THEOLOGY AND ECONOMY

The glory of God is every creature fully alive, and therefore we live to give God glory by loving the world and everything in it. The particular, historical context for interpreting what this means for us today is an economic one. ... Our self-definition must be economic: who we are should be understood in terms of how much we consume of the planet's bounty, both in terms of its health and of justice to other inhabitants. ... Love without economics is empty rhetoric. ... The question is not how each of us can win salvation, but how all of us can give God glory by living together as God's creatures. (Sallie McFague, Life Abundant, Fortress, 2001, p. 128)

The subtitle of McFague’s book is Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril. Her work in this area comes as an urgent challenge for U.S. Christians, for our country is just 4% of the world’s population, but we consume 40% of the world’s resources. We must ask ourselves, What kind of faith or spirituality do we practice in such a world? In fact, Americans as a whole need to be asking ourselves, What kind of humanity do we affirm in such a world?

The author explains how neo-classical or neo-liberal economic theory or ideology has not only accepted but promoted such a worldview, and she proposes a very different perspective that she calls ecological economics.

The worldview of neo-classical economics has two main faults: its individualistic anthropology and its isolation of the economy from the planet’s well-being. (P. 94) Ecological economics is a human enterprise that seeks to maximize the optimal functioning of the planet’s gifts and services for all. (P. 100) Whereas neo-classical economics begins with human desire, the desire to amass wealth, ecological economics begins with human need, the need for a productive and permanent dwelling in which to live. Ecological economics begins with sustainability as the preeminent and irreplaceable sine qua non. Contemporary economics does not recognize the Great Economy, the household of planet Earth, as the overall reality within which all other functions—and economics—must fit. (P. 105)

As we imagine ourselves living in the global village, we become aware of new house rules. ... In lay language the ecological model claims that housemates must abide by three main rules: take only your share, clean up after yourselves, and keep the house in good repair for future occupants. ... My share or your share is what we need for a decent life: food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education. (P. 122)

1. How can we affirm, practice, and promote an economic model that takes into account the well-being of the whole human family, future generations, and all the other inhabitants of the planet?

2. What are the necessary changes in our own lifestyle, in our communities, and at the national level that we should commit ourselves to pursue?

3. What organizations and movements in our churches and in the wider society can we learn from and support?
WHY PEOPLE ARE POOR

The January 1981 issue of *Sojourners* included a milestone article by Tom Hanks under the above title. It begins with an observation of North American churches’ understanding of the causes of poverty.

*The major cause of poverty is widely assumed to be “underdevelopment.” Other prominent factors are believed to be laziness . . . , vices such as drunkenness, and, however subtly and discretely expressed, the supposed racial and national inferiority of certain peoples. It’s a very comforting worldview and one that our most popular politicians delight to propagate.*

Hanks himself, an Old Testament scholar with now some 40 years of ministry in Latin America, has examined extensively what the Bible teaches about the causes of poverty. It says precisely nothing about underdevelopment and very little about “laziness, drunkenness, and other assorted causes.” On the other hand, the Bible contains “an overwhelming avalanche of texts that identify oppression as the cause of poverty.”

*Oppression is a major category in the Bible’s understanding and approach to reality. The Exodus has come to be recognized as playing a central role in the theology of the O.T., comparable to that of the cross in the N.T. And it was in the Exodus that a people God recognized as oppressed won their liberation.*

*It is no exaggeration to say that 90 per cent of biblical history is written from the perspective of a small, weak, oppressed, poor people. Small wonder, then, that oppression and the resulting poverty form so large a bulk of the literature that recounts the struggle.*

* . . . The Lord makes clear that in a class struggle between oppressors and oppressed God does not remain neutral or impartial: God takes the side of the oppressed-poor and acts decisively for their liberation (Ex. 3:7-10; 6:2-5).*

*The Bible . . . abundantly witnesses its awareness of antagonistic classes and the struggle of the poor against their oppressors, particularly in Exodus, the references to “enemies” in the Psalms, and in the eighth century prophets.*

Hanks notes the long absence of social analysis of the causes of poverty in First World biblical theology and calls for a re-reading of the Bible from the Third World.

*In Latin America’s theological and spiritual revolution, biblical Christians often are accused of introducing class struggle into the churches. This is utterly naïve and shows we have understood neither biblical social analysis nor the most elementary facts that are a daily part of Third World poverty.*

What are we called to do as biblical people?

*We need to stop justifying our privileges and start trying to discover, unmask, and denounce the mechanisms of oppression that make and keep people poor. . . . We need to examine radically our understanding of the Christian gospel and Jesus Christ. We must ask whether Christ is presented as liberator of the oppressed or as champion of an unjust status quo, and whether our gospel is “good news to the poor” or a rationalization for the rich.*

What is your own understanding of the causes of poverty—in the US and around the world?
BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION

Gerald West’s book under this title (Second Revised Edition, Orbis, 1995) proposes Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context, as his subtitle indicates. But he sets this proposal in the wider context of the various liberation theologies (see pp. 83-88). He refers to Per Frostin in describing the methodological shift of this new paradigm with the following emphases: “the choice of the interlocutors of theology; the perception of God; the social analysis of conflicts; the choice of theological tools; and the relationship between theology and praxis.” Biblical hermeneutics of liberation is not a self-contained academic exercise. As Gustavo Gutierrez writes in his Theology of Liberation, “It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation to build a different society, freer and more human.” As the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians declared in 1976, “We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World.”

The interlocutors for liberation theologies and biblical hermeneutics of liberation are not, as in dominant Western theologies, the educated nonbelievers or Schleiermacher’s cultured critics of religion, but the poor, the “non-persons,” the exploited, especially those who are excluded in terms of class, gender, and race or culture. The basic problem is not unbelief but idolatry, pursuit of and submission to systems of oppression. The challenge is not to build weighty theological constructs or intellectual apologies but to struggle for the liberation and fullness of life of all God’s people. This is “the option for the poor,” the basic commitment so often recited at the heart of the new reading of the Gospel, which we all know is “good news to the poor” and “to let the oppressed go free.”

This leads us to pose the possibility of re-reading the Bible as a whole through the lenses of the Sabbath-Jubilee vision and mandates that emerge so dramatically in the Torah, are proclaimed so forcefully by the prophets, appear so centrally in the mission and message of Jesus, and are equally central to the life of the early church. The Bible is not to be relegated to “religious” and “spiritual” matters but is fundamentally concerned about social relations, economics, and human wholeness in community--locally, globally, and ecologically.

1. Reflect on your own faith formation as a child, as a young person, and/or as an adult and ask yourself what have been the central concerns of that faith formation.

2. Consider what radical shifts you may have experienced in your faith journey, in your understanding of God and God’s purpose for humankind and creation.

3. If in fact the poor and excluded and oppressed are to be recognized as primary interlocutors for our theology and our mission, what might be the implications for our lives?
500 YEARS OF OPPRESSION, PATRIARCHY, AND RACISM

Howard Zinn’s book, A People’s History of the United States, 1492—Present, has given us a “rereading” of U.S. history “from the underside,” i.e. from the perspective of Native Americans, poor white serfs, African Americans, women, workers, and worldwide victims of U.S. “Manifest Destiny.” It should be required reading, if not in schools and universities, certainly in our churches, as a necessary part of our education and preparation for life in this unjust world.

From the beginning of our history there have been, of course, various mechanisms by which powerful and wealthy elites have gained and maintained and augmented their privileges at the expense of those at the bottom of the social and economic pyramids. White craftsmen and poor whites were invited to make common use of their racial “superiority” in exploitation and abuse of Blacks and Indians. White men exploited and abused both White and non-White women because of their gender “superiority.” Periodically, concessions and compromises were made with middle class and other “inferiors” so that the rebellious sectors could be quelled and the basic socio-economic pyramids could be kept relatively stable.

Zinn analyzes the peculiar nature of the exploitation and oppression of women, who have been largely absent from earlier histories of our country. Among African and Native Americans and among the poor they have been doubly oppressed. And among all groups they were for so long given tasks as “a convenience for men, who could use, exploit, and cherish someone who was at the same time servant, sex mate, companion, and bearer-teacher-warden of his children.” (102) In the early years “women were imported as sex slaves, child-bearers, companions.” (103) Many came as indentured servants. Servant and slave girls were commonly abused sexually. Black slave women were often separated from their husbands and even from their children. According to the dominant cultural and religious ideology, women were expected to be subject to their husbands, to be occupied in the home and not in public affairs, to turn over their property to their husbands, and to be sexually pure, but the vicissitudes of life in the colonies and on the frontier often forced them to assume responsibilities on a par with men.

The struggle of Native North Americans is perhaps the most tragic of all. From the time of the original colonies, through the great White migrations across the Appalachian Mountains, on to the Rockies, and finally to the West Coast, the great Indian Nations have had their lands taken, their villages burned, their women raped, their cultures and religions vilified, their right to life denied. Their story is replete with official deceit and betrayal, massacres and forced removals, and endless treaties leading to genocide. It can be argued that the wars and skirmishes against the Native Peoples played a decisive role in the formation of the heroic, military, chauvinistic American mind that in the 20th Century has wrecked havoc on Third World peoples around the world through military intervention, secret operations, and economic imperialism.

The human cost of the slave system will forever be incalculable and incomprehensible, especially to Whites. The heritage of slavery in the U.S. psyche, both Black and White, may never be fully exorcised. By 1860 there were 4 million slaves in the South, producing enormous profits for their White owners, and there were 200,000 free Blacks in the North. The fruits of this iniquitous system are still being borne by the women, children, and men of Harlem, South Chicago, and South Central Los Angeles and also among the still largely White suburbs of all our cities, among rich and poor of both races whose humanity will be fundamentally deformed as long as this racism, sometimes referred to as America’s original sin, persists.

Consider what U.S. history might have been like if the Jubilee vision and mandates had—as some Native peoples, settlers, and freed slaves proposed—prevailed.
ACCELERATING POLARIZATION BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

The 1992 Human Development Report of United Nations Program on Development captured the attention of many through a visual analogy, a champagne glass. For many years the UNPD had been tracing the distribution of the prodigious productivity of the planet. A formula was devised to calculate the average income of the richest 20% of the world’s population, the next richest 20%, on down to the poorest 20%. That year, 1992, the richest 20% received 82.7% of total income, and the poorest 20% received 1.4%. The richest 20% received four times as much as the other 80%. The champagne glass demonstrates this polarization, as those at the top consume or accumulate most of the champagne, and just a few drops get to the bottom, the poorest.

According to these figures, in 1992 the richest 20% received 60 times as much as the poorest 20%. The Human Development Report (Oxford University Press) for 1999 offers more current data and also comparative data back to 1820. The results indicate that basic inequality has been accelerating and continues to accelerate. This inequality means devastating deprivation for the poorest and increasing poverty for the majority of the world’s population. The following figures are taken from that report (page 3).

In 1820 the richest 20% of the world’s population received 3 times as much as the poorest 20%.
- 1870: 7
- 1913: 11
- 1960: 30
- 1990: 60
- 1997: 74
- 1998: 86

An additional note from the 1999 Human Development Report (page 38) indicates that the 200 richest people received in 1998 a total income of $1,042,000,000,000, more than twice as much as in 1994. And this amount was equivalent to the total income of 41% of the world’s population, i.e. about 2,400,000,000 people. In order to relate these data to real needs, the Report indicates that just 1% of the annual income of the richest 200 people would be enough to provide universal primary education to the entire world’s population. It also states that the three richest persons have a total income greater than all the least developed countries together.
BANKING ON MISERY

The Summer 2003 issue of *Southern Exposure* contains a 53-page section on the current bent of the banking industry toward the exploitation of the poor. Financial institutions, from local loan sharks to the mighty Citigroup, are finding ways to extract enormous profits from the most vulnerable, "subprime" borrowers who do not have access to standard banking opportunities. Low income, blue-collar, and minority consumers are targeted by this "poverty industry," which has grown 500% in less than a decade, from $14 billion in 1994 to $213 billion in 2002. Michael Hudson calls this "a top-down financial revolution," especially in the South, where "economic inequality, racial discrimination, weak consumer laws, and pliable regulators create a ripe atmosphere for abuse." (21) His article, "Banking on Misery," describes how Citigroup, Wall Street, and others build their financial empires, in part, by charging those desperate for cash excessive rates for loans, high rates and hidden fees for mortgages, unfavorable terms for refinancing, and multiple fees and fines for late payments. The CEO of Citigroup, Sanford Weill, rose through this side of the banking business and through arranging mergers with institutions dedicated to the exploitation of the poor, even entities known for corruption and charged with criminal activities.

In his article, "Perpetual Debt, Predatory Plastic," Robert Manning explains the credit card scams. In order to obtain an initial credit line of $400, ACE Visa requires a person with bad credit to take an education program that costs $289 plus other fees bringing his total cost to $369, leaving a real credit line of $31. When the Supreme Court ruled that banks could charge the highest interest rate permitted by their "home" states, banks relocated their offices to states that had no limit. In 1977 50 banks held half of the credit card market; 25 years later 10 banks controlled 80% of the market, which had climbed from $51 billion in 1980 to $610 billion in 2002. 61% of families carry a balance on the credit cards each month; average credit card debt has risen from $10,000 to $12,000 from 1998 to 2002. Late fees jumped from $13 in 1996 to $30 in 2002; penalty revenue grew from $1.7 billion in 1996 to $7.3 billion in 2001; total fee income rose more than five times faster than overall credit card profits between 1995 and 2001; companies like Sears and Circuit City make more from finance revenues than from sales; the industry fights regulation, keeps customers in the dark, pursues the principle that "The most profitable way to make money off the vulnerable is to keep them in debt at the highest rates for as long as possible." (50) In fact, "the most disadvantaged (debtors) subsidize the low cost of credit for the most advantaged (convenience users)." (51)


1. What has been your experience with credit cards, mortgages, and banking in general?

2. How can we make a difference for ourselves, among our friends, and nationally?

SABBATH ECONOMICS vs MARKET ECONOMICS
LUKE 12:13-34

The Parable of the Rich Fool, Luke 12:13-21, is a simple, clear, devastating critique of Market Economics, set in the context of a squabble among brothers over an inheritance and summarized by Jesus with these words: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” This rich farmer is a caricature that is widely applicable even today on a personal and on a systemic level.

He is hoarding his abundance of possessions.
He assumes that they are all for himself, i.e., to be hoarded.
To increase his hoard, he plans to tear down and build bigger barns.
He thinks this will bring him security and satisfaction for years to come.
He plans to relax and eat, drink, and be merry.
His dies, so his hoarded possessions are useless.

God calls him a fool. His life consists of accumulation of material possessions, greed. We might even say that the rich fool is already dead.

The following passage, Luke 12:22-34, offers a radical alternative to the Parable of the Rich Fool. We can call it Sabbath Economics, as it is first posed in Exodus 16, where the Sabbath Day is first introduced with a clear mandate to share the abundance of God’s creation so that all God’s people will have enough. This theme runs throughout the Bible.

Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about such things as food and clothes.
We can learn to live by God’s grace as do the birds of the air and the flowers of the earth.
We must recognize that we cannot add an hour to our life span.
Even Solomon’s robes were not as glorious as lily flowers.

Here again we sense that we are fools if, like the nations, we strive and worry about and hoard material possessions. God knows what we need. God’s good pleasure is to give us the kingdom. We can sell our possessions, give alms, and leave our treasure in heaven, i.e., share it with the community so that we all have enough. The challenge seems very simplistic, almost impossible in today’s world, with a Market Economy that promotes the consumption and accumulation of material goods as a virtue, indeed as the supreme end of our economic system. But we can see in myriad ways that the predominant Market Economy—at the personal level and at the systemic level—leads to death. This passage calls us to choose Sabbath Economics together with family, friends, faith communities, and movements for economic and ecological justice.

1. What are some of the ways that we practice Market Economics?
2. What are some of the ways that we practice Sabbath Economics?
FREE TRADE IS UNFAIR TRADE—THE PHILIPPINES


Put simply, the Philippines got taken. A charter member of the World Trade Organization in 1995, the former American colony dutifully embraced globalization's free-market gospel over the last decade, opening its economy to foreign trade and investment. Despite widespread worries about their ability to compete, Filipinos bought the theory that their farmers' lack of good transportation and high technology would be balanced out by their cheap labor. The government predicted that access to world markets would create a net gain of a half-million farming jobs a year and improve the country's trade balance.

It turns out that U.S., Japanese, and European agricultural products are protected by high tariffs and underwritten by massive farm subsidies—despite WTO rules. They invest almost a billion dollars a day in taxpayer subsidies. Filipino farmers simply cannot compete—even working in the fields at a dollar a day—in the global market and even in their local markets. In eight years under the WTO the Philippines has seen American corn growers receive $34.5 billion in taxpayer support, enabling them to export that corn at two-thirds the cost of production.

The global economy does not offer an even playing field. Quite the contrary. Corporate agro-industry is wiping out the livelihood of millions of small Third World farmers through massive subsidies, tariff barriers, and dumping, "essentially kicking aside the development ladder for some of the world's most desperate people." The latter are forced to open their poor economies to imported industrial goods and services, but they are not allowed to export their agricultural goods.

The developed world's $320 billion in farm subsidies [in 2002] dwarfed its $50 billion in development assistance. President Bush's pledge to increase foreign aid was followed by his signing of a farm bill providing $180 billion in support to American farmers over the next decade. A fair shot, more than charity, is what poor nations need. According to International Monetary Fund estimates, a repeal of all rich-country trade barriers and subsidies to agriculture would improve global welfare by about $120 billion. An uptick of only 1 percent in Africa's share of world exports would amount to $70 billion a year, some five times the amount provided to the region in aid and debt relief.

The future impact of these unfair trade practices on international relations, global poverty, and even terrorism is difficult to estimate. But the hypocrisy and injustice can only lead to resentment and unrest. The Philippines has not gained but lost hundreds of thousands of farming jobs. Globalization is perceived as a new imperialism. "Despair in the countryside feeds a number of potent anti-government insurgencies."

Consider the implications of this analysis for U.S. citizens and people of faith.
THE EXODUS AND THE LOGIC OF LIBERATION

Walter Brueggemann has a special way of capturing the essence of major biblical themes and movements. His little book, *Hope within History*, summarizes the essence of the Exodus experience for the people of Israel. He puts forward three important dimensions of the Exodus experience as foundational for the formation and renewal of Israel's faith throughout its history:

- critique of the dominant ideology.
- public processing of pain.
- release of new social imagination.

The story of Moses and the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, narrated in Exodus 1-15, was and continues to be a powerful incentive for resistance and for hope not only for the original actors in the story but their descendents throughout the Old Testament and later for Christians and other people of concern down to our own time. This is subversive literature, however we may evaluate its historical accuracy.

As Brueggemann points out, the Exodus experience begins as a critique of the dominant ideology. As slaves under the thumb of one of the world's great empires, the Hebrews would normally assume that the power of Pharaoh was absolute and the possibility for freedom non-existent. But these Hebrew slaves—and after them the Israelites under successive oppressive kings and empires—developed their own identity, which did not belong to Pharaoh's world and was not subject to the dominant ideology.

1. *The Israelite knows that he or she lives in a contrived world. Egyptian arrangements are not thought to be either absolute or worthy of trust and respect.*
2. *The contrivance is not a matter of accident or indifference. It is quite intentionally designed to serve the special interests of some at the expense of others.*
3. *Because this technological-ideological world is a contrivance and not a given, it may be undone and dismantled—deconstructed. The world may then be arranged in an alternative way if one has the courage and wits to do so.*
4. *The agent of such dismantling, deconstruction, and delegitimization is known by name—Yahweh.* (Ibid. 12)

Throughout their history the people of Israel maintained this subversive memory through liturgy, the great festivals, the Torah, the Prophets, and regular teaching in their homes and later in the synagogues.

The second foundational dimension of the exodus story is the public processing of pain. The key texts are Exodus 2:23-25 and 3:7-8a:

*After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.*

*Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.”*

Not only did Israel question the dominant ideology and refuse to accept their miserable reality as final. The people gave voice to their suffering communally and publicly. This was revolutionary and empowering!

Brueggemann calls this “an irreversible act of civil disobedience.”

*The outcry is an announcement for all to notice that the peasants would no longer conform to the system, silently meet production quotas, and go home at night exhausted. The outcry is an announcement that Israel would no longer bow before the imperial ideology, because the slaves*
had noticed that the ideology did not square with the reality of pain in their own lives which no amount of ideology could lead them to deny. (Ibid. 17)

It was precisely in the context of this outcry, this public processing of pain, that Israel came to know Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, by name. At the burning bush, as he received God’s mandate to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asked by what name he was to follow these instructions. And God answered, “I AM WHO I AM.” “This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.” (Exodus 3:14-15)

Israel’s faith was formed in the crucible of slavery in Egypt, in the experience of crying out to God, in learning that God’s name is Yahweh and that this God hears the cry of the people and comes down to deliver them. This public processing of pain, together with the critique of the dominant ideology, became an essential element in the faith of Israel as each generation discovered its identity. It was the foundation for survival and resistance under every subsequent experience of oppression, whether domestic or foreign in origin. “The cry of pain begins the formation of a counter-community around an alternative perception of reality.” (Ibid. 17-18)

The third dimension of Israel’s experience of the Exodus is the release of new social imagination. Having critiqued the dominant ideology and having cried out publicly in their pain, Israel went on to dream of a new possibility, a Promised Land where all would prosper under the blessing of Yahweh.

I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Exodus 3:8

Brueggemann underlines three aspects of this new social imagination. The first is liturgical and appears especially in the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15. The liberated slaves danced, sang, and celebrated their freedom and Yahweh’s victory over Pharaoh. And if their God was more powerful than Pharaoh, they could hope for a future social existence that would defend and articulate that freedom. The second aspect of this social imagination is political. At Sinai they committed themselves to Yahweh as their King, to the construction of a new social reality utterly different from the slavery they had experienced in Egypt, to a social reality consistent with God’s liberating act. The third aspect of this social imagination is legislative. Israel undertook the weighty task of elaborating in the Torah a way to live as people of Yahweh in contrast to the peoples around them. (Ibid. 21-23)

It was precisely in the context of the experience of the Exodus that the logic or the spirituality of liberation emerged—at Sinai and at every subsequent stage of Israel’s history. The Exodus was not simply an experience of liberation and the ongoing memory of that liberation. Israel was to incarnate that critique of dominant ideologies, that public processing of pain, and that release of new social imagination in its ongoing life as the people of Yahweh. Liberation from slavery, from Egypt, must lead to responsible living in social relationships that are liberating and just. Yahweh would reign not only in Israel’s liturgies but also in Israel’s daily life, not only in the Tabernacle or Temple but also in their homes, fields, communities, tribes, and nation. This spirituality of liberation is what gave birth to the vision of Jubilee.

1. Explore ways in which our churches today challenge or might challenge us to “critique the dominant ideology” of our communities, cities, and nation.

2. Explore ways in which our churches today enable or might enable “the public processing of pain” in the face of local, national, and global oppression, exploitation, and injustice.

3. Explore ways in which our churches are or should be “releasing a new social imagination” for a more just, peace-full, and loving world.
NEHEMIAH AND THE DEBT SYSTEM

A SCANDAL AMONG THE JEWS (Nehemiah 5:1-5)

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.” There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

GOVERNOR NEHEMIAH’S RESPONSE (Nehemiah 5:6-13)

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!” They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

1. This passage, which tells a classic story of the debt system when Judah was part of the Persian Empire, explains how even among God’s people the rich became richer and the poor lost everything. We know, of course, that interest was prohibited (Deut. 23:20-21, Lev. 25:36-37), and the Sabbath/Jubilee mandates provided for the cancellation of debts and liberation of slaves (Deut. 15:1-18, Lev. 25:25-55). What was God’s clear intention for God’s people?

2. Much has been said about today’s debt system, especially the debts of poor countries, which are falling deeper into poverty and dependence and oppression while the rich countries are becoming more and more wealthy. What is God’s clear intention today regarding poverty and the debt system in the U.S. and globally?
JESUS’ JUBILEE PRAYER

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN,
HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME,
YOUR KINGDOM COME,
YOUR WILL BE DONE,

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD,
AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS,
AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS,
AND DO NOT BRING US TO THE TIME OF TRIAL,
BUT RESCUE US FROM EVIL.

According to Matthew 6:9-13 (NRSV), Jesus taught his disciples to pray in this way. Therefore we too pray this way. But what do these six petitions mean? Is it possible that we have used this prayer thousands of times without realizing its true meaning? We shall now try to re-read the text in light of its foundation in the Hebrew Scriptures, because Jesus was a Jew and frequently based his teachings and actions on these Scriptures. In particular we will look for ties between this prayer and the Sabbath Day, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee mandates. This has, in fact, been called a Jubilee prayer because of these ties.

1. The first three petitions seem to look upward, to God in heaven. But it would be redundant to pray that way because God’s name is already sanctified in heaven, God’s Reign is already a reality in heaven, God’s will is already done in heaven. The problem is here on Earth. How can God’s name be sanctified on Earth? How can God’s Reign come on Earth? How can God’s will be done on Earth? Give examples in response to these questions.

2. The other three petitions clearly refer to the behavior of Jesus’ followers, that is, how we should live in order to sanctify God’s name, realize God’s reign, and do God’s will on Earth. As we examine these petitions, it is very important to note that they are expressed in plural. When we ask for our daily bread, whom should we include—just our families, the members of our faith communities, all Christians, or all human beings, especially the most needy? When we think about our daily bread, how much should we ask for—according to the lesson of the manna in Exodus 16? What do we need to do so that all will have their daily bread?

3. When we ask for forgiveness or cancellation of our debts, here too we have to ask ourselves, whom should we include—just our families or all who are exploited, marginalized, and impoverished by the mechanisms of debt, high interest rates, and corporate commerce that oppresses workers and excludes the poor? How are we to fulfill this petition, in keeping with the Sabbath Year teaching in Deuteronomy 15?

4. Finally, when we think about the temptations of and addictions to the current system of consumption and accumulation, how are we to fulfill the last petition and be freed from this evil, as expressed in the Jubilee Year, Leviticus 25?
JESUS AND EMPIRE
THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

Richard Horsley's book with the above title (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) offers a fundamental critique of Western views of the historical Jesus and a radical challenge for Jesus' followers today in the U.S.A. Christians in general and Bible scholars specifically tend to separate religion from socio-economic realities. They depoliticize Jesus, First Century Judea and Galilee, and the Roman Empire, which domesticates Jesus and his message.

Horsley gives us an excellent summary of the real world of Roman imperialism: the emergence of a single superpower, globalization, emperor cult and the role of patronage, terrorism and humiliation, life in subjugated Galilee under this "new world disorder."

_The Romans determined the conditions of life in Galilee where Jesus lived and carried out his mission. In the decades before Jesus was born, Roman armies marched through the area, burning villages, enslaving the able-bodied, and killing the infirm. Roman warlords appointed the young military strongman Herod as "king" and provided him with troops to conquer his subjects. The Roman emperor installed Herod's son Antipas, who had been raised at the imperial court, to rule over Galilee. With the tax revenues he extracted from Galilee, Antipas built two Roman-style cities in Galilee, which previously had neither cities nor a ruler resident in the territory. Roman governors such as Pontius Pilate appointed and deposed the high priests who ruled Judea from their base in the Jerusalem Temple. When the Pharisees and Herodians wanted to trap Jesus into incriminating himself, they asked him whether it was lawful to pay tribute to the Roman emperor. Jesus was executed by order of the Roman governor, and he was killed by crucifixion, a form of execution that the Romans used to intimidate subject peoples by publicly torturing to death their rebel leaders. Even to begin to understand Jesus in historical context, we must have a clearer sense of how Roman imperial practices affected the people of Galilee._ (15)

Horsley goes on to describe the persistent emergence of diverse expressions of resistance, revolt, and even counter-terrorism in Roman Palestine: guerrilla movements, scribal circles of protest, popular demonstrations, prophetic and messianic movements, tax resistance, and other hidden forms of resistance—all under threat of violent repression. In this context we are led to read the Gospels as "bold declarations of a popular movement" and find "Jesus-in-movement." Horsley offers a holistic reading of the Gospel of Mark and of the Q materials of Matthew and Luke. What emerges is a message of judgment of the Roman imperial order and the formation of a covenantal community as a renewal of Israeliite tradition, bringing healing and hope in the face of hopelessness and social disintegration. This reading of the Gospel is clearly relevant for people living under the New Rome, today's "New World Disorder."

How did Jesus resist the Roman Empire? How do we resist today's empires?
GOD AND MAMMON

The words of Jesus, "You cannot serve God and Mammon," are more important now than ever, because our global economic system focuses primarily on money and the ideology behind it gives priority to the accumulation of wealth. It is now clear that in biblical times wealth was the result not of virtue but of exploitation and disobedience to the covenant. In his book, Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation (WJK, 2000), William Herzog writes:

The rich were those strong enough to deprive others of their property and livelihood, leaving only enough to maintain a subsistence existence. The only way to become rich was to exploit others, so wealth was not an expression of blessing but the mark of a social predator.

To have no other gods before Yahweh means to keep Yahweh's covenant by respecting Yahweh's gift. If the land is Yahweh's gift, then it belongs to all of Yahweh's people, and the bounty of the land was meant to be extended to include especially those in need, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. The debt codes of the Torah, found mainly in Deuteronomy, were fashioned to express that basic impulse behind the covenant and to warn against losing covenant perspective. (63)

Jesus thus carried on the prophetic tradition, when he announced good news to the poor and denounced the exploitation of the rich and the abuse of the Torah to justify the domination system.

Like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah, Jesus the prophet interpreted what was happening to the people of Galilee who were being increasingly squeezed by colonial domination and internal exploitation. He taught them to read their distressing situation not as God's will but as the consequence of the violation of God's covenant. (67)

In the first century C.E. as well as in the eighth century B.C.E., peasants were being alienated from their land, and ruling elites were redistributing wealth to an indigenous ruling class while creating bureaucracies to mediate their power and manage their control. Priests and prophets were collaborating with the emerging rulers, legitimating this juggernaut of change and justifying the ways it trampled and destroyed the traditional clan system and network of tribal loyalties. (62)

1. Consider the ways in which the accumulation of money, possessions, or wealth has become a central drive of our culture and around the world. List concrete examples. Is this idolatry?

2. Explore ways in which as followers of Jesus we can resist and reverse this drive for accumulation in our own lives, in our faith communities, and in our society. Give practical examples.
PENTECOST AND JUBILEE

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the Temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:43-47

1. Underline the phrase, “day by day,” and explain its relation to the manna story in Exodus 16, which introduces the Sabbath Day.

2. Explain its relation to the phrase, “Give us this day our daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 4:32-35

1. Underline the phrase, “There was not a needy person among them,” and explain its relation to Deuteronomy 15, which concerns the Sabbath Year.

2. Explain its relation to the petition, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” in the Lord’s Prayer.

Clearly the experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was foundational for the early church and the whole Book of Acts. Luke, who wrote Acts, begins his Gospel narrative of Jesus’ ministry with the story of Jesus at the synagogue of Nazareth, Luke 4:16-30, which is foundational for the whole Gospel. It presents Jesus’ reading from Isaiah 61: 1-2a as his definition of his ministry, ending with the words, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” which apparently refers to the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25.

1. Read Leviticus 25:8-12 and explain the relation between the Jubilee and Jesus’ ministry and the experience of Pentecost in the above texts from Acts.

2. Explore the meaning of Jubilee for our churches. How has it been understood and practiced? How should it be understood and practiced? What is its relation to the words, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” from the Lord’s Prayer?
LETTER FROM ACCRA
WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

Some say a miracle took place at the August 2004 meeting of the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Accra, Ghana, West Africa. At its previous gathering in Debrecen, Hungary in 1997, that church body, which embraces 218 Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, and United denominations with 75 million members in 107 countries, had chosen the theme from Isaiah 58:6, "... break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free," and asked all the member churches to consider the call to confess their faith in the God who overcomes oppression and injustice. At Accra they chose John 10:10: "... that all may have life in fullness." This time they came to an extraordinary consensus that they must challenge their church family to covenant for justice in the economy and the earth. For many it was like a conversion experience, as they testify in these opening paragraphs of the Letter from Accra:

Our most moving and memorable moments came from our visit to Elmina and Cape Coast, two "castles" on the Coast of Ghana that held those who had been captured into slavery, as they suffered in dungeons waiting for slave ships that would take them to unknown lands and destinies. Over brutal centuries, 15 million African slaves were transported to the Americas, and millions more were captured and died. On this trade in humans as commodities, wealth in Europe was built. Through their labor, sweat, suffering, intelligence and creativity, the wealth of the Americas was developed.

At the Elmina Castle, the Dutch merchants, soldiers, and governor lived on the upper level, while the slaves were held in captivity one level below. We entered a room used as a church, with words from Psalm 132 on a sign still hanging above the door ("For the Lord has chosen Zion..."). And we imagined Reformed Christians worshipping their God while directly below them, right under their feet, those being sold into slavery languished in the chains and horror of those dungeons. For more than two centuries in that place this went on.

In angry bewilderment we thought, "How could their faith be so divided from life? How could they separate their spiritual experience from the torturous physical suffering directly beneath their feet? How could their faith be so blind?" Some of us are descended from those slave traders and slave owners, and others of us are descendants of those who were enslaved. We shared responses of tears, silence, anger, and lamentation. Those who are Reformed Christians have always declared God's sovereignty over all life and all the earth. So how could these forbears of Reformed faith deny so blatantly what they believed so clearly? Yet, as we listened to the voices today from our global fellowship, we discovered the mortal danger of repeating the same sin of those whose blindness we decried. For today's world is divided between those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world's economic injustice and ecological destruction who still suffer and die.

The Letter from Accra goes on to affirm, "the world today lives under the shadow of an oppressive empire," "the gathered power of pervasive economic and political forces throughout the globe that reinforce the division between the rich and the poor." "This is not just another 'issue' to be 'addressed.' Rather, it goes to the heart of our confession of faith. How can we say that we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord over all life and not stand against all that denies the promise of fullness of life to the world?"

What is your response to this analysis and this challenge?
BREAD FOR THE WORLD--ALLIANCE TO END HUNGER

Bread for the World's February-March 2005 newsletter, Bread, includes an article by David Beckmann, its president, "Building the Movement to Overcome Hunger." He explains that BFW has for many years been building collaborative efforts to fight hunger, including charities, Christian and Jewish groups, universities, corporations, and unions. BFW and its partners carry out letter writing campaigns and mobilize lobbying efforts to urge Congress "to commit to the goals of cutting U.S. hunger and food insecurity in half by 2010 and ending hunger by 2015." Their international goal is to pursue the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, agreed to by most countries, to reduce global hunger and extreme poverty in half by 2015. BFW advertisements highlight the slogan, "Hunger is one problem that we can solve!" (www.bread.org)

The recently released federal budget proposal of the Bush administration demonstrates the uphill struggle that lies ahead. The total of $2.5 trillion includes increases in defense and security, as expected, and concentrates all deficit reduction on non-defense spending, which totals about $400 billion or one-sixth of the total. (www.bread.org)

*Domestic anti-hunger and poverty programs are being drastically cut. The Food Stamp Program, our nation’s first line of defense against hunger, faces a cut of $1.1 billion over 10 years. Low-income housing, Medicaid, child care and other low-income focused programs are also slated for large cuts. These proposals just do not make sense with hunger and poverty on the rise. More than 36 million people, including 13 million children, live in families who are unsure where their next meal is coming from.*

*At the same time, the president wants to make permanent the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts that benefited primarily the very wealthiest people, which would add $10 trillion to the deficit over the next two decades. He’s also proposing sweeping changes to the Social Security system that will cost more than $2 trillion dollars. The prescription drug benefit that Congress passed in late 2003 is now projected to cost $720 billion, not the $400 billion originally projected. These numbers do not add up to fiscal responsibility.*

BFW and many partners are launching the ONE Campaign with the goal to increase the involvement of Americans in the global fight against extreme poverty, AIDS, and hunger and to ask the U.S. to commit an additional 1% of the federal budget to development and humanitarian assistance by 2010 in order to do its share in the international effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. That 1% could be close to $25 billion. The campaign also supports proposals to cancel 100% of the multilateral debt owed by poor countries without jeopardizing future assistance to those countries. Current funding for foreign aid is just 0.15% of GNP, the least among all the major industrialized countries.

1. How much of the U.S. federal budget should be spent on aid to poor countries?

2. How adequate is our "safety net" for the poor in this country?
JUBILEE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In the mandates of the Seventh Day, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee Year we find a vision of the world in which all have enough and no one has more than enough (Exodus 16), a world in which debts are cancelled and slaves are freed (Deuteronomy 15), all have access to the essential means of life and even the land rests (Leviticus 25). Jesus came to proclaim the Reign of God as Jubilee, "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4, cp. Isaiah 61:1-2a), and the early church experienced Jubilee when the Holy Spirit fell upon them. They practiced the sharing of possessions, and "there was not in needy person among them" (Acts 4:34, cp. Deuteronomy 15:4). This vision and these mandates are more important than ever today, because they are further than ever from our present reality.

The convergence between the Jubilee vision in the Bible and the modern struggle for human rights can be seen clearly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has ancient roots but is expressed more recently in the United Nations Charter (1945), where the member nations express their "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and value of the human person, and in the equality of rights of men and women, as among large and small nations." The Universal Declaration, which was launched on December 10th, 1948, includes all the traditional political and civil rights, the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and also economic and social rights. The paragraph that follows seems to express the intention of the authors of the biblical Jubilee, who based their mandates on the God who had liberated God's people from slavery and commanded them to build a society of freedom and equality. It gives us the challenge—as persons, as faith communities, and as peoples—to unite our efforts with other movements and institutions in the struggle for fullness of life for all.

EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO A STANDARD OF LIVING ADEQUATE FOR THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF HIMSELF/HERSELF AND OF HIS/HER FAMILY, INCLUDING FOOD, CLOTHING, HOUSING AND MEDICAL CARE AND NECESSARY SOCIAL SERVICES, AND THE RIGHT TO SECURITY IN THE EVENT OF UNEMPLOYMENT, SICKNESS, DISABILITY, WIDOWHOOD, OLD AGE OR OTHER LACK OF LIVELIHOOD IN CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND HIS/HER CONTROL.

1. How are human rights taught, understood, and practiced in our faith communities?

2. How are the biblical mandates for the Sabbath Day, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee Year taught, understood, and practiced in our faith communities?

3. On reflection about the convergence between the Declaration of Human Rights and the biblical Jubilee, what recommendations can we make for our communities?
EMPIRE OR EARTH COMMUNITY
Ross and Gloria Kinsler

Empire and Earth Community are generic names for two models of organizing human relationships at all levels of society, from relationships among nations to relations among family and work-group members. Empire orders relationships into dominator hierarchies that monopolize power in the hands of elites to expropriate the life energy and thereby suppress the creative potential of the rest. Earth Community orders relationships by partnership networks that distribute power equitably to nurture the well-being and creative potential of each individual and the whole of the community. Each model is within our means, and ultimately it is ours to choose between them. (39)

In his 2006 book, The Great Turning, David Korten presents the great challenge of our time. He affirms that “The capacity to anticipate and choose our future is a defining characteristic of the human species.” (25) He lays out the two primary options set before us at this critical time. He argues that for the last 5000 years the most powerful and influential human societies have opted for models of Empire that have ruled by domination, conflict, and competition. They have generally been characterized by racism, sexism, and classism. By contrast, Korten proposes the option of Earth Community, which proposes the organization of human societies through responsible cooperation that benefits all human sectors and includes the wider life communities. “Earth Community orders relationships by partnership networks that distribute power equitably to nurture the well-being and creative potential of each individual and the whole of the community.” (39)

The title of Korten’s book, The Great Turning, expresses his critical and urgent call to choose life in our time, in the face of longstanding and now unparalleled violence and destruction. It spells out extensively the history of human propensity for exclusion, domination, competition, and hatred, but it also emphasizes the human capacity for caring, compassion, cooperation, and community. Both tendencies are within us at all levels, from the local family to the global family. We are challenged to consider the potential of these two options and join with others at all these levels in the widespread movement to turn from Empire to Earth Community.

One of the dimensions of this conflict that touches all of us very directly and intimately is gender. Korten notes that males have dominated human societies for virtually the entire 5000 years of Empire, with their elitist propensity toward conflict, domination, and violence. The emerging prominence of women, with their propensity toward nurture and caring, offers great hope for our time and the future. We cannot help but imagine that women offer us all the possibility of joining the Great Turning and creating an alternative world.

1. Make a list of concrete expressions of Empire in your local and global world.
2. Make another list of examples of Earth Community.
THE GREAT WORK FOR THIS GENERATION
Ross and Gloria Kinsler

One of the most moving books about the challenge of the 21st Century is Thomas Berry's *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Bell Tower, 1999). Berry's poetic, almost mystical style is both elegant and inviting. On the one hand he sets forth the incomparable disaster facing humanity and the whole biosphere; on the other hand he creates a sense of incomparable opportunity also facing this generation.

*We find ourselves ethically destitute just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of the Earth's functioning in its major life systems. . . . with biocide, the extinction of the vulnerable life systems of the Earth, and geocide, the devastation of the Earth itself.* (104)

*The labor and care expended over some billions of years and untold billions of experiments to bring forth such a gorgeous Earth is all being negated within less than a century for what we consider "progress" toward a better life in a better world.* (164)

*The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner. . . . Such a transition has no historical parallel since the geobiological transition that took place 67 million years ago when the period of the dinosaurs was terminated and a new biological age began. So now we awaken to a period of extensive disarray in the biological structure and functioning of the planet.* (3)

*The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. . . . Our own special role, which we will hand on to our children, is that of managing the arduous transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic Era, the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community.* (7)


*We are now experiencing a moment of significance far beyond what any of us can imagine. What can be said is that the foundations of a new historical period, the Ecozoic Era, have been established in every realm of human affairs. The mythic vision has been set into place. The distorted dream of an industrial technological paradise is being replaced by the more viable dream of a mutually enhancing human presence within an ever-renewing organic-based Earth community.*

1. What is your evaluation of Thomas Berry's vision of the challenge facing our generation?

2. What is your own vision of the challenge now facing humankind and planet Earth?