

BIBLICAL VISION – POLITICAL PRIORITIES

JOHN D DAVIES

THE GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS FOR THE CONSTITUENCY OF TATTON IN MAY 1997 READ AS FOLLOWS:

Martin Bell (Ind)	29354
Neil Hamilton (Con)	18277
Others	1161

“Sleaze” is what happens when market interests are allowed to decide the agenda of parliament. “Anti-corruption” was an option for political morality. One way of interpreting the election result in Tatton is to say that the voters chose morality. Being anti-corruption is a necessary moral stance. But very soon – and Martin Bell must have discovered this long ago – morality cannot just be about avoiding what is wrong.

PAGANISM, POLITICS AND THE MARKET

The political morality of the Bible is based on the nature of God, and his positive will for the well-being of his people. Pagan politics, also, reflects pagan understandings of God. Old Testament Baalism sanctified the possession of the land by a few powerful magnates, so that the Canaanite tenants had to work as dispossessed labourers with no power or voice. The paganism of New Testament times represented heaven as a sphere of conflict between warring divinities who worked off their frustrations on humanity; or the god was seen as a capricious and arbitrary power. In our own day, at both the national and international level, many people feel that “the market” is just such a mindless, capricious power, and a multiplicity of rival interests, against which we can never win. The market may be useful as a tool; but it is dangerous as a god. It will not serve as a sufficient source of political morality.

According to the Bible, God’s will is that all people should be seen as moral beings. The apostolic writers address everyone as responsible decision-makers, including classes that other authorities would not credit with moral capacity – women, slaves and children. They can all take responsibility for their actions and attitudes. This is the beginning of a political morality. Positively, there are three primary and fundamental elements in a biblical political morality: they can all be noted most clearly in a local context, and so can well provide an agenda for a local church in its thinking, praying and action. They all provide points at which one of the most important biblical standards can be applied, namely, how does our society work for those who get least advantage from the status quo? An alert local church is the best instrument for getting a biblical morality to function.

LAND

The land is God's creation and God's gift. No one can make it – and no one can increase it. It is unique; it is not one commodity among other commodities. It is not to be treated as anyone's exclusive possession. Because it is a gift, it must not be grasped. Every member of the community of Israel was a stake-holder in the land. If some people, such as the Levites, have no land of their own, they receive a financial payment by the land-holders.

Across our present world, when people are dispossessed of their land, they have to produce more wealth than they need for their own maintenance: they have to pay those who have gained control over the land in either interest, rent or tax. In a colonial society, dispossessed peasants are taxed to pay for the privilege of being governed. Jesus knew all about this; so do millions of people in countries which used to be "red on the map". For most British people, the importance of land tenure may seem remote and obscure. For most African people, it will be only too obvious. If we brought a biblical morality to bear on our present anxieties concerning homelessness, mortgages and negative equity in Britain, we would see that the cost of housing is not due to any excessive increase in building costs. It is due to the erratic and unregulated movements in land values. Increases in the value of land are often due not to the work of the individual landowner, but to the combined activities of many members of the community, for example in the development of new roads. A biblical political morality would require that such increases should be shared for the common good. In several areas of the world, this is the basis of local authority financing.

LABOUR

God sets human beings in the world to work, to share the task of creation. Work is not just a "job" – important though that is. Work includes parenting, law-making, symbol-making, the whole range of human activity of hand, mind and feelings. A biblical morality would, of course, take seriously the whole issue of rewards and differentials, but it would also be concerned that the work is itself worth doing. It would be concerned that it enlarges and does not demean the worker, that it represents God's mandate to care for the earth and not despoil it.

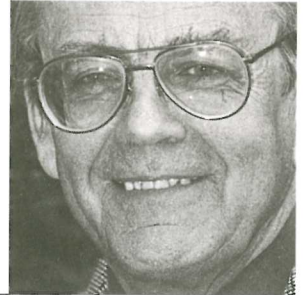
The most detailed of the Ten Commandments is the one about the Sabbath. The Sabbath law requires that there should be one day out of seven in which the distinction between employer and employee is removed, that all should be together in the freedom of those released from slavery. Today, we would have to add a third category – the unemployed. The vision of "One Nation" no longer mean bringing the middle class and the working class into one community, but holding together the working classes, as a whole, with the non-working classes: the unemployed, the disabled, the homeless. Biblical morality calls us to share the wealth created from the land with the stranger, the fatherless, the widow and with all who are excluded from the process of productivity.

The people of God are a redeemed community. We can judge how far a community is redeemed by seeing whether its members are still slaves, whether they are still valued only as producers of wealth. Often, a slave was a person who was trapped in unpayable debt, which is exactly where many of the poorer countries of the world find themselves now. Just as a biblical morality inspired our predecessors to free the slaves, so it should inspire us to free our debtors.

LEARNING

"Education, education and education" are current political priorities. Fine. The Mosaic law had very inclusive principles concerning education. It was not for children only. The Sabbath regulations provided for a regular occasion when the whole nation would down tools and come together for a systematic teach-in on every subject of human interest. Young and old were required to learn of the Law; and the Law covered every aspect of knowledge, arts and sciences, technology and history, human relations and theology. This was education for the Second Chance. The sabbatical year was not a chance for the academic high-fliers to fly even higher and distance themselves from the common people; it was a way of ensuring that knowledge was shared, and that ordinary people were not disabled by experts.

THE RT REVD JOHN DAVIES WAS ANGLICAN BISHOP OF SHREWSBURY FROM 1986 TO 1994. HE SERVED IN SOUTH AFRICA, FIRST AS A MISSION PRIEST AND THEN AS A UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN, FROM 1957. HE HAS BEEN PRINCIPAL OF THE COLLEGE OF THE ASCENSION, SELLY OAK, AND CANON MISSIONER IN THE DIOCESE OF ST ASAPH. AFTER HIS RETIREMENT, HE WAS A COUNCILLOR ON THE LLANGOLLEN RURAL COMMUNITY COUNCIL.



Education is not just for the benefit of students, to help them fly higher and become better predators; nor is it only to provide skills for the producing of commodities – necessary though that may be. The value of education is for the developing of an informed community, to give it the political wit to take responsibility for national standards of both justice and compassion. In our modern society, the further education sector is closest to the biblical ideal of the Second Chance. In spite of recent changes, it remains essentially local, geared to local interests and claims. And, of all the various elements in our educational system, this is the one which has received least attention from the mission and ministry of the organised churches.

LOCAL

Land, labour and learning are all matters which can properly claim priority at national and international level. But perhaps it is at a local level that they are most significant for most people. The way in which land is held is vital to individual households. Local Authorities have a valuable tradition and expertise in housing and land-tenure; this has been weakened in recent years, and new housing has not materialised as a result of council house sales.

Centralisation and opting-out could also be seen as factors in weakening the repositories and skills of Local Authorities in the provision of education.

Old Testament politics swung back and forth between the authority of the local tribe and the centralising claims of Jerusalem. For all sorts of reasons, Jerusalem won. But then, along came our Saviour, a local, non-establishment, provincial man. He was at home on the frontiers, and his typical companions were the sorts of people who are always found at frontiers – soldiers, customs officials, prostitutes. He moved from the edge towards the centre. The apostolic movement did likewise within the span of the Roman Empire.

Local councils are the places where people's hopes and grievances find most immediate expression; the response to them often cuts across the political divides of the national system. Israel was a community of tribes, of local authorities. A biblical political style would recognise the importance of the local starting point. For most of us, if a thing is to be real it must be local. Most, if not all, of our churches contain Martin Bell-like people who are determined to work for morality within our local political structures. The task of the local church is to resource and support these people with a biblical political morality, and so bring about a transformation of our whole experience of political decision-making, our work and our leisure. ■

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