



Lukas Vischer: The Year of Jubilee: A Model for the Churches?

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

On May 19th, 1996, Lukas Vischer gave this lecture at a WCC consultation of Christians and Jews at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey near Geneva.

3. Summary

In 1991, the Swiss Confederation celebrated its 700th anniversary. Church circles suggested that the jubilee should be celebrated *along the lines of the scriptural year of jubilee* (Leviticus 25). It seemed easy to connect this project with the *conciliar process for justice, peace and integrity of creation*, proposed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches in 1983. Three recommendations aimed at the remission of debts to Switzerland of the poorest countries, the introduction of an alternative to military service, and the reduction of energy by 2%. Some of the recommendations met with approval. Official church circles, however, offered only half-hearted support for the initiative, and the official state committee took hardly any notice of the proposal.

What do these experiences allow to say about the application of the year of jubilee to the present time? 1) The prescriptions of Lev. 25 were designed to ensure a just distribution and due cultivation of the land in Israel. The injunctions are contained in the framework of the Day of Atonement and the Sabbath tradition. Inherent in all attempts to apply the year of jubilee to the present time is the danger of transforming a programme meant to be realistic legislation into a utopian programme. To be in harmony with the text, we should rather offer concrete solutions and practise them within the bounds of the church. 2) The prescriptions in Leviticus were addressed to the people as a whole. Today, the celebrants of the churches being a minority are not capable of pointing the whole society in a certain direction. 3) Jesus extends the biblical law to a perpetual year of grace. His signs declare that there are limits to suffering and repression. His disciples wait for the dawning of the ultimate kingdom of God which is not a utopia but a kingdom of love that manifests itself among us now, in the midst of persistent injustice and suffering. 4) Behind the injunction in Lev. 25 is the expectation that in sabbatical and jubilee years Israel can heal whatever went awry in the everyday life of the intermediate years and decades. Is this expectation justifiable today? Even if some adjustments may be possible, there can be no full restoration of the order as God foresaw it for his people. - Does all this mean that reference to the year of jubilee necessarily leads us astray? I think, in fact, that any too direct recourse to the idea would create more problems than it would solve. But perhaps it is possible for the World Council of Churches to concentrate its efforts on working out realistic solutions to the question of how the debts of the poor nations can be controlled in the long term.

4. Editor's Remarks

Original version in German, published only on this Website: 1996 Das Jubeljahr als Leitbild für das Zeugnis der Kirchen heute? Kritische Überlegungen im Rückblick nach fünf Jahren.



Hans Ucko
Editor

**The Jubilee
Challenge**
*Utopia or
Possibility ?*

Jewish and
Christian
Insights

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Hans Ucko
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WCC Publications, Geneva

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Cover illustration: Sounding the *shofar*, the ram's horn used for the Jewish new year and day of atonement festivals. In kabbalistic literature it is credited with the power of softening the divine judgment and dispelling the forces of evil — something that it appears to be doing in this 13th-14th century miniature of a German Yom Kippur rite. (Used by permission of the Bibliothèque de l'Alliance Israélite universelle, Paris, MS 24 H, fol. 79 v. Photo: Jean-Loup Charmet.)

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The Year of Jubilee: A Model for the Churches?

Lukas Vischer

In recent years proposals have repeatedly been made to apply the idea and institution of the biblical year of jubilee to our own time. The suggestion has actually been taken up in certain countries. Churches have sought to use the year of jubilee as a framework for their present-day witness. Recently, in Switzerland, for example, church circles proposed that the 700-year anniversary of the Swiss Confederation (1991) should be celebrated in the perspective of the biblical year of jubilee.¹ Another example was the suggestion of a number of Korean churches to declare 1995 a year of jubilee, and to prepare for it jointly by way of a new commitment to justice. In the background here was the hope that this year might bring about the reunion of the two Koreas. Recently it has been proposed that the World Council of Churches might take the basic principle of the year of jubilee as its model for the 50th anniversary of the WCC, and for the assembly to take place in the jubilee year 1998.

How useful are these suggestions? More precisely, how can we meaningfully apply the biblical injunctions about the year of jubilee, as well as the ideas behind them, to the present time? What problems would arise in the process?

In an attempt to find an answer to these questions, I shall first say something about the Swiss celebrations. The experience gained during those celebrations shows that the transposition of the biblical texts is anything but a simple affair. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, an agreement needs to be reached on the basic idea of the jubilee year and its possible application today.

The Swiss “jubilee year 1991”

The jubilee of the Swiss Confederation

In 1991, the Swiss Confederation celebrated its 700th anniversary. Of course the choice of 1291 as the year in which Switzerland came into being can be questioned. The event that took place in that year concerned only a small part of present-day Switzerland. On August 1, 1291, the inner Swiss territories concluded a protective pact against Austria. Initially, the majority of the cantons making up Switzerland today were not included in this pact. We might say, to be sure, that present-day Switzerland gradually grew out of this original alliance. But we should not forget in this respect that the other areas of Switzerland have centuries of their own history behind them. Fundamentally, therefore, they can identify with the year 1291 only indirectly. The common history of present-day Switzerland began only in later centuries, at the latest with the Napoleonic occupation of the country, and fully with the establishment of the federal confederation in 1848. Nevertheless, there were various reasons for choosing 1291. One reason for making the choice was the confessional division of the country. Events that have occurred in the centuries after the Reformation are all inevitably emotionally loaded. The legends gathered around 1291, especially the William Tell narrative (also immortalized by Friedrich Schiller), were harmless in this respect. On this basis, the young confederation could pass over the conflicts of the past and celebrate its unity.

If the establishment of the confederation had been taken as the occasion for a celebration, the problems of present-day Switzerland would have been much more directly tackled. The opportunity for this will come in 1998, when 150 years will have passed since the foundation of modern Switzerland. It would be an important task to use this occasion as an opportunity to trace once again the history of the confederation, together with its achievements and its failures, and to consider the future in common.

In 1991, however, 1291 was chosen as a jubilee year, and a celebration was held. The population, however, was not in a festive mood. An initial project for a really major festival met with resistance in the cantons in question and was rejected by a plebiscite. Why was this? The reason was certainly the general uncertainty of the Swiss about their own country. What does it mean to be Swiss in the modern

world? What is there really to celebrate about the many aspects of present-day Swiss society that have been brought into question?

Church circles then suggested that the jubilee year should be celebrated “along the lines of the scriptural year of jubilee”. The “conciliar process of reciprocal commitment (covenant) for justice, peace and integrity of creation” proposed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches met with a widespread response in Switzerland. This was obviously something to connect with. Perhaps the jubilee year could be the opportunity for renewal as called for by the conciliar process? Perhaps it was possible to make a number of adjustments to the course the country was taking, and to make a small contribution to justice, peace and the integrity of creation? These questions were behind the 1991 jubilee year project.

The conception of the jubilee year

Two biblical themes were to the fore: God’s covenant and the year of jubilee as described in Leviticus 25. We in Switzerland thought it was important that we should not merely confine ourselves to a number of recommendations to the government and to parliament but should emphasize the need for an inner renewal of church and nation. The idea of the covenant, which was in constant use in conciliar process circles, seemed appropriate to this design. God has entered into covenant with his people and has maintained it throughout an eventful history. The people have abandoned God, and if they want to live under God’s promise, they must return to it.

The meaning of the covenant concept, however, is not so unequivocal as it seems at first. Whereas the biblical terms *berit* and *diathēkē* emphasize God’s initiative and subordinate the human response to it, the terms used in Western languages have another implication. “Foedus”, “Bund”, “covenant”, “alliance” and so on, refer rather to an agreement between equally entitled partners. In general usage, the terms “covenant” and “alliance”, for instance, evoke the idea of a human initiative. We conclude an alliance in order to serve God. This notion was also dominant in the conciliar process. We thought it important to query this “activist” interpretation of the covenant. We believed that a real basis for church discourse and action could emerge only if the divine initiative was stressed. We were talking not so much about concluding an alliance but much more about recalling God’s covenant anew and responding to God’s commitment to us.

The second idea that played a major part in our deliberations was the jubilee year. We based a series of recommendations to contemporary Switzerland on the injunctions in Leviticus 25. They also corresponded to the three key terms "justice", "peace" and "integrity of creation". It is quite evident that the prescriptions of the year of jubilee are not very far removed from this threefold guideline. In the declaration we published for the Swiss jubilee year we said:

In order to recall in common the covenant that God entered into with humanity, the churches in the ecumenical movement have allied themselves in the cause of justice, peace and preservation of creation. God wants to liberate us for life. We maintain this out of trust in Jesus Christ, who said at the beginning of his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to *proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*" We propose that Switzerland should celebrate the year 1991 as a year of jubilee in the biblical sense.

The practical recommendations

Three recommendations were made. First, on the occasion of the jubilee, the government should write off the poorest countries' debts to Switzerland. A petition to this end was organized under the slogan "Development requires debt remission." By the jubilee year, 250,000 signatures had been collected in support. In the same year the request was made that the new poverty in Switzerland should be ranked more explicitly among topics requiring political decisions.

Second, government and parliament were urged to introduce an alternative to military service. At that time, conscientious objectors were still punishable and had to serve prison terms.

Finally, we recommended that the consumption of energy in Switzerland should be "subject to an annual reduction of 2 percent". In this connection, we stated that we were prepared to adopt a "simple life-style". A "self-commitment" campaign stressed our seriousness in this respect.

In addition to these practical recommendations, we urged that the jubilee year be a year of reflection, reconciliation and conversion.

The effects of "jubilee year 1991"

The effects of the jubilee year were twofold. The proposal was accepted favourably by many people. It led to a widely ramified

discussion. Some of the recommendations met with general approval. Government and parliament accepted the idea of the petition and made available the sum of 700 million Swiss francs for debt clearance and related aims. Since 1991 a solution to the problem of conscientious objection has also emerged.

Otherwise, the effects of the church initiative remained limited. In all honesty, it must be admitted that the two above-mentioned steps forward (especially the introduction of an alternative to military service) on the part of the government and parliament would probably have been taken even without the voice of the churches. Our movement was no more than an intensification of developments that were in the air anyway.

One difficulty was in the twofold attitude of the churches themselves. The group responsible for launching the jubilee year did indeed have the express approval of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation. It soon became evident, however, that official church circles, especially the Swiss bishops' conference, offered only half-hearted support for the initiative. The spirit that had governed the European Ecumenical Assembly at Pentecost 1989 had disappeared relatively quickly. The Roman Catholic Church had distanced itself from the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation proposed and conducted by the World Council of Churches. The church leaders in Switzerland began to realize that the concept of the jubilee year meant more than a number of individual recommendations, and that it basically committed them to consequences that went much further than their judgment of the present-day situation led them to think were feasible.

The official state committee for the organization of the jubilee year took hardly any notice of the proposal. Apart from the provision of the 700 million Swiss francs, therefore, the official celebrations as a whole remained extremely conventional. Although there were constant claims that the festivities were not to celebrate the status quo, the profound malaise of the Swiss population scarcely changed. Shortly afterwards the major debates on joining the European Economic Area began. The question of how our society might overcome the major challenges of industrial development — new technologies, competitiveness, unemployment — had the first call on people's attention. The major issues of social responsibility, both at home and internationally, faded increasingly into the background.

Open questions

What do the experiences gained allow us to say about the application of the year of jubilee to the present time? I suggest four considerations for discussion.

Tangible social-ethical solutions or symbolic actions?

The prescriptions of Leviticus 25 are a piece of Jewish legislation. Even if we do not know the extent to which they were ever applied in reality, their intention is clear. They were designed to ensure a just distribution and due cultivation of the land in Israel. The injunctions are contained in a "liturgical" framework. Both the Day of Atonement and especially the sabbath tradition were decisive in this respect. They gave additional weight to the prescriptions. Just distribution and due cultivation of the land were a part of Jewish spirituality.

Is it at all possible to transfer these regulations to our own time? Are the requisite preconditions available? The agricultural economy of Israel has been replaced by a complex industrial society. The liturgical context that gave additional authority to the ordinances has vanished, even in the churches. Today the prescriptions of Leviticus 25 are scarcely more than a text that we may recall in Bible studies but that actually no longer has any roots in the practice of the churches, still less in that of society.

In the publications on the Swiss jubilee year, therefore, we said that something "corresponding" to the scriptural year of jubilee ought to happen in Switzerland. But that would mean that the churches would have to propose solutions today whereby the land throughout the world could be justly distributed and cultivated, and at the same time would have to indicate how these solutions might possibly be put into practice.

In reality, however, something different occurred. A "year of jubilee" was proclaimed. The idea was that a particular effort at a specific time could make possible a new beginning in our world. The jubilee year was now no longer a solution but had become an appeal to people of good will to take at least one step in the right direction. The objectives of the year of jubilee were understood as a utopian social programme that would indeed point the way, but in all probability would not be implemented. The desiderata formulated as "corresponding" to those of the year of jubilee were symbolic steps in the

direction of utopian goals but fundamentally so modest that society as a whole was not really affected by them.

Inherent in all attempts to apply the jubilee year to the present time is the danger of transforming a programme that was meant to be realistic legislation into a comprehensive utopian programme. Whatever value utopias may have, such a transformation does not do justice to the biblical text. To be in harmony with the text, we would have to attempt to offer concrete solutions and to practise them within the bounds of the church.

The celebrants of the year of jubilee

The prescriptions in Leviticus were addressed to the people as a whole. It was a matter of ensuring that the people returned to the sources and restored justice in their midst. If the churches proclaim a jubilee year today, its celebrants are a minority set over against society as a whole. Today, the churches are not capable of pointing society in a certain direction. They can remind political authorities of God's commandments. They can stand up for the restoration of justice. But everything depends on the kind of response they get from the public. Possibly their voice will be heard. But in many cases they will be no more than a protest movement with no real influence on the course of things. The difference is not unimportant. The society that is trying to rediscover its due order under God's promise has been replaced by a minority seeking to influence society.

What was legislation in ancient Israel can be no more than an appeal under these altered circumstances.

The acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:19)

Certainly, in trying to apply Leviticus 25 nowadays, sufficient thought has not been devoted to asking how the efforts and institution of the year of jubilee are to be understood after Christ. Christians, however, cannot avoid this question. Between the chapter in Leviticus and our present time stands the New Testament. What part did the year of jubilee play in Jesus' own proclamation? He alludes to it in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry. He quotes the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2) and thus gives the year of jubilee a messianic emphasis. The biblical law is extended to become a comprehensive vision. It is no longer a matter only of the just distribution and sensible use of land. A perpetual year of grace — "the acceptable

year of the Lord” — opens up with the coming of Jesus. God’s justice breaks into this world. The lame walk and the blind see. Signs declare emphatically that there are limits to suffering and to repression.

Accordingly, the year of jubilee is placed in a new context. Jesus’ disciples wait for the dawning of the ultimate kingdom of God. Is it possible to speak in any way of sabbatical and jubilee years after Christ? Surely the community must first proclaim, “in season and out of season”, the coming of the kingdom? Surely every moment must be used to reveal something of God’s inspiring presence? To be sure, the coming of God’s kingdom also finds expression in precise recommendations, and these certainly include the just distribution and due use of the earth. But now the motivation for advances in this direction is to be found in the coming of the kingdom. In respect to every transposition of the idea of the year of jubilee, we must enquire expressly how the proposed solutions relate to the coming of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is not a utopia but the kingdom of love that manifests itself among us now, in the midst of persistent injustice and suffering.

Can things still be put right?

Finally, we are faced with an urgent question in the present situation. Can we still count on the restoration of justice? Behind the injunction in Leviticus 25 is the expectation that in sabbatical and jubilee years Israel can heal whatever went awry in the everyday life of the intermediate years and decades. The people’s sin can be effaced; it is possible to restore the order appropriate to God’s commandment. Is this expectation justifiable today? Or have injustice and destruction prevailed to such a degree that the way back to a wholesome world is already blocked? It could indeed be true that adjustments are possible but that there can be no full restoration of the order as God foresaw it for his people.

It is significant that in our pronouncement on the Swiss jubilee year we said the following: “We have no complete, indeed not even a coherent, programme to offer. We do not know how the future order of society will and must look in detail. But we believe that certain steps have to be taken *whatever the circumstances*.” Many people felt that this “modesty” was unsatisfactory. What do you want, then? we were asked. What alternatives do you propose?

But there were good reasons for our reticence. It was based on the conviction that humanity is now steering a self-destructive course and that the future can open up only if the thrust of this development is stopped. The time for comprehensive social projects is past. Utopian visions of a just world are so far from the lived reality that they have, quite rightly, lost their capacity to inspire. Before all else, it is a matter of avoiding any further irreparable damage.

The big questions are: How can we really bring about any kind of reversal in this self-destructive world? And if it is no longer possible to bring about any such change, what witness should the churches bear? And is the concept of the jubilee year the appropriate way to find an answer to these questions?

What inspiration does the year of jubilee afford nowadays?

Does all this mean that reference to the year of jubilee necessarily leads us astray? Must we conclude that when preparing for its next assembly, the World Council of Churches would do better to avoid any such reference?

I think, in fact, that any too direct recourse to the idea would create more problems than it would solve. At first sight, the biblical prescriptions seem straightforwardly illuminating and appealing. Accordingly, there is a strong temptation to take them as a motto or, as is sometimes said nowadays, a “source of inspiration”. Yet the experience of the Swiss jubilee year shows that the real meaning of the scriptural text vanishes when it is reduced to the level of a utopian programme.

The text, however, is still relevant. It shows us how the land was justly distributed and used at a particular time. It invites us to do something equivalent today. Is it possible, accordingly, for the World Council of Churches to concentrate its efforts on working out realistic solutions to the problem of how the debts of the poor nations can be controlled in the long term as well? The notion of a cancellation of debts was, relatively speaking, the most successful recommendation of the Swiss jubilee year. But in the end this too was no more than a symbolic gesture. We need an analysis that reviews the whole complex of problems and leads to tangible proposals for solutions.

An analysis of this kind must be as accommodating as possible and include the greatest possible number of partners in the discussion. It should neither disappear in a sea of generalizations nor try to address

every aspect of present-day injustice but must focus on the single problem of indebtedness. In terms of this one question, it must try to show how to set limits to debt and to the impoverishment and destruction it produces.

NOTE

- ¹ Schweizerisches Ökumenisches Komitee für Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und die Bewahrung der Schöpfung, *Zum Leben befreien: Das Jubiläumsjahr als Chance* (Liberation for life: The possibilities of the jubilee year), Bern, 1990.