

# Land and the Vocation Of the Church

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Not many Christians are aware that there is any connection between land ownership and the vocation of the church. Throughout most of church history the church has been controlled by the big landlords and has often been one of the biggest landlords and has carefully avoided any discussion of the issues. There have been times when small groups of Christians rebelled against the landlords and formed self-sustaining communities, such as the Mennonites and the Amish. Today there is a steadily increasing tendency for such groups to form, but the main line denominations carefully avoid the issue.

The question we are asking here is "What is the relationship between the role of the Church and land?" We must begin by examining the role of the Church. For what does the Church exist? What is the Church?

The Church is, first and foremost, the Body of Christ to do Christ's work in the world. That work is first, to proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ, to invite people to accept Christ, to nurture them to maturity in Christ, and to put them to work proclaiming the good news and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth as much as possible. In an area where Christians are a small minority, there is a limit to what the Church can do, as power is going to be in other hands. Where Christians are a significant part of the population there is much they can do, and when they are a large majority they should be able to come close to establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Why don't we?

Let us go back to the beginnings of Christianity and briefly examine how we got where we are today. Christianity started as a tiny minority group, with neither wealth nor power. What Christians had they shared and whatever land any of them had provided a base for their economic life as well as for their meetings. The earliest buildings were simply private homes, but as time went on more and more buildings were erected for church activities. This was the picture for nearly 300 years. In those cases where big landlords became Christians, the land was shared with the other Christians and raised the standard of living of the little communities. Then, at the beginning of the 4th Century, came the turning of rulers to Christianity. Although there was probably a minor problem from sycophants of the few Christian landlords joining the church and trying to use it for their own ends in the previous era, now the problem became a major one. The people who surrounded the Christian kings were not necessarily interested in God at all. For the most part, they were only interested in power. But since the king had become a Christian they had to go through the motions of becoming Christians. They joined the Church but they had no intention of letting their lives be guided by the teachings of Jesus, which were the exact opposite of what they believed. This made it imperative that they work their way to power in the church as quickly as they could and get the church's teachings changed so as to be no longer a threat to them.

One would think that the Christian kings would have the power to keep pretence-only Christians from taking control of the church, but this did not happen. It may have been because the kings, themselves, were not genuinely changed and only saw the Church as one important organization among others, one which they needed to control, or it may have been that they were sincere enough but did not catch on to the fact that Biblical Christianity covers every aspect of life. There were not that many Bibles available and it was not long before the impression got out that the Old Testament teachings about society were only for Jewish society of ancient times, and that Christianity was not about contemporary human society but just about getting forgiven from sin and getting a passport to heaven.

Such a concept – that “religion” has only to do with the next world – would leave the people in power free to run their part of the world to suit themselves and we find, as a matter of fact, that this is just what happened. When the church could be used to reinforce their position, those in power would use it. The vocation of the church to change the world was either lost sight of entirely or reinterpreted to be a vocation to change the world to suit the people in power. Often the people in power helped the church become a landlord.

Now we have an interesting situation. There are only a few nations, today, where there is a church that controls power. Most nations have many different churches and many of those have no social teaching at all, just teaching about the Next World. It is assumed that the church can raise enough money, by taking collections in one way or another, to finance its mission. The mission is seen simply as persuading people to “believe in Jesus,” almost always meaning that Jesus provides us our passport to get to heaven and has nothing to say about our social and economic or political problems. As long as the church limits itself to a “pie in the sky” approach, it does not need land. It can just take up collections. If it has land, it can use that land to derive an income to supplement the collections and to make it more effective in recruiting, training, and sending missionaries to bring more people into the organization on the assumption that membership in the organization is the way to get your passport to heaven.

Today, however, we find a steadily increasing number of Christians who read the Bible carefully and thoroughly and who are coming to the conclusion that God is concerned with the real world, the present world. These people often find themselves in conflict with the powers who control this real world. They, too, need some kind of power that will give them leverage to bring about changes in the real world.

As such people begin to examine what they can use for this leverage, they discover that land is the basis of all power. Man cannot live without land. Man cannot work without land. Not just farms, but factories, stores, and all kinds of businesses require a location and this location is controlled by a landlord. The landlord will not give anyone space to do his work unless the landlord is quite sure that that work is no threat to himself. Since the existing form of society is controlled by the existing landlords, any proposal to change the form of society is a threat to the landlords. The church has to face the choice between being reactionary, irrelevant or revolutionary. If it proposes to change the

world in which it exists, it must find some way of getting ownership of land and using the power in the land for the purposes of God.

Up until now, only the small communities such as the Mennonites and the newer intentional communities that are growing up around the world have come to grips with this. Their ownership of land makes it possible for them to survive, but their influence in their various nations is very limited. They are able to do many kinds of social work but their impact on their society as whole is very limited.

The fact is that land is the basis of power and if the church sees its vocation as establishing the kingdom of God in the real, present world, it will have to get control of land. To the extent that it controls land, to that extent it can impact the society in which it finds itself. The question posed by church history is "Can the Church own land and not become corrupted?" The matter of land and the church is two problems: getting hold of land and, at the same time, not losing sight of our task or becoming corrupted, becoming just one more landlord. There is no reason to suppose that if we set our minds to the task we cannot start a new chapter in church history!

[The following is a slightly different discussion of the same topic.]

When we ask "What is the relationship between the role of the Church and land?", we must begin by examining the role of the Church. For what does the Church exist? What is the Church? The Church is the Body of Christ to do Christ's work in the world. That work is first, to proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ, to invite people to accept Christ, to begin nurturing them to maturity in Christ, and to put them to work proclaiming the good news to the poor and to fulfill the good news by working to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Where we Christians are a significant and influential part of the population, we should be able to come close to establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Why don't we?

For the most part, those who do not want the Kingdom of God on earth, those who do not want God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, those who benefit from exploiting the poor and from speculating in land manage to persuade the church that its vocation is just to get people a passport to heaven and not to interfere with such practical issues as economics and politics. Social work may be encouraged, but it must be kept in the realm of what the Bible calls "works of mercy," never in the realm of justice. Various forms of relief work and social work can lessen the suffering of the poor but can never change the society so that poverty, unemployment, and exploitation cease to exist. Social service and social justice differ in the same way that medicine differs from public health. Medicine deals with problems that have arisen and treats each individual problem. Public health deals with the society as a whole to keep people healthy and to protect them from disease. Justice deals not with poverty but with the prevention of poverty.

What does land have to do with justice? The Bible teaches that each family is to have

their own land and that this is inalienable and that arrangements must be made for people to get their land back if they lose it. The importance of land was expressed by a famous American business man, Marshall Field, when he said, "Land is not just a good way to get rich, it is not just the best way to get rich, it is the only way to get rich." People without land are victims of injustice, whether they know it or not.

The Bible tells us, clearly and concisely, that we have three tasks: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Those who practice injustice have been very successful at persuading the church to spend most of its energy studying what it means to "walk humbly with your God," and the rest of its energy on works of mercy such as feeding the poor or treating the sick. For the most part, the church has been so busy with these things that the thing which is listed as first (see Micah 6.8) – doing justice – is left undone. Jesus said, "These you should have done and not leave the others undone."

Although Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, that is, the Old Testament, He was aware that, until people are born again and filled with the Holy Spirit they cannot fulfill the teachings of the Old Testament. Those who profit by injustice, by exploiting the poor, persuade the church to limit itself to the New Testament and not to ask what we are supposed to do after we get born again and filled with the Spirit. They persuade us that getting born again and getting filled with the Spirit is the ultimate goal.

The fact is, the ultimate goal is reorganizing society according to God's will, according to God's blueprint in the Old Testament. The New Testament calls this the Kingdom of God. The most conspicuous element in the Kingdom is justice. The key verse is Matthew 6:33. Once we have received the Holy Spirit, both within us for bearing fruit and upon us for works of power, we are ready to begin seeking the kingdom and justice, to begin studying God's blue-print in the Old Testament.

When we do that we find that the Bible teaches that the basic economic reality is land. Man cannot live without land. Man cannot work without land. Not just farms, but factories, stores, and all kinds of businesses require a location and this location is controlled by a landlord. The landlord will not give anyone space to work unless the landlord is quite sure that that work is no threat to himself. Since the existing form of society is controlled by the existing landlords, any proposal to change the form of society is a threat to the landlords. The church has to face the choice between being reactionary, irrelevant or revolutionary.

Without land there is no place to stand, much less to work. The Bible contains powerful denunciations of those who accumulate land and exploit the landless. Today, there is a great deal of secular literature explaining why land is the basic issue and how this issue can be solved. One proposal is to make all the land the property of the state and this is the method advocated by Marx. But because Marxism cannot change human nature it appeals to anger and selfishness for its motivation and ends by producing exceptionally evil people, far worse than any other world culture. If the same techniques were used with Christian motivation, the results would be quite different, but this has never been tried on any large scale, only in small Christian communities.

The Bible tells us that God says, "The land is mine." We have to examine the various proposals being made to see which ones are consistent with this concept. The Bible says that land must not be sold "in perpetuity." (See Leviticus 25:23) Yet that is exactly what most so-called capitalistic societies do. In America, when one buys a piece of land the deed reads "in perpetuity." This means that America has rejected the will of God. However, one American economist, Henry George, a century ago, showed how any governmental unit that collects taxes (the nation, or a city, or other unit) can begin to restore justice by increasing the taxes on land and decreasing the taxes on every form of human effort – whether sales taxes, income taxes, or building taxes.

There are a number of cities in America that are reducing the taxes, year by year, on houses, personal incomes, and other forms of creative effort. At the same time they increase the taxes, year by year, on land. This produces the same income but it also reduces unemployment and reverses urban decay. One city that was the dirtiest city in America adopted this method and is now considered to be "the most livable city in America."

This proposal of Henry George's, to lower the tax on improvements and all products of man's labor and to increase the tax on land – which is not something made by man's labor – has worked effectively wherever it has been tried. Technically, the land tax is not a tax at all, but a rent for the site where one does business. The Bible does not approve of taxes at all! It does approve of having a lease on land. At one time Hong Kong had no taxes but only land-leases. It worked beautifully. There is no reason why the Korean church cannot advocate and work for such a program in this country. It is working effectively in other Southeast Asian countries and there is no reason to suppose that it would not work effectively in Korea. In fact, the more one studies this matter the more convinced one becomes that it is the only way Korea be saved. If we go on the way we are going, we will soon be bankrupt and become just a third-rate economy with unemployment, poverty and unrest increasing steadily. The Church can fulfill its vocation by investigating the literature on this subject, by observing those economies (e.g. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) that are applying these Biblical principles and then by pushing for them. That would be in keeping with the church's vocation to seek God's blueprint and God's justice, and would be a practical way to start.