

19. SOCIOECONOMIC LIFE – A WAY OF CONFESSION

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The title of this essay, “Socioeconomic Life - A Way of Confession,” may seem somewhat strange. One would think that confession has to do with the Apostle’s Creed and with ecclesiastical creeds and of course, we admit that these creeds are also concerned with our socioeconomic life. But to call that life itself a way of confession seems to say too much, for socioeconomic life brings us into the world of tricky newspaper headlines concerning balance of payments, structural unemployment, and so on. These matters appear to be external to our lives rather than matters in which we participate inwardly. How then can our socioeconomic life itself be a form of confession? Obviously the title needs to be explained.

If a person gives money to foreign missions, that act is a small part of his socioeconomic life, for a small money stream is recruited which makes a very slight difference in the national balance of payments. This act then is authentic economic life and is at the same time a part of the donor’s confession, revealing something of his life’s direction. But why would this apply only for the money we give to missions? Our life as a whole stands under the power of the cross and resurrection of Christ whose salvation is radical, integral, and total. That is why the everyday actions of buying and selling and working are included in the circle of things that the Christian should confess. For he makes his confession not only with words but also with deeds, whether he knows it or not.

As an illustration, take the early Christian community. When the Holy Spirit was poured out, Christians began to deal with one another differently. I refer not only to the fact that their faces beamed with joy and that they broke bread together in all simplicity, but also to the changes that occurred in their social and economic relations.

A new style of socioeconomic activity became apparent in that community. We would oversimplify the new character of their life if we were to make it merely a question of whether or not to hold possession communally. A new ground-rule for socioeconomic life appeared within the congregation, one which the Savior himself had illustrated with his life: it is more blessed to give than to receive. When this rule functions as the basic norm of life, the economic relationships among men begin to change and economic life becomes an articulation of communal confession.

Let me sharpen the focus. Socioeconomic life is always a kind of confession in the sense of making known, or even unconsciously betraying, what a person’s life is all about, what he really lives for, and where the meaning of his life lies.

People make confessions not only for themselves individually but also communally. The Bible speaks not only of persons but also of peoples, nations, and societies which depart from the living God. And his judgement rests not only upon particular persons but also upon nations who one day will appear before His throne.

For us in the western world the crucial question is: *what* do we confess within and concerning socioeconomic life? We cannot cut ourselves off from western society nor can we view it as something that transpires apart from us. We participate in the development of western culture and are therefore co-responsible for it.

Biblical Models

Let me illustrate the nature of socioeconomic life as confession by referring to the social order described in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy where God himself was the author of an *open* society.

The Mosaic society affords a striking illustration of the meaning of the biblical words, “reconciliation,” “mercy,” “forgiveness,” and “love.” These words are intended not only for the “soul” but take on meaning in the midst of socioeconomic life which illustrates, for instance, what reconciliation actually is and what the making of laws actually is. God’s promises are laid down and reflected there in the socioeconomic realities. This economic order was an *open* order that pointed out a way and witnessed to the living God; at the same time that order was also open to man’s neighbor. It was like a house with an open door through which one can see the world outside. Similarly, God himself stands open to society, to the people who are willing to serve Him and to view their neighbors as His children. This principle can be illustrated further by certain specifics of the Mosaic laws, particularly those concerned with property, slavery, and the tithe.

Regulations Concerning Property

The regulations for property owners in Israel, particularly those who owned land, were different than those we know today. Israel’s regulations were also different from those of the ancient cultures of the Middle East. In Israel there was no “exclusive right of control.” Leviticus 25 states bluntly, “ ‘The land belongs to Me’, says the Lord.” He was the owner; since He controlled the land, no Israelite could use property exclusively for himself. God was the owner; the Israelite was the steward.

In this light we can understand a large number of specific regulations which we might be inclined to call restrictions on ownership. They were not restrictions, however, but were expressions of how property could be unfolded, that is, made to stand open to God and to fellow men. For example, when a farmer in Israel worked his land, he had to leave a border of the grain field un-harvested. The produce of this border was for the use of those who passed by. Or if a man walked past a vineyard, he was allowed to take along as much as he could carry in his hands. What we would be inclined to call a limitation on ownership was rather an unfolding of ownership: it stated who really has authority in the lives of us all. An unfolded or open ownership said this: property bears a social mortgage, namely the neighbor’s right to its use.

A second example of God’s ownership of the land is found in his provision that the land must rest. The year of the Sabbath was a part of the rhythm in which people, animals, and land were granted rest by the Lord. He determined and reserved the time when the land could recover from human use. We know that the people of Israel did not faithfully keep the Sabbatical year. We also know that in a certain sense this disregard for God’s commands determined the history of the people of Israel. At a given point when the people no longer kept the Sabbatical year, God stood up and took the side of the land. He sent his people into captivity so that the land could enjoy its sabbath (Lev. 26:32). Thus God maintained his right of property, even at the price of exiling his people.

A third example of God’s ownership was his maintenance of the original division of the land among the families of the tribes of Israel (Josh. 13). As a result, when Israelites bought and sold parcels of land, they were not dealing with the *land* but

with its produce, for the land reverted back to the original family. The Levites were excluded from the apportionment of land, but they received their consolation prize when God told them, "I am your portion." Pariahs by the grace of God!

Regulations Concerning Slavery

In the regulations concerning slavery, the open character of the Israelite society also clearly appeared. Socioeconomic life transpired as a part of a concrete, living, covenantal intercourse with the Lord. At first glance the example of slavery appears to be entirely out of place. As soon as we hear the word "slavery" we become uneasy, for it appears to be a direct intrusion upon human equality. However, this was not true of slavery in Israel.

Try to visualize the position of an Israelite who became so deeply entangled in debt that he had to sell himself and his family to his neighbor to work his neighbor's field. We should note that such a slave had a number of God-given rights. He had the right to the Sabbath rest during which he could not be given slave's work. He also retained the right of redeeming himself. Moreover, slavery in Israel could not last longer than six years, for in the year of the Sabbath the slave was set free.

There are two other noteworthy regulations. When a slave lost by ill-treatment but a single tooth, he was immediately set free. And when he ran away from his master, it was assumed that his master had treated him cruelly. Therefore he did not have to be returned.

What happened to the slave who was not liberated in either of these ways? Consider his position in the forty-eighth year, just before the beginning of the year of Sabbath (the forty-ninth) and the year of Jubilee (the fiftieth). Consider also the family that was deep in debt, with both husband and wife working on another man's land to pay their burden of debt. The dawning of the year of Sabbath meant that the slave and his children were set free, and his debts were considered paid. Moreover, in the year of Jubilee the land that he first possessed through his family line was returned to him. This was not all. The master for whom the slave worked was obligated to give the former slave young livestock and food for a whole year. Thus a man who earlier had been hopelessly in debt and unable to support his family now recovered his land, had livestock and food for a year, and was free from debt! He could make a new beginning.

These regulations are concrete expressions of redemptive reconciliation in economic life. Reconciliation is not just a matter of fine words but of forgiveness so concrete that it did away with all debt. Reconciliation is the grace to begin with a clean slate. It is not accidental that the year of Jubilee began on the tenth day of the seventh month, the Great Day of Atonement, for this stipulation draws the meaning of reconciliation directly into the midst of socioeconomic life.

There is one other noteworthy aspect of the regulation concerning slavery. We tend to say that a person belongs either to the class of owners or to the class of employees, and that he maintains that position throughout his life. In Israel, in the forty-eighth year, a slave engulfed in debt would become a free farmer at the end of two years. Thus Israel did not have the class relations that we know. A farmer could within two years become a slave, and a slave could in that time become a farmer. This illustration of what equality among men ought to be contrasts sharply with cheaply-bought equality presently in vogue, that everyone should have equal rights and influence.

Not only was Israel organized to avoid the development of permanent classes and to give every man a chance to become a farmer or a slave but barriers were built into Israel's structure to keep people from accumulating and possessing wealth permanently in the face of permanent poverty. Everyone who earned money could attempt to become richer by investing it in land. However, in Israel this was limited by the obligatory restoration of property in the year of Jubilee. A person could also try to become rich by increasing his capital and investing his money on interest. However, in Israel all debts were cancelled after seven years. One can easily understand that it was very difficult to become rich in Israel.

Regulations Concerning Tithing

Tithes have to do with taxes. The word itself has an unfriendly sound, even though a tax rate of 10% would not seem harsh. What was the goal of the tithe, the levying of 10% of the harvest of grain and of livestock? In Deuteronomy 14 we read that once in three years the tithes had to be deposited in the gate. Once in three years the tithe (3½% of the gross national product) was designated for relief of the poor, the strangers, the Levites, and the widows.

Twice in the three years the people had to take their tithe to Jerusalem so that there, together with the Levites and servants, they could feast before the face of the Lord. Moreover, the people might buy from the tithes whatever they wanted, even alcoholic beverages.

This too is a sign of a truly open society where affairs are so regulated that an individual man and the people as a whole can attain to shalom. Peace consists in their festive encounter with God and in having peace and joy with their neighbors.

Painful Contrasts

The title of the essay, "Socioeconomic Life –a Way of Confession," should now make some sense. For in the concrete rules of various economic and social relations of the Mosaic regulations we encounter Israel's confession of openness to the living Lord and to the neighbor whom they encountered before God's face.

Turning now to our own society, we encounter many contrasts. I do not mean that we should allow land to lie fallow once in seven years or that we should immediately cease putting money out on interest. These are all intriguing issues, but they direct our attention away from the most painful and yet central one; namely, whether in our socioeconomic life we, people of the West, display that same tendency and the same direction of development as was portrayed in the old covenant.

Actually we are here confronted with a number of contrasts. I will mention three. First, in Israel there was an openness to the rest that God alone can give. Shalom is the basis for human labor. The Torah first says, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy", and then adds, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." Shalom thus precedes work and gives it its framework. In our society, however, everything is first of all concentrated on our restless pursuit of what we can produce through our own efforts. Here, our economic confession is that in the last instance our labor must produce our wellbeing. For instance, the pursuit of economic expansion has become the central trait in the policy of both corporations and trade unions.

A second contrast is that Israel illustrated the grace of a new beginning when the slave returned to the ranks of free men. In contrast, our society bears the curse of a

never-ceasing conflict between men, conflicts which are intensified for our own interests. Quite typical is the conflict between employers and laborers.

A third contrast is that our socioeconomic life does not recognize God's first right to the land and to nature. We do not show the same concern for God's creation: birds, animals, plants, fish, resources - that we show for the houseplants of the neighbor lady who asks us to care for them while she is away on vacation. Rather, for the sake of expanding our own prosperity we have almost completely depleted and plundered nature. Proof of this lies in the chemicals and the oil which smother fish and birds in the air and the sea.

These are contrasts which are too sharp to be overcome by simply correcting social structures. First of all, we must be concerned with how we behave in our socioeconomic activities and with how we give form and content to western society. In this respect I should refer once again to our act of confession.

I began by saying that our socioeconomic life is a form of confession. That applies not only to life in ancient Israel but also to life in the West today. In the light of these contrasts, we fully realize that our confession is radically different from the confession of ancient Israel. Central to our *de facto* confession is the conviction that happiness and salvation must be expected from our own achievements and technical ability, the elements on which our social order is built and of which it bears witness. Our society, which is directed first of all to satisfying our wants, is based on a deep trust in scientific knowledge and technological power.

Fortunately, other developments can also be observed in the structure of western society. These developments remind us of the Reformation confession that our entire life goes on before the face of God. In this light, the freedom of enterprise, of work and of consumption are precious. That too is a part of our confession. How have we used our freedoms? Have we used them to attain reconciliation and shalom? Have we become good stewards of God's creation? The legitimate questions indicate that we Christians in the West are equally guilty of living a confession that is directed away from God.

To be a Christian in Economic Life

I will not conclude with a proclamation of judgment, even though such a sermon would not be altogether out of place. For in a sense we in the West do stand under judgment. If we see how seriously God took Israel's insult to Him as the owner of the land, then we shall not expect to go unpunished for the way we have dealt with His creation in our society. However, I want to end on a different note, emphasizing two things.

First, precisely because socioeconomic life is a way of confession, we Christians may be expected to establish a socioeconomic lifestyle that differs from what we see all around us. For example, does our lifestyle accord with the idea of open ownership? Do we consider our houses and our cars as things that should be open to serve others in need? And what is our style of consumption? Do we think power lies in a materialistic competition with our neighbors? What is our style of work? Do we choose to work where we can earn the highest wages? Does it make any difference whether the industry that we patronize pollutes the environment? Have we attempted to help people who have landed in the gutter in order to give them the opportunity of a new economic beginning? Do we sometimes "deposit our money at the gate?" Or is our display of mercy really an expression of pride? Are our lives open so that we have real

joy and festivity? And do we invite today's Levites and strangers, the lonely ones and the pariahs to feast with us? Do we demonstrate concern for the orphan and the poor?

These questions are gripping because they cannot simply be recast into social structures with which we can build. Rather, they concern the marks of a spontaneous faith and a spontaneous, Christian economic lifestyle. The socioeconomic life of the early Christian community was not a question of following wonderful blueprints (of which our age has an ample supply). In that early day, faith penetrated society, including the sector of buying and selling and sharing. Those same matters must concern us also today.

One final comment: our society is more closed than open in character. It is a tunnel society in which everything has to be sacrificed in order to reach the end of the tunnel. It is not open every day for the coming Lord. Nevertheless, at this precise moment we must not lose courage, for our socioeconomic life cannot be closed up if Jesus Christ has become our door to life.

A tunnel society attempts to reach independence and happiness by constant exertion and the sacrifice of the self. Nevertheless, shalom is never attained in this way, for shalom is not the result of our work and our activities. Acceptance with God is the basis for our life and work. Therefore, tunnel societies should remind us that a new heaven and a new earth are coming in which there will be no taxes or tithes, for even the water of life can be bought without money. Slaves and differences of social standing will disappear too, for the year of Jubilee will have become eternal reality. The rushing and the competition will have come to an end because God's peace will have arrived. In spite of our poor stewardship he will cause everything to reach its true destiny.

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