect of crime and punishment, is only mentioned explicitly right at the end of the narrative (2nd main part, vv.17-20a). Prior to that, it is only discernible implicitly. The first set of events, on the contrary, where it is a question of the initial failure but ultimate success of the royal ambitions, is right in the forefront of attention for three-quarters of the narrative (preliminary action and first main part: vv.2-16). The narrator thereby skillfully achieves an account of events from the angle of the royal family. To begin with, in vv.2-16, Ahab and Jezebel, their desires, plans, disappointments, cleverness and ultimate success, are at the center. Naboth, on the contrary, speaks only his words of refusal (v.3). Thereafter he is simply the silent victim of government intrigues. The narrator in this way ensures that his audience identifies itself very largely with the disappointed Ahab

and the cleverer Jezebel. In this way, the audience can experience for itself the surprise of the unmasked royal murderer. The brusque and unsparing, exposing and condemning prophetic word is also intended in some measure to be taken to heart by those who hear the story.

In view of this narrative structure, it may be supposed that the story was originally addressed to those groups which came to terms with the monarchy and—like the notables of Jezreel—let themselves be corrupted by it, either out of fear or for personal advantage. The purpose of the narrative was to get under the skin of people who needed to be warned against allying themselves with a power which despises humanity. The story is therefore also directly addressed to us.

2. vv.1-4 The conflict and its social background

The conflict in our story is sparked off by Ahab's desire to possess and use for his own domestic needs a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite, adjacent to the king's property:

v.2 And after this Ahab said to Naboth:
"Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money."

The king's proposition sounds reasonable and his offer a fair one. He offers Naboth a vineyard in exchange, promises him an even better one or its market value in ready cash.

Naboth's surly reply to the king's proposal is all the more surprising:

v.3 But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers!

The Hebrew word *halila* rendered here as "the Lord forbid!" is a powerful oath meaning literally: "May (something) be accursed!"

It thus expresses the repugnance felt by someone who repudiates a proposal which he finds utterly impossible and out of the question. Naboth is not willing even to discuss the king's proposed business transaction. He rejects it brusquely and without qualification.

But why? What prompts Naboth's strange attitude? The reasons are not stated explicitly in the text since they are evidently familiar to the narrator's audience. But they need to be reconstructed for us and seen against their social background.

We begin with the fact that Naboth describes his vineyard as the "inheritance of my fathers" (v.3). We meet this term again in Ahab's response (v.4) and it obviously is of decisive importance for Naboth's refusal.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *nahala* (=inheritance) denotes the real estate exploited by peasant families for their livelihood. In pre-monarchical times it had been distributed by lot *(heleg)* among the families. It was inherited patrilinearly in the family and in order to keep it in the family, in the case of heavy indebtedness *(ge'ulla)* on the part of the family, the tribe was under obligation to redeem it. Traditionally it was regarded as not for sale, even if the legal prescription for this probably dates only from early post-exilic times. This regulation is found in the Old Testament passage we shall be studying tomorrow. Yahweh's decree via Moses here is:

Lev. 25:23 The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

According to this text, the real owner of the land is Yahweh, who assigns to families only its use and denies them complete power to dispose of it as they will. It is very unlikely that this legal and theological explanation was already assumed in the ninth century. That would have made Ahab's proposition to Naboth appear immediately as a crude disregard of a divine commandment and there is no trace of this in our narrative. We are dealing here in

all probability with an unwritten ancient custom for which there is also evidence in other parts of the Near East (e.g. in the Nuzi documents). This custom was intended to ensure the social homogeneity and equality of the small peasant family enterprises in the tribal agrarian society of pre-monarchical times, by setting strict limits to the accumulation of property. Naboth at all events feels the obligation to uphold this traditional idea of an inalienable family entitlement to land.

That still leaves unexplained why Naboth reacts so aggressively and refuses even an exchange of land as offered by Ahab, accommodating himself here apparently to Naboth's ideas about family property rights. To understand this, we need to know that the economic and real estate laws had been radically changed since Israel's transition to the monarchy. The centralization of administration which began under David and Solomon resulted in a pressing need for land on the part of the monarchy; in order to maintain the royal court and royal temple, large domains were required. There was a constant need of new territory to maintain and pay the growing number of officials, soldiers and merchants in the king's service.

Pursued and promoted by the monarchy, this modern trend towards a concentration of land-ownership in safe hands made things increasingly difficult for the traditional small peasant-family businesses. While, to begin with, the land available was freshly conquered territory which had become ownerless (2 Kings 8:1-6) and which the crown confiscated and distributed to its officials (1 Sam. 8:14; 22:7; 2 Sam. 9:10ff.), in the middle of the eighth century the smallholders were driven in droves into dependency and poverty by the new class of large landowners and sometimes even forced out of their small-holdings altogether by a ruthless deployment of the strict ancient law of credit. Thus we find the prophet Isaiah castigating a regular cut-throat competition in oppression which was the logical outcome of this economic expansion.

Is. 5:8 Woe to those who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is no more room
and you are made to dwell alone
in the midst of the land.

At roughly the same time, the prophet Micah also saw the real estate law which guaranteed to every full citizen his inheritance being utterly gutted of substance by the unbounded economic frenzy of the large landowners:

Mic. 2:1f. Woe to those who devise wickedness
and work evil upon their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in the power of their hand.
They covet fields, and seize them;
and houses, and take them away;
they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance.

When the reforming priestly movement which developed in exilic times from among the disciples of the prophet Ezekiel set strict limits to the territorial demands of the king and his officials, we once again see in retrospect just what a threat these were to the ordinary peasant class:

Ezek. 46:16-17 Thus says the Lord God [Adonai Yahweh]: If the prince makes a gift to any of his sons out of his inheritance *(nahala),* it shall belong to his sons, it is their property *('ahuzza)* by inheritance.

But if he makes a gift out of his inheritance to one of his servants, it shall be his to the year of liberty *(deror);* then it shall revert to the prince; only his sons may keep a gift from his inheritance.

> The prince shall not take any of the inheritance of the people, thrusting them out of their property; he shall give his sons their inheritance out of his own property, so that none of my people shall be dispossessed of his property."

In other words, the king shall only bequeath to his sons his own land. Gifts of land to officials are no longer to be a permanent transfer of property. Such land regularly reverts to the king so that the latter's demand for land shall not constantly expand and the small holders not be driven once again from their holdings.

In the ninth century, which is the context of our narrative, we are only at the very beginning of this critical social development; but it is only in the light of its subsequent course that the heart of the conflict between Naboth and Ahab really becomes clear. For the Jezreelite farmer Naboth, the issue at stake is not simply this particular vineyard which the king wants to use as a vegetable garden to supply the needs of his court. What is at stake for Naboth is a matter of principle. It the royal family with its insatiable demand for land entitled to eat away ever more deeply at the territorial and social basis of the ordinary peasant farmers? By defending his vineyard, Naboth wishes to establish a precedent in opposition to an economic development which he regards as deadly. In his view, the time has come to resist firmly the economic pressure of the state. This is the reason for his categorical refusal and uncompromising stand, his passionate and stubborn No! As a free peasant of Israel he wishes to point out to his king a frontier which the latter is not at liberty to cross, whatever the rational economic arguments in favor of his doing so.

The purpose of the vivid description of Ahab's reaction to Naboth's opposition is to show that the kind certainly recognized the principled character of Naboth's refusal:

v.4 And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of his fathers." And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food.

As king of a nation which had been created under Jeroboam out of a revolt against state oppression through forced labor (1 Kings 12), Ahab knew the unyielding attachment of his subjects to liberty. He also saw no possibility of simply ignoring the family land law which thwarted his economic plans. To use royal force to crush resistance directly would have far-reaching consequences, including eventually open rebellion, by which many of his predecessors had been swept aside. He is vexed and sullen, therefore. No, indeed, it was certainly no fun being the king of a stubborn and backward rustic nation!

3. vv.5-7 The discussion with Jezebel

After the conflict has thus ended in an impasse for Ahab, it is only through his wife Jezebel that the action is moved on.

vv.5-6 But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said to him, "Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?" And he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite, and said to him, "Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it please you, I will give you another vineyard for it"; and he answered, "I will not give you my vineyard."

The narrator's purpose here is to lift the curtain a little on the psychology of the royal family—almost in the manner of a gossip columnist. Quite the loving wife, Jezebel inquires the reason for Ahab's ill humor. This permits the sulking king to give full vent to his pent-up frustration and to tell the whole story. But the way Ahab presents the situation to Jezebel betrays a certain political difference between husband and wife. He is afraid to admit to Jezebel how far his has already gone to placate Naboth. His

account reverses the sequence of his offer to Naboth; the sale of the vineyard is now mentioned as the first option; the offer of a "better vineyard" in exchange becomes now simply "another vineyard", and this only as an alternative to the first option of a purchase. Ahab also omits to mention the passionate way Naboth refuses the offer (the word *halila* is not repeated in v.6) as well as Naboth's appeal to the "inheritance" of his fathers. Ahab prefers not to bother his foreign wife with domestic Israelite sensibilities since he clearly thinks she just would not understand them. Despite these tonings down of the story, Jezebel's reaction is sharp:

v.7a And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you govern Israel?"

Jezebel has indeed understood the coded message of Naboth's refusal. Naboth's protest—designed to point out limits to the monarchy—is a challenge to Ahab's sovereignty—Jezebel sees that very clearly. And by her mocking question to Ahab, she seeks to show her husband that in no circumstances can such resistance to the authority of the state be tolerated. After such a protest, to want to take into account the Israelite love of freedom and these old-fashioned peasant ideals, which are in any case alien to Jezebel as a foreigner, would be in her eyes sheer suicide for the monarchy. Moreover, knowing her husband's feelings here, she determines to take matters in hand herself:

v.7b Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

And Ahab, still shaken and uncertain, falls in with his wife's plans.

4. vv.8-10 Queen Jezebel's plan

Although she is a Phoenician woman, Jezebel is sufficiently aware of the sensibilities of her Israelite subjects to know that she cannot simply have Naboth arrested and eliminated by the royal officers. To have done so would only have provoked a

united protest on the part of the local peasantry and resulted in a dangerous situation of unrest. She devises a plan, therefore, to enlist the local authorities in her plans:

vv.8-10 So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who dwelt with Naboth in his city. And she wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people; and set two base fellows opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, "You have cursed God and the king". Then take him out, and stone him to death."

The purpose of this plan is clear: the Jezreel local court itself is to execute the sentence of death on Naboth. Outwardly everything was to seem to be done legally. The law books of the Old Testament, which are highly critical of rulers, do not indeed furnish us with any legal rule corresponding precisely to what happens in our narrative; there is however a commandment in the covenant book of the eighth century which approximates to it in substance:

Ex. 22:28 You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

The only dubious point is whether the Hebrew word *nasi'* (traditionally in English "prince") really means the king or only a fairly powerless tribal chief. But the prohibition could certainly have been claimed by the monarchy for itself. No one who calls the religious and political foundations of society so radically in question as to want nothing further to do with them (which is what "cursing" means) can be allowed to go on living.

But how were the accusation and condemnation to be achieved? Here, Jezebel's plan is not so clear, since the detailed legal processes of the period of the Israelite monarchy are still to some extent obscure to us. The celebration of a fast, to be proclaimed at Jezebel's request, presupposes an emergency, perhaps a time

of drought. Such a situation was interpreted in the ancient world to mean the land had committed some offense. The queen's plan indeed includes the public exposure of Naboth's conduct as the causes which brought down the divine wrath on the land. The purpose of assigning Naboth the place of honor and responsibility at this ceremony is not only to lull him into a false sense of security but also to intensify his criticisms of the monarchy and the social evils to be laid at its door and thus as a rebel against the monarchy. The "base fellows" set opposite him at the ceremony are to provoke him into making such treasonable statements. This godless kingdom was simply inviting the divine wrath, as the drought demonstrated! It was turning God into an idol by failing to respect the real estate law handed down to us from the beginning! But to make such statements would carry Naboth further than he intended and inevitably brand him as the intolerable malcontent who must be eliminated.

5. vv.11-14 The corrupt local community

The plan is carried out just as the queen has devised. The most shocking aspect of our Bible passage is its sober account of the way the responsible leaders of the local community fall in with the royal family's transparent design to murder Naboth and offer no discernible resistance to its wicked plan.

vv.11-14 And the men of his city the elders and the nobles who dwelt in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it was written in the letters which she had sent to them, thy proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. And the two base fellows came in and sat opposite him; and the base fellows brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death with stones. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

The narrator refrains from making any open criticism; he wants

his readers to say frankly and unsparingly: That is the way things are. This is the sort of people we are. The narrator's subdued reserve is only discernible in the way he twice stresses that it was people from Naboth's city, elders and notables who dwelt there (v.11), who behaved in this way, and that Naboth's accusers were "scoundrels" (v.13). Naboth's fellow citizens—people who had known him and his views well—nevertheless accepted the malicious and far-fetched accusations of two scoundrels coming from heaven knows where, and let them count against him. The narrator is holding up a mirror to his hearers: this is the kind of society you are—a society lacking true solidarity and only too easily corrupted!

The reasons which moved the elders and nobles of Jezreel to behave in this way are deliberately left in obscurity by the narrator, since he wishes to exclude any possibility of exculpation. We may assume that, for the people actually involved, the situation was less transparent than appears in the narrative. Probably only a few had been made privy to the queen's plan; they may have been bribed, enticed by the promise of royal favors. It was precisely the wealthier and respected families who traditionally provided the elders for local administration and who profited from the monarchy, already held royal offices probably and, thanks to this, were already large landowners. the social differentiation reflected in the term *horim*—nobles, v.8, 11 had undermined the solidarity of a once egalitarian Israelite society; and the once democratic dispensation of justice in the local community had degenerated into an instrument of oligarchical domination.

It may be that, to begin with, Naboth had awakened sympathy among his well-placed fellow citizens by his courageous opposition to Ahab. They, too, had no love for an over-ambitious royal family which trespassed on their economic interests. If someone like Naboth reminded it of the limits to royal power, all well and good! But the role assigned to Naboth in the scene so cunningly contributed by the queen, his prominence at the fasting service and his bold criticism, may well have provoked envy, distrust and opposition, particularly among the leading families. They were

definitely not prepared to follow this "Michael Kohlhaas"* that far. Naboth's resistance challenged the very foundations of religion and society, from which they were the beneficiaries. They therefore dropped this troublesome fighter for such old-fashioned peasant ideals like a hot potato and excluded him as a dangerous disturber of the peace. Most of them will not even have had any feeling of acting unjustly. It is indeed characteristic of the sin provoked by economic interests and dependencies in all ages to insinuate itself slyly and to remain unrecognized for what it really is.

* Michael Kohlhaas is the hero of a short novel of the same name by H.v. Kleist, in which the merchant, Michael Kohlhaas from Cologne (executed 1540), becomes a criminal because of an outraged sense of justice.

6. vv.15-16 Ahab takes possession of the vineyard

Because of the dark doings of the local community, the conflict ends in complete success for the monarchy—apparently!

vv.15-16 As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

The narrator deliberately gives this scene a special solemnity by means of detailed repetitions. Jezebel can announce the success of her plan proudly and pompously. Her policy has succeeded perfectly. She has avoided any direct confrontation, eliminated the rebel, involved the local community in responsibility for what has been done and brought the coveted vineyard into the king's power. Ironically, she once again dwells on what she can only regard as Naboth's utter stupidity. He had refused to do business with the king but had ended up by paying with his life! There is

no longer any mention of the offer to exchange properties; for Jezebel, this had been a quite needless fall-back position, quite irreconcilable with her own idea of how to proceed. And Ahab accepts without comment the result of his wife's policy. he neither praises her nor criticizes her. In the beginning, he still hesitated between his own economic interests and respect for the free Israelite system of land ownership. Now he goes to take possession of the vineyard. This was done by walking through the length and breadth of the plot of land (Gen. 13:17); it is tacitly assumed here that ownerless property reverted to the king (2 Kings 8:1-6).

7. vv.17-20a The divine commentary

vv.17-20a Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. And you shall say to him: "Thus says the Lord, 'Have you killed, and also taken possession?'" And you shall say to him, "Thus says the Lord": 'In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood." Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"

In the very hour of triumph, when everything seems to have gone well, when power has triumphed over justice and there is no longer any human institution left which could bar the king's way, Yahweh commissions the prophet Elijah to deliver the divine judgment. It is only here that the narrative reaches its real climax.

Elijah receives from God the order to confront Ahab at Naboth's vineyard where the king—certainly in the presence of witnesses—is pacing out the plot of land he has at last secured for himself. We are not told exactly where and when this order was carried out. All that interests the narrator is that the prophet finds the

king still in flagranti. The words of the prophet (v.19) are as usual in two parts: an accusation and a condemnation, which are defined as a divine sentence by the so-called "messenger formula": "Thus says the Lord!" The accusation takes the form of a cutting and sarcastic question which tears aside the mask:

"Have you killed, and also taken possession?" The seemingly legal procedure of the king's acquisition of the land is to be unmasked as what it really was, namely, as killing, or rather, as murder. The Hebrew word used (*rasah)* means malicious killing for base motives. It is also the word used in the Decalogue, in the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (*lo'tisrah).* By their judicial trickery masked as a legal condemnation in God's name, Ahab, Jezebel and the judicial authorities of Jezreel have in reality broken the ancient divine commandment.

A striking feature of the accusation made by Elijah in God's name is its blunt one-sidedness. While the royal authority and the local justices try to drown the truth in imprecision, God names the sin unequivocally. In the sight of God, the king's acquisition of this plot of land by riding roughshod over the vital interests and rights of his peasant subjects is sin, however many economically plausible arguments the king may produce to justify it. God comes down clearly on the side of Naboth, the victim of this modern economic vitality. It was not Naboth who had cut himself off from God by resisting the destruction of the foundations of peasant society, but rather those who isolated him as a troublemaker and then abandoned him and eliminated him. To be sure, Elijah was not advocating in God's name a land and economic policy as such; he did however point unambiguously to the bounds which had also to be respected by the promoters and beneficiaries of the new economic development: namely, the right to life and to property of the weak who were the victims of this development.

Therefore, the divine condemnation which Elijah has to announce to Ahab is also a harsh one. Ahab as the prime agent is to suffer the same shameful and violent death suffered by his victim Naboth.

The actual delivery of the prophetic word by Elijah is not recounted, nor does it need to be in the taut Hebrew narrative style. The narrator passes at once to Ahab's reaction: "Have you found me, O my enemy?" The king, who thought he had destroyed all traces of a judicial murder by the cleverly contrived intrigue of his wife, has to acknowledge with horror that he has nevertheless been "found", i.e. "found out!" He has to recognize that there is in his kingdom one man at least who, unlike the notables of Jezreel, refuses to let himself be compromised by the royal favor or power but has the courage, in God's name, to confront the king directly with his sin.

8. vv.20b-28 Postscript to the narrative

Elijah's words were not fulfilled in exactly the way he had announced to the king. According to the note in 1 Kings 22:40, Ahab died a natural death and received the customary burial. In 845 B.C. however, about a decade after his death, a bloody revolt took place in the northern kingdom claiming as its victims not only Ahab's son Joram but also Jezebel and all the king's descendants (2 Kings 9-10). The prophetic word to Ahab was subsequently applied to these events (2 Kings 9:25). And the delay in this divine judgment in vv.27-28 of our narrative is taken to signify that Ahab penitently humbled himself in response to Elijah's words.

Similarly, the fate of Jezebel is also included within the range of the prophetic word of Elijah (1 Kings 21:23). The remaining verses, which were added only in the period of the exile (vv.20b-22, 24f.) widen Elijah's accusation into a general condemnation of this king. Thus the grim downfall of this dynasty, indeed, the downfall of the whole monarchy, subsequently was seen as a judgment of God, the divine punishment not least of the shameless disregard the royal family and the circles allied with it had shown for the right to life of the weak.

(Translated from the German)

BIBLE STUDY

Leviticus 25

Rainer Albertz

Given our impotence in face of the apparently inescapable pressures of our respective capitalist or socialist economic systems and the structural violence they engender which were vividly brought home to me and doubtless to many others in this group in yesterday's addresses and discussions, the fact that our biblical sisters and brothers did not tire in their struggle against the devastating pressures and social systems which they in their day knew to be unjust can give us comfort and hope and spur us on. They felt themselves called by God time and again to try to relieve these pressures and to check their destructive consequences.

The latest and most comprehensive reform project in the Old Testament was the law of the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee in Leviticus 25. It forms part of the so-called "Holiness Code" (Lev. 17-26) which was probably composed in the early exilic period (circa 500 B.C.) by a group of priestly reformers recruited from among the disciples of the prophet Ezekiel. Their purpose was to make a fresh beginning possible for post-exilic Israel, finally putting an end to the mistakes and failures of the pre-exilic years.

To grasp the significance of this reform project, we must recall in part at least the history leading up to it. Pre-national Israel had been a relatively egalitarian society of small farmers and shepherds. As we heard yesterday, every family had a parcel of land, its inheritance (*nahala*), the sale of which was traditionally prohibited so as to prevent the whole land from falling into the hands of a few families (see 1 Kings 21 - Naboth's vineyard). As

the result of social changes produced by the monarchy, this social order was already dislocated in the national period. As we heard yesterday, already in the ninth century B.C. individual families with small parcels of land came under pressure from the crown which wished to extend its royal properties (1 Kings 21). It was only in the eighth century B.C., however, that the economic pressure of the new class of royal ministers, officers and merchants which had been created by royal gifts of land to large landowners became such that the traditional smallholders were driven in large numbers into dependency and poverty and expelled from their farms (Is. 5:8; Mic. 2:1-2; Am. 2:6; 5-11).

The means used by the large landowners to extend their estates and to create a pool of cheap labor, moreover, were quite legal. They used the severe ancient law of credit. This permitted the creditor to secure the repayment of outstanding loans by high interest rates, seizure of the debtor's property, or imprisonment. In the case of default on the debtor's part, the creditor could seize all the debtor's property and goods as well as his person and the members of his family (2 Kings 4:1f.). In other words, once they were in the toils of this law of credit, smallholders had to mortgage to their creditor firstly their goods, then their land, and finally even their own family and themselves; i.e. they had to sell themselves into debtor's slavery. In most cases, to be sure, they continued to work their own fields but these, the produce of them and the debtor himself and his family now belonged in fact to their masters. In the end, they could be expelled from their land and sold into slavery abroad (Nehemiah 5) or eke out their days as day-laborers paid by the day (Heb. *sakir).*

This aggressive economic process had devastating consequences. As a result of it, a large part of the population was forced into permanent poverty, dependence and servitude. Traditional remedies such as the right of redemption within the tribe (*ge'ulla;* cf. Jeremiah 32) no longer sufficed to surmount this widespread social crisis. On the contrary, all sense of mutual solidarity with

others outside the family froze in the icy blasts of the scramble for the spoils in this divided society with its two opposing classes (Am. 6:6; Jer. 6:13f.; 9:2ff.; Job 6:22f.).

From the end of the eighth century B.C., after social outsiders such as the prophets of judgment, Amos, Isaiah and Micah had first exposed and branded this entire social and economic process as sin against God, various groups which still felt responsible for the welfare of society initiated an attempt to halt this disastrous development and to mitigate its devastating effects by legislative means.

A brief summary of the reform laws which preceded the law of the sabbath year and the jubilee year and formed their basis will be useful at this point:

1. **First preliminary stage: The Book of the Covenant (Ex. 21-23), end of eighth century B.C.**

The first remedial measures to counteract the impoverishment of the smallholders were already framed in the oldest body of law that has come down to us and which recent scholarship assigns to the end of the eighth century B.C.:

> If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him (Ex. 22:25).

Lending at interest, the most pernicious form of the credit business, was prohibited in the case of the poor; the prohibition was subsequently extended to cover the whole nation.

A charitable purpose was assigned to the traditional taboo which required that the land be left fallow every seven years in order to maintain its power of blessing and to honor God as the Giver of this blessing:

> 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 wild beasts may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard and your olive orchard (Ex. 23:10f.).

The natural growth in the fallow period is to be left not only for the wild animals, as was ancient custom, but also for the poor. In the cornfields where grain dropped from the harvest sprouted again, this natural growth did not amount to much, of course, and was hardly sufficient to provide for the needs of the poor. The law reformers later added the vineyards and olive orchards, therefore, which produced a passable harvest even without cultivation. Agriculture thus came to have a quite serious charitable significance. It is probably assumed here that the seven year cycle applied to different fields at different times to ensure that there would be some natural growth for the impoverished smallholders every year. Besides this, the reformers undertook for the first time to legislate for enslavement for debt and so to remove it from the arbitrariness of the creditors:

> When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, an in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. If he came in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, "I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out free", then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall serve him for life (Ex. 21:2-6).

The conversion to a permanent state of slavery was tied to fixed criteria and turned into a verifiable public act. The most important innovation was the restriction of the period of enslavement for debt to a maximum of six years irrespective of the amount owed. The purpose here was to set a limit to the worst forms of arbitrariness on the part of creditors and to prevent servants who were unable to pay their master the amounts due during their service period from being constantly burdened with additional debts which they could never repay.

2. Second preliminary stage: The Deuteronomic Law (Deut. 12-26), end of seventh century B.C.

Towards the end of the seventh century B.C., after the deliverance from Assyrian hegemony, a determined effort was made under King Josiah radically to reform Israel's religion and Israelite society, by a broad coalition of upper-class groups with a sense of responsibility.

One feature of the comprehensive Deuteronomic legislative reform was the extension of the prohibition of interest finally to all Israelites:

> You shall not lend upon interest to your brother, interest on money, victuals, interest on anything that is lent for interest. To a foreigner you may lend upon interest, but to your brother you shall not lend upon interest that the Lord your God may bless you in all you undertake in the land you are entering to take possession of it (Dt. 23:19f.).

Still more important, however, was the quite new conception of the agricultural fallow period. Developing further the charitable thrust given to this custom in the Book of the Covenant, its application is extended to the credit business and it becomes a legal provision for the cancellation of debts (*shemitta),* in view of the more intensely urban conditions of the seventh century B.C.

> At the end of every seventh year you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's year to release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it; but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release (Dt. 15:1-3 [*shemitta* = release]).

Here the reformers make deep inroads into the property rights of creditors. The cancellation was to apply not just to the sum owed but to all the secondary items involved in the credit business (usufructs, security pledges and enslavement for debt). Loans to foreigners were the sole exceptions.

Such general cancellations of debts were not unknown elsewhere in the Near East and in Israel even (cf. text Jeremiah 34). In Babylonian they were called *anduraru* and in Hebrew *deror* they could be granted, for example, on the accession of a king. This, however, made them dependent on the whim of the monarch or the propertied classes and they could also - as the example of Jeremiah 34 (cf. v.11) shows - be quickly withdrawn. The special feature of the Deuteronomic legislation was the separation of the remission of debt from the monarchy and its establishment as a permanent regularly recurring institution to which all impoverished Israelites were to have a legal right. At the same time, the reformers gave this economic process a religious dimension. The remission of debt was to take place "for the Lord" (v.2) and was thus an act of worship to be celebrated publicly by the whole people. In this way the reformers hoped to be able regularly to put a stop to the over-indebtedness of whole sections of the population.

They also realized, of course, that such a radical intervention in economic processes could easily be circumvented:

> If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your

> heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever that may be. Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, "The seventh year, the year of release is near", and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and it be sin in you. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land (Dt. 15:7-11 [shemitta = release]).

The remission of debts at a fixed date could also encourage the upper class to refuse credits to impoverished peasants the nearer the year of remission approached. The reformers tried to prevent this abuse by theological appeals but this is more a gesture of helplessness in face of powerful economic interests. They drew the line at any legal revision of the credit law.

Finally, the Deuteronomic reformers tried to prevent the slide of debtor slaves into permanent slavery by urging the payment to them of initial capital - though the amount is not laid down precisely:

> If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed; you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press; as the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this

today. But if he says to you, "I will not go out from you", because he loves you and your household, since he fares will with you, then you shall take an awl, and thrust it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your bondman for ever. And to your bondwoman you shall do likewise. It shall not seem hard to you, when you let him go free from you; for at half the cost of a hired servant he has served you six years. So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do (Dt. 15:12-18).

This initial capital was meant to make it easier for the released peasant to stand on his own two feet once more. In this passage it is also clear which theological insights were used by the reformers to commend their humanizing interventions in the law of credit. They are as follows: Yahweh set Israel free from slavery once (v.15); wealth is a divine blessing (vv.14, 18). Even the slaveowner is only a slave released from slavery by God; he must therefore be concerned for the freedom of his brother who has fallen again into slavery and show him the blessing which God first showed him. To be sure, the reformers did not succeed in abolishing slavery consistently by this means, on the basis of these theological insights; they had, however, taken a decisive step towards the undermining of its inhuman principle. Since the slave not only worked off his debts but was in addition given a reward, he came close for the first time to the status of the dependent paid worker (cf. v.18).

That concludes our consideration of the basis on which the legislative reform in Leviticus 25 is to be understood.

3. The third stage: Law of the sabbath year and the jubilee year (Lev. 25)

There are two parts to this law:

1. The law of the sabbath year (vv.2-7 together with vv.20-22).
2. The law of the jubilee year (vv.8-55).

The two projected institutions are linked together by the seven-year rhythm. The sabbath year is to be celebrated every seventh year; the jubilee year is to be celebrated every seven-times-seventh year (=49 years).

3.1. Vv.2-7: The new rule: the fallow year as the sabbath year

V.2 The command to observe the sabbath year

> Say to the people of Israel, When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a sabbath to the Lord.

Vv.3-5 Details of the law of the fallow year

> Six years you shall sow your field (cf. Ex. 23:10a), and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits (Ex. 23:10); but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the Lord; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. What grows of itself in your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your undressed vine you shall not gather; it shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.

Vv.6-7 Free access to the natural produce of the land

> The sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired servant and the sojourner who lives with you; for your cattle also and for the beasts that are in your land all its yield shall be for food.

In v.2 the observance of the sabbath year is commanded for the time when Israel inhabits the land; vv.3-5 regulate in more detail what is to be done in the sabbath year: the cultivation of field and vineyard is forbidden and the use of the natural produce of the earth prescribed. As can be seen from v.3, the priestly reformers turn back explicitly to the older fallow law of the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 23:10f.) but are determined to give it a new content and new significance by their own regulations.

The underlying concern of the new regulations is clear if we compare them with the Deuteronomic regulations. The transfer made there of the agricultural fallow law to the credit business, which the former had pushed into the background, is to be canceled again according to the priestly reformers. In their view it was a too narrow anthropological approach which ignored the whole area of the extra-human creation of God. From the Deuteronomic reform, therefore, they adopted only the idea of a general, regularly recurring renunciation effected simultaneously by the whole of society for Yahweh, but sought also to give the fallow year law a new theological content by linking it with the idea of the sabbath.

The weekly rest from labor had already from of old been connected with the extra-human creatures:

> Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your ass may have rest... (Ex. 23:12).

The rest from labor on the seventh day was also to allow the laboring animals of rural Israelite society a time of refreshment. This expressed the dread of exploiting to economic extremes the animals which human beings had domesticated for their own purposes by intervening in God's creation. The commandment to rest on the seventh day set a limit to the economic exploitation of these animals; its purpose was to encourage respect for the independent right of these animals to life and - within limits - regularly to restore to them the freedom which is rightly theirs as God's creatures.

During the Exile, this sabbath idea acquired a still more fundamental significance. After the Temple had been destroyed and was in any case no longer within reach of many deported Israelites, it was no longer possible to worship God as the Giver of all these gifts by sacrificial gifts from agricultural production. The sabbath, i.e. the deliberate interruption of the labor process and the renunciation of the profits thereby foregone, was the

only form left in which to give thanks to Yahweh as Creator and Giver of all blessings. By being liberated from human control, the whole creation was to be permitted to return regularly to itself, i.e. to its Creator, who Himself rested on the seventh day after having completed all His work of creation (Gen. 2:1-3).

It was such thoughts as these which guided the priestly reformers in their propaganda in favor of a sabbath year. If not every week, then at least every seven years, linking up with the old fallow rule, the whole creation was to be returned symbolically to its Creator. Set free from human control, not only the animals but also the cultivated fields and the vineyards were to be allowed to breathe in again and to celebrate the sabbath to the glory of Yahweh, the Creator and Giver of the land (v.4). By this new custom, Israel was to be regularly reminded that nature is more than a raw material for human purposes, that it has its own right to life and that Israel has received it as a gift from God.

In an agricultural system like that which prevailed in Palestine, in which there were never any large surpluses, the reordering of the fallow year in a seven-year rhythm embracing all the fields alike presented considerable problems of supplies, of course. The reformers tried to take this difficulty into account by allowing all free access to the natural growth in this sabbath year, and not just disadvantaged groups as in the Book of the Covenant. But, as the eloquent exhortations in vv.18-22 show, doubts remained as to the practicalities:

> Vv.18-19 Exhortation to keep the commandments: promised blessing
>
> Therefore you shall do my statues, and keep my ordinances and perform them; so you will dwell in the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell in it securely.
>
> Vv.20-22 Answers to objections to a general fallow sabbath year

> And if you say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?" I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, so that it will bring forth fruit for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating old produce; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old.

This then is the reply given by the reformers to their critics: if you keep God's commandments in general and the sabbath-year law in particular, so great a blessing will follow that you will have no supply problems. It has to be noted, nevertheless, that the implementation of a symbolic "rest for creation" in the sabbath year necessitated the abandonment of the charitable functions of the fallow field. Already in biblical times a price had to be paid for "environmental protection".

3.2. Vv.8-11 Introduction of the jubilee year

The priestly reformers, however, did not rest content with this abandonment but transferred the social functions of the fallow year and remission year to the new institution of the jubilee Year. As far as we can tell, there was no precedent for this jubilee year in the Old Testament tradition. The name "jobel" (=a ram) probably derived from the ram's horn (Jos. 6:4 et passim) which was sounded when the people was summoned to observe this year. Luther's translation, "Halljahr", was an attempt to reproduce the verbal image in the Hebrew; the term "jubilee year" stems from the verbal pun of the Vulgate "annus jubilaei" which echoes the "shepherd's song" (*jubilum*).

> Vv.8-9 Commandment to celebrate the jubilee year; date, general summons
>
> And you shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall be to you forty-nine years. Then you shall send abroad the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the

seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall send abroad the trumpet throughout all your land.

Vv. 10-11a Content of the new institution: two principles - release of pledged land and pledged persons

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his family. A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be to you...

Every forty-nine years, i.e. in the fiftieth year when the first year is counted, a jubilee year is to be publicly proclaimed (vv.8-9); this year, too, is a sabbath year (vv. 11b-12); its content, however, over and above that of the normal sabbath year, is the liberation not only of creation but also of society (vv.10-11a). The social concerns of the Deuteronomic reformers are thus set by the priestly reformers in a broader context, one which also embraces nature.

As formulated by the reform priests, who borrowed here from the earlier royal acts of grace, the liberation (*deror*) is to have two aspects: in the jubilee year, each Israelite is to be handed back his own land if this has because of debt passed into the hands of another (v.10b); and each is to be permitted to return free to his tribe if he has had to pledge himself to another because of debt (v.10b).

In the law which follows, both these principles are regulated in detail: vv.13-34 for the parcels of land, and vv.39-55 for persons. The intervening verses (vv.35-38) deal with the law of interest, which is important for both land parcels and persons.

3.3. Vv.14-17 Digressive discharge of debts

But surely the extension of the period covered by a general remission of debts from seven years in Deuteronomy to forty-nine in Leviticus 25 makes the whole institution pointless since,

assuming an average life expectation of forty years, only few of those affected would live to reap its benefits.

But this would be seriously to underestimate the determination of the priestly reformers to deal effectively with the serious problem of excessive indebtedness. Before they deal in detail with the land parcels, therefore, they speak of a new principle whose purpose is to make it possible for debts to be remitted even before the jubilee year.

Vv.14-17 Detailed provisions for repurchase

> And if you sell to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. According to the number of years after the jubilee, you shall buy from your neighbor, and according to the number of years for crops he shall sell to you. If the years are many you shall increase the price, and if the years are few you shall diminish the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

This regulation is framed by the warning not to oppress the neighbor (vv.14 and 17); it is not concerned with normal transactions, therefore, but with the transfer of parcels of land in virtue of pledge obligations between the debtor and the creditor (cf. also the introductory phrase "If your brother becomes poor ...you..." [vv.25, 35, 39, 47]). The fair relationship between creditor and borrower, as the reforming legislators see it, requires the creditor not to fix the amount of the debt, i.e. the value of the parcel of land given in pledge, once and for all but rather to allow a degressive diminution in the value and debt of the original amount. The jubilee year period serves here as basis of calculation: i.e. a debt, for example, which amounted to 100% at the beginning of this period would diminish annually by 2% over the fifty years until it is completely wiped out. The indebted peasant would thus, after twenty-five years, still have only half of the amount to pay in order to buy back his parcel of land.

In the view of the legislator, the loss which the creditor has to accept in virtue of this regulation is balanced by the usufruct income he has received during this period. In other words, it is no longer the parcels of land themselves which are sold and purchased (i.e. transferred by pledge) but only the transient rights to use them ("the number of the crops", v.16). The degressive liquidation of debts within the jubilee year period, therefore, is to be adjudged as a serious attempt to reshape the economic laws so as prevent the smallholders as a group from sliding ever deeper into debt.

3.4. Vv.13, 23-28 The redemption of parcels of land

V.13 Principle

In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property (cf. v.10b).

Vv.23-24 Directions for applying the principle stated in v.13: Irrevocable transfers of land prohibited. Release of the *ge'ulla*

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall grant a redemption of the land.

Vv.25-28 Detailed regulations for the redemption of pledged and parcels

If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it, and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him reckon the years since he sold it and pay back the overpayment to the man to whom he sold it; and he shall return to his

property. But if he has not sufficient means to get it back for himself, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of him who bought it until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

Here for the first time, the positive consequences of the new conception of property become visible. The irrevocable sale of land parcels and, with it, the final expulsion of hopelessly indebted smallholders from their inheritance, is forbidden (v.23). While this corresponded to ancient family custom, only now was it provided with a clear theological basis: the real proprietor of the land, the reformers clearly stated, was Yahweh, and the Israelite families only had the usufruct of the divine property. They were God's "guest workers" who enjoyed no final say over the land they cultivated (v.23). The rule was, therefore, that they had to permit the release (*ge'ulla),* i.e. the repurchase, of land parcels given in pledge.

By applying their new degressive debt redemption here too, the reformers tried to ensure that the ancient obligation of family solidarity (which included the redemption of the land parcels of indebted kinsfolk) had a greater chance of being fulfilled (v.25). Indeed, they even reckoned that the debtor himself could repurchase his land since, in their view, even as an "enslaved debtor" he ought still to be paid a wage (v.40). The chances of his recovering his property, either on his own or with the help of his kinsfolk, were thus clearly enhanced. In the jubilee year, the property was in any case to revert to its original owner (v.28).

3.5. Vv.29-34 Exceptions

Vv.29-31 1st exception: procedure in the case of dwelling houses

If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a whole year after its sale; for a full year he shall have the right of redemption. If it is not redeemed within a full year, then the house that is

in the walled city shall be made sure in perpetuity to him who bought it, throughout his generations; it shall not be released in the jubilee. But the houses of the villages which have no wall around them shall be reckoned with the fields of the country; they may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee.

Vv.32-34 2nd exception: procedure in the case of Levite property

Nevertheless the cities of the Levites, the houses in the cities of their possession, the Levites may redeem at any time. And if one of the Levites does not exercise his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a city of their possession shall be released in the jubilee; for the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. But the fields of common land belonging to their cities may not be sold; for that is their perpetual possession.

How seriously and concretely the reformers were concerned with making their concept realizable can be clearly seen in this section. They limited the opportunity of repurchasing dwelling houses in the city to one year and excluded them from the jubilee year redemption, for it was unthinkable that the inhabitants of the city should constantly be forced to move house (v.29f.). in the case of "villages which have no wall", on the contrary, since these were indispensable for the effective cultivation of the land, the reformers retained the provision which made repurchase possible (v.31). In allowing the Levites a permanent possibility of redeeming their urban dwelling houses and exempting their grazing land completely from credit transactions (vv.32-34), the purpose of the reformers was to protect the basic economic interests of the Levites from any encroachments. The self-interest of the priestly group is plainly to be seen here.

3.6. Vv. 35-38 Prohibition of interest

At the end of the first part of the regulations for applying the jubilee year law, the legislators refer once again to the prohibition of interest, already familiar to us from the Book of the Covenant and Deuteronomy.

> Vv.35-38 Parenthesis: Prohibition of interest in order to check the spread of indebtedness
>
> And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

The prohibition of interest is not, of course, a direct part of the institution of the jubilee year; but since its purpose is to prevent the spread of indebtedness, it is related to the reformers' project. The abandonment of interest increases is a necessary part of their projected reduction of indebtedness; this project underlines the drift of this commandment. To take interest from the poor brother on top of everything else would be an oppressive act against which the legislators had already issued a warning at the outset (vv.14 and 17). Instead, the rich are to assist their poor brothers and help them to live in the community (vv.35f.). This counsel, which applies not just to the prohibition of interest but to the whole of the jubilee year law, is a direct implication and corollary of Israel's experiences of deliverance at the hands of its God (v.38). The first sub-section of the jubilee year law concludes, therefore, with the solemn self-proclamation of Yahweh as liberator of israel from egypt and the giver of the land of canaan.

3.7. Vv.39-43 Revised law of enslavement for debt

The second sub-section of the law, dealing with the release of persons, begins with a revision of the law of enslavement for debt:

> Vv.39-43 Revised law of enslavement for debt among Israelites
>
> And if your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee; then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own family, and return to the possession of his fathers (cf. v.10b). For they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him with harshness, but shall fear your God.

We must be careful at this point if we are really to grasp the nature of the reform the priests were striving for, since at first glance it seems as if, following the whole tenor of their legislation, what they are proposing is a considerable worsening of the situation of those enslaved for debt: forty-nine years' service instead of only six years in the Book of the Covenant and Deuteronomy. Nor is there any longer any reference here to the initial capital introduced in the latter. First appearances are deceptive, however. What the reformers are aiming at is a radical change in the character of slavery for indebtedness among the Israelites. The poor brother is not to be treated as a slave or driven to slave labor (v.39); he is not to be ruled with harshness, e.g. with physical discipline and punishments (v.43; cf. v.46). He is to be treated instead as a hired servant - or guest worker - including the choice of his place of work and, like them, keep his individual rights and receive a wage (v.40). In other words, the reforms envisaged transform the slavery for debt into a form of

dependent paid employment. In that case, however, the forty-nine years are in no sense only an imposition but also a guarantee of finding a settled outcome down to the jubilee year. The person in this sort of service certainly had a much more secure future prospect than the day-laborer who could be hired or fired at need. As a wage earner he also had the possibility of repurchasing his mortgaged ancestral property even before the jubilee year and thus of setting up in business again on his own. This is also perhaps the reason why the legislators made no special provision for the release of this group of persons; they were no longer enslaved and therefore no longer needed to be released before time either.

The basis offered by the reformers for this further deep inroad into the freedom of the propertied classes to dispose of their possessions just as they pleased was that Yahweh himself claims to be the real proprietor of all Israelite slaves, whom he delivered from Egypt. Among Israelites, therefore, there was no longer any place for slavery in the strict sense (v.42). Certainly the reformers steered clear of calling in question the personal responsibility reflected in the ancient law of credit as such, yet they nevertheless - on the basis of Israel's experiences of religious liberation - pushed their efforts to humanize it even to the point of almost eliminating slavery altogether. Moreover, it can only be a matter of sadness to us how long it took Christianity to finally arrive at this conclusion and to take this step.

3.8. Vv.44-46 The limitation of slavery to foreigners

Having made such deep inroads into the property rights of the rich, the legislators - as a sort of consolation prize - condescend to permit expressly the purchase of foreigners as permanent slaves, a custom which had always existed alongside enslavement for debt.

> As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are round about you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with

you and their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever; you may make slaves of them, but over your brethren the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another, with harshness (vv.44-46).

As the context itself (vv.43 and 46) shows, however, this was not an independent theme for the reformers; it served only to emphasis that brother Israelites were no longer to be treated with "harshness" as if they were slaves. This admission may be scorned as a "double morality" but we have to realize that slavery was as axiomatic an element in ancient society and its economic life as factory production is in our present-day societies. In addition, the ethnic limits of Israelite religion are in operation here and these it was only able to transcend in its Christian continuation. Foreigners had in fact no part in the liberation which Israel had experienced at the hands of Yahweh. But when even today these very verses are used by white Christians in South Africa to provide a biblical justification for their apartheid system, even though the blacks whom they oppress as slaves are for the most part their Christian brothers and sisters, this is so flagrant a misuse of the text as to make us blush for shame.

3.9. Vv.47-54 The release of Israelites enslaved for debt among foreigners

If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you, or to a member of the stranger's family, then after he is sold he may be redeemed; one of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle, or his cousin may redeem him, or a near kinsman belonging to his family may redeem him; or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. He shall reckon with him who bought him from the year when

> he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his release shall be according to the number of years; the time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired servant. If there are still many years, according to them he shall refund out of the price paid for him the price for his redemption. If there remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall make a reckoning with him; according to the years of service due from him he shall refund the money for his redemption. As a servant hired year by year shall he be with him; he shall not rule with harshness over him in your sight. And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he shall be released in the year of jubilee, he and his children with him (vv.47-54).

The only case in which a release is still required in respect of persons is that of an impoverished Israelite who has become the slave of a rich foreigner because of debt. The reformers do not claim to compel foreigners dwelling in Israel to abandon slavery for debt; they had no power to do so. Yet Israelites are to make sure that their enslaved fellow-countrymen are not badly treated (v.53) and the kinsfolk of these fellow-Israelites are urged to do everything possible to secure their freedom (v.48f.; cf. Neh. 5:8). Foreigners dwelling in Israel are subjected to the jubilee year law only in being required to release Israelite slaves in the jubilee year (v.54) and to respect the degressive cancellation of debt so as to facilitate redemption (vv.50-52).

3.10. V.55 Concluding justification

> For to me the people of Israel are servants, they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt (cf. vv.42 and 38). I am the Lord your God (v.55).

The second sub-section, like the first, concludes with the solemn declaration that Yahweh is the Deliverer of Israel. Because it was Yahweh who delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage,

they can only be God's slaves - but not slaves of other human beings, be they Israelites or foreigners. The connection between the theological creed and the social ethical requirement is quite direct. Every single member of the people of God, however poor he or she may be, has the dignity of a human being delivered from bondage by God. To drive him/her into poverty and slavery, therefore, is an affront to God Himself and a cancellation of God's act of deliverance. On the contrary, in the view of our biblical witnesses, the economic laws are to be transformed so that the whole people of God may be able to make the freedom given it by God a reality within a liberated creation.

(Translated from the German)

LUTHERAN ECONOMICS: IN COMMUNITY WITH THE POOR

Richard P. Hordern

But is there such a thing as "Lutheran economics"? Luther said things about the economic situation of his time, including the problem of poverty and the emergence of capitalism. Some attempt to dismiss these comments from the core of Luther's theology by labeling them borrowed philosophical concepts from the ancient world and, of course, who of us today would want to be guilty of following antiquated economic theory. But Luther's views on economics are supported by appeals to the Old and New Testaments, and they are an essential component of his theological themes. Lutherans, as Lutherans, should use this as a precedent and raise theological and moral questions about today's economic situation, both international and national, with a special concern for the impact of economic programs on the poor.

In so doing, we would not be simply "applying ethics" to a "problem of the moment" but we would be articulating the gospel message of justification in our present-day context. Luther's views on economics are not so much an appendage to his theology as they are part of his core theological outline. His concerns about poverty, welfare, usury, and free enterprise capitalism are integral to his understanding of justification and community, the theology of the cross and the incarnation. Underlying all of these themes is his theological concern that encountering Christ in the neighbor is the locus of daily justification. It is Luther's concern for the poor and encountering Christ in the neighbor that connects his theology with concrete historical reality, thereby preventing his theology from being abstract speculation unrelated to human life; once his views on economics and the poor, for example, disappear from outlines of his theology, we

are left with the kind of abstract theology that he deplored so much from the Middle Ages. By returning his concern for particular social problems into his theological system we can perceive the important connecting links between his theology and today's liberation theology.

The medieval background

Luther's theology of poverty is a protest against the development of the theme during the Middle Ages. Towards the start of the medieval period the church was facing a dilemma: how to continue the apostolic affirmation of God's special option for the poor, yet accommodate the wealth and power of the Roman Empire?[1] A compromise was articulated whereby only the monks and clergy, seeking a higher state of perfection, were obliged to live a life of "poverty" without private material possessions; while the laity, living at a lesser level of perfection, were exempted (they, of course, would need to do a bit more in the way of good works to make up for this shortcoming). This framework was the basis for the ensuing Middle Ages.

This led to an attitude[2] whereby poverty was no longer seen primarily as an injury to the human spirit but as a virtue to attain. There was a threefold practical consequence from this during the

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1 Monastic vows evolved over time, perhaps beginning in the third or fourth century. Some have located the critical theological shift as taking place around 410AD in Augustine's writings against the Pelagians. Pelagius advocated that Christians should remain distinct from the Roman way of life, including the attachment to possessions, but Augustine developed a theology of accommodation to wealth. The Pelagians were perhaps the last of the early church tradition that called for voluntary poverty as a way of life for all Christians, and this was probably a more important question than the matter of "free will" which is normally used to define the Pelagians.

2 The problem still confronts Roman Catholicism. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation,* trans.

Middle Ages. First, the monks who had taken a vow of poverty were seen as being more spiritually perfect than the laity who still had private possessions. Second, those who were outside the monastery, yet poor, were also seen as being in a blessed state, leading to a blasphemous acceptance of poverty: if someone is poor and hungry, why damage that person's spiritual blessedness by providing that person with a decent standard of living? Third, one of the most important good works for the laity was to give alms to the poor; therefore, in the context of the merit system, it was essential to have poor beggars around in order for people to be able to perform the good work of assisting them. An abolition of poverty would have ended this opportunity for doing a good work and gaining merit! Thus professional beggars were both accepted and commonplace in the cities and countryside, including monks practicing their voluntary poverty and also those of the laity who were involuntarily poor.

Part of Luther's position on poverty reflects his reaction against the moralizing hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) of the Middle Ages which found moral imperatives and virtues throughout the Bible. Moralizing distressed Luther as a way in which the gospel of grace was hidden, being replaced by a religion of doing good works to merit salvation. He especially attacked the conclusion that the Bible sees the lack of material possessions as a virtue for Christians to attain rather than being a scandal to abolish. He despaired, "now there is so much begging that it has even become an honor.... I think it would be more fitting if there were no more begging in Christendom under the New Testament than among the Jews under the Old Testament."[3] When Luther commented on the text from Luke, "Blessed are the poor," he noted

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and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), pp. 287-306 deals with this problem, and suggests that voluntary poverty should be seen today as a form of solidarity with the poor in protesting poverty.

3 Martin Luther, *Trade and Usury,* pp. 245-310 of *Luther's Works,* American Edition, gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut

that Jesus "is not teaching me where to build the foundation of my salvation, but giving me a promise that is to console me in my sufferings and in my Christian life."[4] Here we can see Luther overcoming his monastic background: material poverty is not a virtue, it is a condition to abolish.

Rich church, poor people

With Luther's restructuring of theology it was inevitable that he would see through the existing system and place poverty in a new light. After realizing that justification is through faith alone, and that good works merit no special status before God, the significance of poverty would have to be re-examined. As a monk and priest, Luther had taken the vow of poverty, but found that his vows did not give him a favored relationship with God. Indeed, as he often later remarked, the monks claim to be "poor" and yet they live in comfort and idleness at the expense of the common people and the poor. Large sums of money had to be raised from the common folk in order to keep the monks in their "poverty"! But if the key to acceptance with God is faith, why should monks sit around, doing nothing, living off the poor, and yet claim that their poverty puts them in an exalted state before God? Why the exaltation of the "poor" monk while, in the real world outside, there are people who are *in*voluntarily poor and yet are forced to impoverish themselves further by supporting the monasteries? Luther could see the false poverty of the clerics and the real poverty of the people, and in this tension between a rich church and the poor people was another clue that the church had strayed from the teachings of the Bible.

The special concern for the poor is present in the official starting point of the Reformation, Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* of 1517. Prompted by a local sale of indulgences, Luther opens the theses

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Lehmann, various trans., 56 vols. (hereafter cited as *LW), Volume 45* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), p. 281.

4 Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons),* pp. 3-294 of *LW Volume 21* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1956), p. 293.

with a statement of the radical nature of repentance and the total claim that God makes upon human life. Luther next addresses some of the contradictions within the penance system and the power of the church (Pope) to forgive sins. Then he looks at the positive side of what Christians ought to be doing: works of love, works of mercy. For Luther, this means primarily works of compassion towards the poor. It is much better, says Luther, to give to the poor than to purchase indulgences (even though, at this time, Luther did not deny the efficacy of indulgences). "Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath." Nor should the Christian impoverish his family by purchasing indulgences.[5]

Luther saw, in the sale of indulgences, not only a false presentation of the proper works of the Christian life, but also a rich and wealthy church hierarchy robbing the common and poor people of their limited financial resources. At this point of his career Luther felt that the problem was more with the local indulgence sales people than with the Pope, and so Luther expressed belief that the Pope, as a true Christian, would agree that it was immoral to sell indulgences at the expense of raising money from the poor. He had no doubt that the Pope would rather burn or sell St. Peter's basilica than to have it financed from the money of the poor common folk.[6]

But perhaps Luther did have some suspicions about the Pope since, after all, Luther had seen both the splendor of Rome and also the economic situation of the people in his parish. In a later thesis he gets angrier and returns to the topic of papal wealth: "Why does not the Pope, whose wealth is today greater than the

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5 Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses*, pp. 25-33 of *LW Volume 31* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), p. 29, theses 42-46.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 30, theses 50-51.

wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"[7] Luther's indignation comes from the spectacle of a wealthy church robbing the poor in order to build a monument to human grandeur.

While in the 1517 theses he objected to the church raising money from the poor, a few years later he stated that no one, rich or poor, should make any contribution to the institutional life of the church out of proportion to their giving to the poor:

> It would be satisfactory if we gave the smaller proportion to churches, altars, vigils, bequests, and the like, and let the main stream flow toward God's commandments, so that among Christians charitable deeds done to the poor would shine more brightly than all the churches of wood and stone.... Beware, therefore, O man! God will not ask you at your death and at the Last Day how much you have left in your will, whether you have given so and so much to churches - although I do not condemn this - but he will say to you, "I was hungry, and you gave me no food; I was naked, and you did not clothe me" (Matthew 25:42-43). Take these words to heart, dear men! The important thing is whether you have given to your neighbor and treated him well. [8]

Early in 1518, because of the debate over the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther finalized his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* in which he amplified his comments. Luther says there are only three good things to be done by spending money.

> The first and foremost consists of giving to the poor or lending to a neighbor who is in need and in general of coming to the aid of anyone who suffers, whatever may be his need. This work ought to be done with

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7 *Ibid.*, p. 33, thesis 86.

8 Luther, *Trade and Usury*, p. 286.

> such earnestness that even the building of churches must be interrupted and the taking of offerings for the purchase of holy vessels and for the decoration of churches to be discontinued. After this has been done and there is no longer anyone who is in need, then should follow the second type, namely, contributing to the building of our churches and hospitals in our country, then to buildings of public service." [9]

(What would happen today if we did not spend another penny on the building of our church until "there is no longer anyone in need"?)

Beginning with this early debate, Johann Eck became Luther's primary theological opponent for many years. Eck wrote refutations of Luther's theses, and one of Eck's arguments was that alms should be given to the needy, instead of going to the church, *only* in situations of extreme want, for unless the need is extreme, poverty remains a virtue.[10] Luther later replied that this viewpoint contradicted the Golden Rule and the priority of helping the neighbor who is in need. If a person is in need, why wait until the need is desperate and beyond remedy? You or I would want to be helped *before* we were "perishing, starving, freezing to death, or fleeing because of poverty and debts." Why is it that these privileged theologians can counsel a delay of concern for the poor, but "when it comes to churches, endowments, indulgences, and other things which God has not commanded" there is no delay in arguing that "we should give to the church before the tiles fall off the roof, the beams rot, the ceiling caves in, the letters of dispensation molder, or the indulgences rot with age; although all these things could wait more easily than people

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9 Martin Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses,* pp. 83-252 of *LWF Volume 31,* p. 199

10 Luther, *Trade and Usury,* p. 287 n. 107.

who are in need."[11] We are not called to a virtue of poverty: we are called to abolish poverty.

The common chest

In 1520 Luther published a series of tracts that outlined the essential points of his developing theology. We find that a reform of theology and the church must include economic reform for the poor. Luther now wanted to go beyond simply "assisting" the poor to achieve "the complete elimination of poverty in the town and in the nation."[12] Individual acts of charity are always insufficient and must be accompanied by structural social change. In his *Long Sermon on Usury* of 1520[13] Luther called for the abolition of begging. In his appeal *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* he called upon the political rulers to bring about needed reforms in church and society, including his proposal to establish a "common chest" for the relief of the poor.[14]

Luther opens his appeal to the nobility by attacking the riches and wealth of the church as represented by the Pope and others in the hierarchy.[15] Then, in contrast to the wealth of the church,

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11 *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288. This expands his comments in *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, p. 203, thesis 45.

12 Karl Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, eds. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense, trans. Fred W. Meuser and Walter R. Wietzke (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), pp. 125-126.

13 "Introduction" to Martin Luther, *Ordinance of a Common Chest,* pp. 161-168 of LW Volume 45, p. 161.

14 The idea was later developed in *Ordinance of a Common Chest,* Preface (1523) and *Fraternal Agreement on the Common Chest of the Entire Assembly at Liesnig;* both in *LW Volume 45.*

15 "He (the Pope) wears a triple crown, whereas the highest monarchs wear but one. If that is the poverty of Christ and of St. Peter, then it is a new and strange kind of likeness!"; Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,* pp. 123-217 of *LW Volume 44* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 139-140.

stand the beggars. "One of the greatest necessities is the abolition of all begging throughout Christendom," writes Luther.[16] He envisioned a structural means of dealing with poverty more extensive than local parish charity. He felt that a city-wide program would also help identify abusers of the systems, for Luther was deeply suspicious that many of the beggars were idle and slothful monks. A centralized system of welfare operated on a city-wide basis would make it possible to ensure that assistance would go to the truly needy.[17] In terms of a theological basis for the system, Luther comments, "there is no greater service of God than Christian love which helps and serves the needy, as Christ himself will judge and testify at the Last Day (Matthew 25:31-46). This is why the possessions of the church were formerly called *bona ecclesiae*, that is, common property, a common chest, as it were, for all who were needy among Christians."[18]

It was during Luther's exile (1521-22) that the "common chest" was first implemented at Wittenberg,[19] and within a few years the practice had spread to other cities of Germany.[20] Funding was based on an annual tax plus confiscated church property.[21] The system eventually had some problems, which Luther tended to blame on the incompetence of the church administrators,[22] although the penny-pinching city councils were hardly free from blame. The basic system remained intact and is recognized as perhaps the first of the government sponsored welfare programs which we enjoy today.

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16 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 190, "As I see it, there is no other business in which so much skullduggery and deceit are practiced as in begging, and yet it could all be easily abolished."

18 Martin Luther, *Ordinance of a Common Chest,* Preface, pp. 169-194 of *LW Volume 45,* pp. 172-173.

19 "Introduction" to *Ordinance of a Common Chest,* p. 162.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Luther, *Ordinance of a Common Chest,* p. 166.

22 "Introduction" to *Ordinance of a Common Chest,* p. 166.

Usury and early capitalism

The feudalism of the Middle Ages was based on an agricultural economy. The way to accumulate wealth was by possessing large amounts of land, which was then parceled out to peasants who would pay the landowner an annual rent. By owning a large amount of land it was possible for the landowner to have a good income while performing no real work on the land. At the same time, a complex system of mutual obligations had been developed to ensure that goods were sold as a "just price" and that everyone made a "fair living."[23] But the importance of the agricultural economy was being replaced by growing trade and manufacturing in which a money economy was used. It did not matter how much land you owned, the important question was whether you had money to invest in a venture. A person could invest money and then receive a profit or interest on the money loaned. The "money economy" provided the essential basis for capitalism to replace feudalism: the important way to obtain further wealth is no longer by owning land but by having surplus wealth (capital) which can be invested to yield a profit or interest. This permits those with surplus capital to increase their wealth without actually doing the work involved in the venture.

Luther was strongly opposed to this early form of capitalism. He believed it was impossible for money to make money: only work, said Luther, can increase wealth.[24] You were born rich or poor, that was your station in life given by God, and it is impossible to become richer than is allowable within the limits of your station - unless you rob or steal from someone else. Luther saw the grow-

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23 See Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era: 1500-1650,* Second Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 10 etc.

24 "Introduction" to Luther, *Trade and Usury,* pp. 233-243 of *LW Volume 45,* p. 233. This viewpoint had been commonly accepted in the church for centuries.

ing trade of his day, and also the related financial institutions, as symptomatic of greedy people essentially stealing from others, stealing either from those doing the actual work or from the gullible consumer who is persuaded to buy a luxury item that is not truly needed.

Furthermore the financial institutions, especially the Fuggers, were deeply involved with the papal office since the high cost of Rome's splendor required constant loans. The church availed itself of the financial institutions despite the fact that the unanimous testimony of the Bible and even the laws of the church opposed usury, namely lending money and charging interest on it. As Luther saw it, if your neighbor needs to borrow something, why should you charge interest and thereby profit from your neighbor's misfortune? If your neighbor needs something, give a loan and don't complain if the neighbor is unable to pay you back![25] Luther's views were not ameliorated by the fact that his antagonist Johann Eck was a consultant to the wealthy Fugger banking house (which financed the sale of indulgences in 1517). Eck assisted the Fuggers in finding theological loopholes to avoid the church's restrictions on charging interest.[26]

Luther's position that money cannot produce money, and therefore loans should be primarily considered as a form of charity, can be traced back to the Bible and Aristotelian philosophy, but the undergirding of his discussion is the theological mandate of concern for the neighbor, in particular that the purpose of money

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25 Luther did feel that interest could be honestly charged in some situations, such as by a widow whose only means of income is lending, provided the interest rate was reasonable (4%-5%) and the lender would also share in any losses sustained by the debtor. Interestingly, Luther did not say that the practice of interest should be stopped entirely. See Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther,* trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), p. 108.

26 Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1978), p. 183.

is to help the neighbor rather than being a source for individual profit at the expense of the neighbor. In commenting on the business idea of the "free market" that the seller is justified in charging as much as the market will bear for a product, Luther remarks that thereby "every window and door to hell is opened. What else does this mean but this: I care nothing about my neighbor; so long as I have my profit to satisfy my greed, of what concern is it to me it it injures my neighbor in ten ways at once?" Luther sees this principle as violating both Christian love and natural law. "How can there be anything good then in trade? How can it be without sin when such injustice is the chief maxim and rule of the whole business? On such a basis trade can be nothing but robbing and stealing the property of others."[27] Luther's arguments were not simply "philosophical," nor can we dismiss them as being "law" rather than "gospel." This business ethic violates the holy bond between people that is established in the act of justification. Karl Holl has commented: "Since the warnings of the Sermon on the Mount had laid hold of his conscience, the contradiction between it and the current money economy could not be concealed by the arts of the exegete ... the whole spirit of this capitalism ... seemed to him to be irreconcilable with Christianity."[28] As another scholar has concluded, Luther's "views of economics, while temporally conditioned, were biblically determined, and must be seen in the light of his entire social ethics."[29]

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27 Luther, *Trade and Usury,* pp. 247-248. Althaus, p. 109, writes that Luther saw "all business" as "dominated by an unlimited selfish desire for profit."

28 Holl, p. 123.

29 "Introduction" to *Trade and Usury,* p. 239. Althaus, p. 111, has a more limited conclusion: "However we may evaluate his individual judgments, the seriousness with which he criticizes economic life on the bases of love and equity remains a valid example."

The Peasant "War"

Discerning the relevance of Luther for our present-day situation consists of understanding his basic theological and biblical insights, and evaluating them in light of their functioning in Luther's context and also in light of our present-day social context.

I have intentionally delayed mentioning Luther's position on the peasant uprising until now because when most people think of "Luther's attitude towards the poor" they think immediately of Luther's strong and cruel rejection of the peasants in favor of the princes. But, in fact, Luther's writings during this period yield no information about his attitude towards "the poor." He did not understand the desperate plight of the peasantry and did not see the uprisings as poverty riots. We do learn about his theory of the "two kingdoms" wherein he treats the social realm as an aspect of nature, and some of the other assumptions of his cultural framework. But Luther did not regard the peasants as being "poor." Thus these writings are a poor starting point for understanding his views on poverty and economics, views which remained quite consistent both prior to and following the peasant revolt.

Comments have been made to ameliorate Luther's stand, although, when all is said and done, Luther cannot be excused for his strong and totally unnecessary encouragement of the princes to stab, slay, smite, and mutilate the peasants - who had already lost the battle when Luther's words appeared. Although his initial writing is sometimes described as "blaming equally" both peasants and princes, still an estimated 100,000 peasants were put to death, plus thousands more were disfigured and maimed from the princes' application of Luther's "justice," but how many princes died? It was hardly a situation where applying "equal blame" would do anything but give total support to the militarily superior princes.

Here we see clearly Luther's limitations as a Christian theologian. It is to his credit that he was a "man of his times," rooting

theology in his cultural and social context, but it is to his detriment that he was so much a "man" of his times in allowing his political limitations to become theological limitations. In this case, he allowed his theory of the "two kingdoms" to take priority over his biblical exegesis. He saw the revolt as a question of the legitimate use of power in society, not a question of assisting (or not assisting) "the poor." Furthermore, his political reflection was within a framework that saw "society" as not an aspect of "history" but as part of the natural world and governed by unchangeable laws of nature. Because he saw society as part of "nature" we today will only reach very reactionary conclusions if we apply Luther's "politics" to a world order which we understand as being part of "history," the arena of human freedom.

Luther was perhaps momentarily correct in sensing that the survival of the Reformation might be at stake in the peasant uprisings, but eternally wrong in not appreciating the human dimension of the plight of the peasants.

Luther always felt that no one should have more material possessions than they "need" in light of their preordained station in life, an admirable ethic for some in society but making it impossible for Luther to sympathize with the peasantry who, from Luther's point of view, needed next to nothing in the way of material security in order to survive in their lowly "station." Many interpreters have seen in Luther's writings a frequently condescending attitude towards the peasants, seeing them more as objects of charity than as human beings. He also saw "needs" in a crassly materialistic way, not recognizing, for example, freedom from slavery as a legitimate "need" of the poor. Ultimately, felt Luther, food is all one really needs in life.[30]

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30 "For a man can do without everything else but food, so that almost all goods exist for the sake of furnishing him with food, without which no man can live, even though he might be able to live without clothing, house, money, property, and fellow men." Martin Luther, *The Magnificat,* pp. 297-358 of *LW Volume 21,* p. 349.

Although Luther was active in abolishing begging and opposing early capitalism, when it came to the peasants he was opposed to individual initiative in trying to change one's status in society. Luther felt that fighting for one's neighbor was the best of all Christian works, but, in order to eliminate selfishness as a motive, he also said we would never fight for our own rights - only the rights of our neighbors. This noble and altruistic ethic can only work if one can validly have a passive reliance on "the system" to provide justice, and one assumes that neighbors will in fact be dedicating themselves to their neighbors in need. Here Luther underestimated the reality of structural sin in society, and once the "goodness" of "the system" breaks down the ethic no longer applies. Because Luther was "soft" on the reality of sin in society, he did not appreciate the systemic social breakdown that took place in his own day, and in effect was content to have the foxes guarding the hen house. Perhaps too many years in monasteries and too many years of political support from the princes had dulled his ability to identify with the ordinary people and their needs.

Theology of the cross

Luther's response to the peasant uprising illuminates some of his limitations as a theologian. He allowed a shallow understanding of political society to compromise his theological appreciation for the centrality of the poor in the revelation of Christ. However, to relate Luther to today's context, we should not take Luther's politics and force them into the twentieth century. Nor can we today "do what Luther did" because we have a different understanding of the historical nature of society. But what we must do, hermeneutically, is to analyze Luther's exegetical themes that informed his theology, and then explore the implications of those themes in our own world context.

We can profit from a positive appreciation of his central theological themes that relate today's concern for the oppressed and victimized of society to the core of the Bible and the gospel, including his view of the incarnation, the related "theology of the cross," and his "theology of community."

Luther's strong emphasis on the incarnation and the humanity of Christ counteracted the distant and remote Christ too often portrayed during the Middle Ages. Luther emphasized theology as anchored in the realities of life, rather than being abstract speculation. Christ is to be found in this world. The bread and wine of communion are the body and blood of Christ in more than merely a "spiritual" sense. The infinite God was fully present in the finite person of Jesus, and thus all finite human beings have direct access to God through Christ. It is Jesus' entry into the human condition that makes it possible for Christ to be "our representative" before God, thereby assuring the possibility of forgiveness and salvation.

But the human condition is a diverse reality, and it is not sufficient to identify the humanity of Christ with any aspect of the human condition that we choose. In his "theology of the cross" Luther makes it clear that our understanding of Christ, and our relationship with God, cannot be mediated through patterns of human wealth, power, and privilege - that is what was erroneously projected into the "theology of glory" during the Middle Ages. Instead, said Luther, it is through human weakness, suffering, humility, oppression, and poverty that we find God and truly understand Christ and the nature of God's salvation through the cross. The poverty and low estate of Jesus do not direct us to human wealth and power to find God, but to human suffering and oppression. This is where God's power works in human history. "Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil. Thus all the martyrs were strong and overcame. Thus, too, all who suffer and are oppressed overcome."[31] We cannot understand God and Christ apart from God's identification with the suffering and the oppressed.

Luther used the theology of the cross and the reality of poverty to relate God to the depths of the human condition. This theology is, unfortunately, often spiritualized in the Lutheran the-

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31 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

ological tradition, being used to support an other-worldly individualistic faith. The cross of Christ too often becomes a sentimental neon light on a church altar or steeple, a sign of human escape from the misery of life rather than being God's entry into the hardships of human oppression. But, as James Cone has commented, "when the poor of the Third World and of North America read of Christ's passion, they do not view it as a theological idea but as God's suffering solidarity with the victims of the world. Jesus' cross is God's election of the poor by taking their pain and suffering upon the divine person."[32] The theology of the cross does not expound a new virtue to attain by imitating Christ, rather it directs us to the only perspective from which we can understand the presence and work of Christ in our world.

Community

The theology of the cross tells us where, in the wide range of human experience, Christ encounters us. Luther's concept of community then binds all of humanity together and emphasizes the "solidarity" we ought to have with the oppressed. Luther saw society as an organic whole, a unity under God. Just as there are many members in the body of Christ, likewise there are many members in human society, yet there is one organic whole or community. Community is a gift of God whereby we are placed into a network of mutual interdependencies and obligations with all other members of the community. People perform different functions in the community, but all of the functions are intended to serve everyone.

There are different vocations, or callings, that people undertake, and all true callings are from God. We should regard our own calling as a task which God wants us to perform well for the benefit of our neighbor (all other members of the community). It is the height of selfishness and greed to live our lives on our own, because for Luther society is not the sum total of individual

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32 James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back, Journeys in Faith* (series), ed. Robert A. Raines (Nashville: Abington, 1982), p. 105.

members: society is a preordained entity into which individual people find themselves placed by God. We are to serve our neighbor as we fulfill our own particular calling in life whatever it may be. Consequently, it is concluded, "the best way to serve one's neighbors is to do well the task that is assigned to him."[33]

Luther's attitude towards material possessions is based on his concept of community. Possessions are a trust, given to us by God, to be shared with our neighbor. It is only through sharing that possessions have any value: the reason for "having" is to help those who "have not."[34] Some people today argue that God regards all people the same, regardless of material wealth; Luther would not agree at all with such a position. He felt that the wealth of people was related to their "station" in life and so, for example, the only people who needed large amounts of wealth were the princes who would use their own personal wealth to help run the affairs of state. Otherwise there is no excuse for a person being rich. And, even for the prince, if your wealth exceeds that which you honestly need, then you must give it to the poor.[35] Luther does not support "private property" in the sense that we can do as we wish with our possessions - our wealth is a

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33 This is the observation of Einar Billing, as reported by Edgar M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1948), p. 97.

34 Luther, *Sermon on the Mount,* pp. 14-15, and pp. 111-112: how can we help others if we have destituted ourselves, as the Anabaptists have done?

35 Luther writes, "In God's sight everything which a man has left over and does not use to help his neighbor is an illegal and stolen possession; for before God one ought to give, to lend, and to let everything be taken away from him. Therefore, the popular proverb says that 'the biggest big shots are the biggest thieves,' for they have the most left over and give the least," quoted by Althaus, p. 107 n. 8.

trust for our neighbor. Material possessions are not viewed in terms of what they mean for the individual person but in terms of what they mean within the context of community.

The callings of life are not seen by Luther as human constructions, and likewise the existence of community is not the aggregate result of human effort. Community and the vocations have been planned and preordained by God. Unfortunately, for Luther that means that the agricultural and small-town society of the Middle Ages is God's one design for human society. This reflects his problematic assumption that the structures of society are not so much a part of human history and endeavor but more a part of God's created world of nature. People must accommodate themselves to the social system just as human accommodation is needed towards the weather or disease. He did not anticipate the alienation of labor in modern capitalism, and found it impossible to conceive of human transformation bringing in a better or even a different kind of society, whether through democracy, evolution, or revolution. He saw any tampering with social structures as analogous to tampering with the very laws of God's creation - hence any program of social change would be perceived as anarchy: literally, going against the laws that establish the status quo. The placement of human society under the realm of nature, rather than history, probably accounts for much of the reactionary element in Lutheran social ethics, whether we think of Luther's fanatical concern for order and law during the peasant uprising at the expense of a more just social arrangement (which is the only basis for order and law) or more recent events in South Africa. People who continue to uphold such an assumption have no choice but uncritically to support the status quo.

But Luther did speak about social abuses, notably poverty and usury and early capitalism, and his comments make it clear that he felt change within social structures was both possible and a mandate for Christians. From his perspective, usury and poverty and free enterprise trade represented greedy and unjust distortions of the divine social system, and what was needed was not so much a new system but a restoration of the ordained patterns

of the past.[36] Nor should we allow the unfortunate example of the Lutheran churches in Nazi Germany to define the logical outcome of Luther's concept of community because developments in Lutheran Scandinavia have indicated a different form of understanding and development. A study of the concept of community in Lutheran countries, including the "folk church" of Scandinavia, will provide important correctives to the individualism and breakdown of community that is so characteristic of technological North America. The concept of community has been kept alive in local Lutheran congregations although in the North American experience "community" has been identified with the congregation rather than with the wider society.

The important point is the mutual interdependencies of everyone which bind them together into community. Theologically this occurs with the incarnation and the solidarity of Christ with the oppressed, and goes on to incorporate all of the branches on the vine (John 15). The realm of economics is the arena in which this solidarity is materially actualized, since the theology of the cross is the basis for understanding that all of our possessions are a trust we hold for our neighbors in need.

When we today articulate a theological approach to society, we must begin with the assumption that the working structures of society are human creations which people can transform for better or for worse. We must avoid the danger of associating the humanly constructed systems with God's plan in creation. Where Luther treated society as an aspect of nature, we must treat it within the context of human history: we recognize no divine sanction for the status quo.

Interwoven throughout Luther's discussions on poverty and economics is his constant emphasis on love for the neighbor. Love for the neighbor is not a "law" of God but is the natural disposi-

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36 Most revolutionary movements, be they the peasants of 1525 or modern Marxists, tend to envision the coming new society as a return to some form of previous social justice that existed prior to the introduction of a distorting injustice.

tion of loving concern that will characterize all who have been justified freely by God's grace. Conversion to Christ means, automatically, conversion to the neighbor, for we encounter and serve Christ through our relationships in life; the theology of the cross directs us to Christ in the neighbor, in particular the neighbor who is in need, in particular the poor and the oppressed. Luther calls us to community solidarity and compassion not as a "law," not as a "virtue," but as an aspect of living under and by the grace of God.

GROUP REPORTS

PREAMBLE

A consultation with the theme "The Liberation of Creation and an Economy Based on Growth" was held in Mariaholm near Oslo from March 10-17, 1989. Theologians from different parts of Europe, the USA, Brazil and Namibia as well as some scientists participated in this consultation.

Originally the participants had intended to formulate a joint statement regarding prospectives for the economy from a Christian perspective. However, due to divergent positions and a variety of individual experiences this task was not quite accomplished.

The following group reports do not reflect a general consensus. However in respect to their order and line of argument a logical connection can be established:

The first report describes the situation of the world economy with its social and ecological tensions.

The second report tries to link ethical criteria and political intentions with economic processes.

The third report elaborates on the theological premises and the Christian perspective vis-à-vis the economy.

GROUP REPORT I

THE DILEMMA OF ECONOMIC STRATEGIES IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL INCOMPATIBILITY

1.

Humanity is faced with the huge problem of fulfilling the basic material needs and rights of all people today and those of an increased population in the future. Economic strategies are tools for fostering economic efficiency and growth in order to meet this challenge.

When it comes to the environment and the use of non-renewable resources it is quite clear that the present form of economic growth has reached its limits. This situation is so serious that unless we make dramatic changes, the global ecological system will collapse.

At the same time we see that this threatened globe is a divided world where the peoples of the South carry the heavy burdens of marginalization, injustice and conflicts. Hence the two fundamental challenges we face, namely, the total breakdown of the global ecological system and the fact that it is a divided world where people have become the victims of a dramatic deterioration are closely linked. History has shown that economic growth is a necessary, but not a sufficient aim of economic policy and strategy. There is indeed a need to qualify economic growth. The concept of sustainable growth and development as formulated by the UN Commission on Development and Environment seems to be constructive.

Just distribution of wealth must be included in the concept of economic growth and of sustainable development. An economy that grows within acceptable ecological limits is not sustainable

unless it solves the problem of the unjust distribution of wealth and fulfills the basic human needs and rights of all people and abolishes poverty.

The basic problem facing the world economy today is how to achieve this sustainable development and growth. The fact that as yet no economic strategy has been developed that can achieve this aim proves that this is a highly complex problem. We are thus faced with a dilemma and the only way out is to strengthen and expand the ongoing dialogue at all levels.

2.

Global economy is marked by increasing internationalization and interdependence. However, this interdependence is biased in favor of the industrialized countries which possess both the economic and the political power to decide upon the framework of the world market. The concentration of economic power increases the inequality both within and between nations. But no nation can permit itself to abandon the world market and depend only on its own resources. The change towards sustainable growth and development must take place in the structures of the world market.

One of the major dilemmas is how to govern this world market. On the one hand, there is a need for a more open market that can provide the developing countries with access to markets in the industrialized countries and increases trade between developing countries. On the other hand, the market forces need to be restricted by means of social and environmental measures. Yet, the complexity of the global economy makes it difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to strike a balance between the necessary response to market forces and social and environmental needs in different local and regional situations. It is important to sustain the dynamics of the market in order to encourage people to produce and to match supply and demand. The present markets however do not reflect the environmental costs, nor do they secure a just distribution either in the short or in the long run.

Linked to this dilemma is the question of short-term versus long-term solutions. Developing countries are often forced into socially

and ecologically destructive policies because of their economic problems, e.g. the external debt. Industrialized countries will argue that a more restrictive social and ecological policy will destroy their ability to compete on the world market which would entail unemployment and poverty.

This reflects the dilemma of modern technology. The production technology of industrial expansion is such that it has been and is destructive for the environment. It is irresponsible to continue implementing this kind of technology and to export it to the developing countries. However, in some cases the development of new technologies can create appropriate means and methods to control and restrict agricultural and industrial pollution and to develop sustainable forms of energy production. Nevertheless, this technology is often very costly. This new, environmentally sound technology could increase the gap between rich and poor and produce new patterns of dependency. The ownership of technological know-how and information by the already rich and powerful makes it even more difficult to attain sustainable development which distributes wealth and power justly.

Because of the short-term costs of environmental improvements industry is already moving its production to countries with less stringent restrictions regarding industrial pollution. Thus an ecological gap is added to the already existing economic gap the most dramatic expression of which is the dumping of life-threatening waste in developing countries, waste that no industrial country would receive.

The cultivation of land and the production of food has been, is and will always be a basic economic activity. The dynamics of agriculture and its ecological impact must be understood if humankind is to survive. The worldwide increased production of food has been significant but we are now faced with the reality that growth and competition in the production and distribution of food have caused a serious economic crisis for small and medium sized farms. On all continents this has led to a massive population shift from rural to urban areas resulting in urban poverty and

the concentration of land in the hands of a few. Under the prevailing agricultural policies the growth in production has been achieved through the use of un-sustainable production practices such as the excessive use of chemicals and fertilizers which have devastating ecological consequences. In addition, the politics of food in the industrialized countries provides for the export of subsidized products to the South and becomes a disincentive to local food producers. The costs of the technology required in order to increase production and the need for an efficient global delivery system have also resulted in a dramatic concentration of land and production in the hands of fewer and fewer landowners and corporations which means that they rapidly gain increasing control over the world food production, prices and technology. Thus, the farmers, who still form the majority of the world population, depend more and more on these systems.

3.

Sustainable development can be achieved only if the participation of all people in the decision-making process is ensured. Hence, democratic structures must be developed at all levels, reaching from local communities to international institutions.

The international character of these problems demands the strengthening of international agreements regulating the market through social and environmental measures. There has been some progress made through the efforts of the United Nations and its specialized agencies but they are slow and not wide-ranging enough.

International agreements are ineffective unless they are implemented by each individual nation. The costs of restructuring the economy and the ability to do so differ dramatically from nation to nation. The establishment of new international funding to effect these changes is therefore necessary. In the short run, conditions in international financing must include not only economic measures, but also social, democratic and ecological measures.

The fact that most of today's governments are not politically strong enough to counter the power of the transnational com-

panies and capital poses a basic problem and it is therefore a major task to strengthen the political institutions in these nations. This strengthening of the political process can only be achieved if the whole population is given the freedom to participate in the political process. The tendency of national governments, often in coalition with national elites and international capital, to oppress popular organizations and deny the people the right to self-determination and education, is therefore a major obstacle to sustainable development, as for example in Namibia where the illegal occupation by South Africa makes sustainable development impossible.

Sustainable development will require major changes in the habits of the wealthy consumers in both the North and the South. People's participation must therefore include critical consumer organizations which make an economy based on the exploitation of the environment and humanity unworkable.

GROUP REPORT II

THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF ECONOMICS, POLITICS AND SOCIAL ETHICS AND THE PRECEDENCE OF POLITICS OVER ECONOMICS

1.

The structural interrelatedness of the present ecological and economic problems is manifest in the Amazon region. The timber trade promoted by the need for foreign exchange and the servicing of debts to industrial countries cause the cutting of trees faster than forests can regenerate. Soil erosion, flooding and the loss of livelihood for the native Indian peoples are the consequences. The conversion of the tropical forest into live-stock ranches for beef export has proven economically unsound, because the soil has few nutrients.

The timber trade, pulp and paper production, cattle ranches and slash-and-burn harvesting of the best trees not only destroy the forest but also prevent the development of an ecologically viable use of the products of the forests and the employment that goes with products extracted from the forests.

The integration of ecology and economy at the national level for a sustainable development has to be matched at the international level. The instability of prices, the trade barriers in the industrial world, the burden of servicing debts and the decline in new capital only strengthen the forces that lead to the destabilization of the world's largest ecosystems, the extinction of species and the overuse of the environment to ensure economic survival.

We quote from the "National Campaign in Defense of the Peoples and the Forests in the Amazon": "Massive destruction supported by the government by offering attractive tax incentives under the "Superintêndencia do Desenvolvimento da

Amazônia", immense foreign loans, given only to the economically powerful individuals and groups such as timber merchants, the mineral industry, builders and constructors, life-stock breeders, industrialists and bankers as well as other sectors of big national and international capital, whose only interest it is to rob us of our wealth."

The Brazilian statement is corroborated by the Stockholm Group for Studies on Natural Resources Management: "How to find better methods to cope with the technical, economic and social aspects? Research is one tool in such a process. Nevertheless, firm political actions are also required. In fact, the root of the problem lies basically in the nature of the decision-making structures at both national and international level.

Ecological considerations can play a more central role in development only if there is a political commitment and will to tackle the weaknesses in the decision making structures..." (SGN, Report No. 1, 1988).

2.

So far it has been the people and the natural environment of the Two-Thirds World that carry the major burden of the negative social and ecological effects of the economic show of power. However, the rich industrialized nations are increasingly feeling the effects.

- the destruction of globally important ecosystems (ozone layer, greenhouse effect, soil erosion, dying of forests, the contamination of drinking water, desertification of arable land);
- the inability of economic mechanisms to prevent or counter the widening of the gap between rich and poor.

Despite continuous global growth both the social and ecological crises are becoming more acute. The pauperization of the Two-Thirds World continues and even the socialist nations are finding it more and more difficult to finance their welfare programs.

Besides grave damage to the environment the western industrialized nations seem to produce also a number of hardly solvable social problems. The structural marginalization of growing parts of the population (new poverty, unemployment) is increasing.

The major problem is that the ever increasing social and ecological deformations should be solved through economic measures whilst it is precisely the power of the economy that reinforces these deformations.

It is in the light of this situation that we feel that one has to speak of a nemesis within the prevailing economic structures. Despite the fact that the economy is increasingly being influenced by international division of labor, the market as such still functions on the basis of specific interests and decisions that, on the whole, do not take the global social and ecological necessities into consideration. National political decisions have fewer and fewer possibilities to influence directly global developments. In the western industrial nations the national political decision-making bodies related to ecology are trying to "price" environmental factors and subsequently to incorporate th costs into the mechanism of the market such as environmental taxes. The socialist countries are of the opinion that as regards the ecology they can only afford what they have first earned. In both instances the margin for political decisions regarding social and ecological measures depends on the existing realities of the economy.

Reducing the political, social and ecological to the economic seems to have become unavoidable. The political models are imprisoned in this supposedly systemic necessity. We term this mechanism economism. Creative alternatives and mental creativity are nipped in the bud by referring to the unavoidable circumstances, and are branded illusions.

The Brundlandt Report suggests that people's social conditions and the protection of the environment be effected through a politically directed redistribution of the earth's riches. The United

Nations and its specialized agencies as well as other worldwide organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are asked to contribute to the realization of these necessities.

3.

On the basis of this analysis and with the positive acceptance of the proposals of the Brundlandt Report we would like to affirm a type of oikonomia which we understand as good stewardship of God's creation. Thus we are aiming at an economic structure that once again opens up a direct access to the needs of humanity and the necessities of nature, an oikonomia, which highlights conscious and ethically sound decisions made by human beings. An economy that orientates itself by the principles of stewardship should have a serving function. In social terms this would mean developing more humane norms in order to ensure that human beings are active subjects and not objects subjected to economic inherent necessities. Ecological needs must be considered in advance rather than in retrospect (even that in effect only takes place to a limited extent). This will have to be part of the basic parameters of an economy based on stewardship.

The reorientation towards a socio-ecological concept of economy is in our opinion not merely an abstract model but rather an absolutely vital prerequisite if the global crises which the current world economy can quite obviously not cope with are to be overcome. What we must do is to learn how to use the economy as decisive means to sustain life for everyone and for a careful and conserving use of the natural resources of the one world (Brundlandt Report, Chapter I, 1).

4.

Necessary changes towards a sustainable economic and environmental development will take the concerted efforts of:

- international and national political institutions;
- expertise and research within the fields of sociology, economy and the natural sciences;
- women and men of good will everywhere.

The churches are obliged to support all efforts in these institutions to find ways and means for a just and sustainable economic system.

The churches are called upon at both the national and the local levels to encourage and support the work for human rights, economic justice and environmental improvements and long-term conservation carried out by a variety of movements on international, national and local levels, such as Green Peace, Amnesty International, land reform initiative, women's solidarity groups, boycott activities etc.

GROUP REPORT III

THEOLOGY'S CLAIM TO THE ECONOMY AND THE CONCILIARITY OF THE THEOLOGICAL JUDGMENT

1.
It is our faith in the Triune God, whom we share with the rest of Christendom, that makes possible our participation in his creative, liberating and consummating presence. Thanks to liberation theology, we are explicitly reminded of the duty we have as a result to assist the poor, to advocate just economic and political structures and to be good stewards of God's creation.

2.
Christian responsibility for the world is based on the fundamental recognition drawn from the Bible, and experienced in faith, that God is always in solidarity with his threatened and endangered creation.

3.
This is the basis for the essential principles governing ethical decisions:

(a) Our Lutheran tradition tells us that God is the lord over the whole creation, the good as well as the endangered one (cf. the two kingdoms doctrine). This means that there is no area and no context of the human world and secular relations altogether that can escape the judging and liberating action of the God manifest in history. On the one hand, Christians are kept within their politico-secular responsibility (cf. the concept of the *tertius usus legis),* on the other, their

experience of the God acting in history continues to be ambivalent (cf. Luther's *Deus absconditus).* This means that there is no certainty on how we can best realize God's will in the political and economic realm.

(b) Belief in the Trinitarian God however implies empathy with all suffering, threatened and underprivileged persons. The consequence of this is a strong preference, clearly manifest elsewhere in the Christian tradition, too, for the humiliated (cf. the Beatitudes), hence in turn a new hermeneutics and a revised understanding of the biblical message and a newly unfolding openness towards the will of God in current situations of conflict involving his people.

4.

These principles governing ethical decisions are not without ecclesiological consequences:

(a) The maxim of God's lordship over the whole of creation and his siding with the poor needs to be tied to ecclesiology in order to guard against the danger remaining only at a spiritual level. The church as the body of Christ is mandated, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to give authoritative (prophetic) witness of God's salvific action in the world and thus to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

(b) As much as this necessarily calls for the institution of a church - to guard against a docetic ecclesiology -, as much needs to be warned, in this connection, against triumphalism in the church which would mistake the church's pilgrimage for the consummation not yet achieved. The church is always the church under the cross and as such only a sign of the kingdom of God. *Crux probat omnia:* this continues to be true also (even especially so) in the realm of ecclesiology. It also implies a certain relativization indicating that the church must not necessarily be understood to be the exclusive instrument of divine action in the world, but that God

can make a claim on the church for such action in its function as the called and empowered people of God. For the sake of its ministry to the world the church must speak authoritatively even though such speaking is full of risks and may take the church to the limits of triumphalism and may make its prophetic voice always sound ambivalent (namely in need of the distinction between the spirits).

5.

Since the beginnings of Christendom, the conciliar assembly (cf. Acts 15) has been the place for finding the truth as the basis for prophetic authoritative speaking, and today the general Christian council continues to be an appropriate platform for theological discussions and church decisions. This is the only way to reach the magnum consensus desirable also in the Reformation tradition which will provide the basis for voicing the church's message in an up-to-date and contextual form. The church's involvement in secular necessities and its being rooted in ever-changing history corresponds to the conciliar process from which the ever-new decisions of faith concerning burning questions at all levels of the church (local, regional, universal) will arise. The church has an obligation with regard to the situations described above. The church can never remain neutral. It takes sides in speaking and acting or in silence and omission. It needs to learn to perceive the groaning of creation and has the duty to identify and condemn destructive developments. This is true for the church itself, too, when its own speaking and acting are offensive to creation and have a part in deadly developments. The church is called and liberated to intervene, to resist the deadly forces and to stand up for life.

At a time of worldwide peril, as the One church of Jesus Christ it has a special chance and a specific duty to speak with one voice. In the ecumenical communion we encourage and engage one another as brothers and sisters to committed action in truth. The conciliarity of speaking in common corresponds to the soli-

darity in contextual action.
The specific contribution of the churches links the confession of Christian faith in God — the Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life — to the necessity to work for alternatives that grow out of:

- empathy with the other,
- respect for the holiness of creation,
- the recognition of human dignity,

and to emphasize economic arrangements bearing in mind the following question: what does the economy do to and for the voiceless, the hungry and the politically oppressed people?

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