

NMB church Leaders for “Good Values, Ethics and Clean Living” – 2020

‘They worship in our churches’

What does God’s Word teach us about government and business practice?

Deuteronomy 25:16 (NIV2)

For the LORD your God detests anyone... anyone who deals dishonestly.

The starting point – the recommendation of Psalm 11 to think about God

I begin by reiterating the quote at the end of the last article, entitled, ‘What can the righteous do?’ There are in fact many answers offered in the Bible:

When the foundations collapse (due to corruption) you can flit (like Elijah), seek to rebuild them (like the Deuteronomist), preach (like Amos), tell stories to build faith (like Genesis), promise a better future (like Isaiah), or feel overwhelmed (like the author of Ecclesiastes). Or you can just stand tall and look for God to act, like the author of Psalm 11, knowing that Yahweh’s acts do not lie in some distant future, but now¹.

We will be reflecting on most of these actions, but begin by discussing the ‘looking up to God in his holy temple.’ The motivation for all moral intervention by God’s people has to be preceded by the faith and conviction that only come by reflecting on God. Much to the distaste of our action orientated, pragmatic society, we first must systematically study what God has to say in his word (the bible) so that the principles we learn can be applied to everyday life. This is by no means all we should do, but it must be the beginning.

This approach is taken in the light of the intended outcome of this article, namely, to communicate this message to church leaders to empower them to preach with conviction to motivate church members to act with conviction. Before we try to encourage them to actively combat corruption we must first look up to God and ask what does His word teach us about about government and business practice? Amazingly the bible teaches us that they were not invented by human beings but by God to facilitate our social development so that we may be able to fulfill his command to be fruitful and multiply!

Government and business facilitate God’s plan for the world

In the bible we read of the overflowing goodness of the Father, the unselfish emptying of the Son and the of the giving of the Spirit, without measure, revealing the love, abundance, self-giving and generosity of the Triune God in whose image men and women are made. He created the universe to express this, his character, as indicated by Romans 1:20, (CEV) *‘God’s eternal power and character cannot be seen. But from the beginning of creation, God has shown what these are like by all he has made.’* Then, more particularly, He created men and women, in His image, so that they might demonstrate His wonderful character in the

¹ Goldingay, J., 2008, *Psalms*, 3 vols., Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, p.194.

world as they filled it, subdued it and ruled over it so that all would be able to experience His unselfish, self-giving and generosity.

This might be called God's 'service delivery program' for humankind. The entry of sin has made this impossible to attain, but it is still his plan 'A' for human society. God still desires humankind to abound, enjoy his goodness, and develop socially, intellectually, technologically, and culturally. To facilitate this revelation and process He established two institutions, which are built into the character of humankind - government and business. The developmental state striving to effect service delivery by improving the economy and infrastructure, educate its citizens, and care for their health and uplift their standard of living, is thus close to his heart. So also, strangely contrary to much Christian tradition is business, which in the effort to get and gain has advanced humankind from the stone-age to the Information Technology age, and contributed to providing a standard of living for millions that even the wealthiest in the past would never have dreamed of.

The role of government in facilitating God's plan

We look at the institution of government first of all. God established governments as we read in Rom 13:1 (NET), *'There is no authority except by God's appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God'*. The ability to govern is built into the DNA of human beings because they are created in the image of a God who governs the Universe. As we have seen, men and women, made in God's image, were created by God to rule and be ruled in order to produce an abundance that will sustain them and enable them to be fruitful and multiply as Genesis 1:28 says: *'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'*. Yet to be productive this ability had to be socially structured, empowered to maintain the law and order necessary for social development and then institutionalized in society so that it would be passed on from generation to generation with recognizable authority based upon God's ethic of service.

Thus, He instituted government because good governance that seeks the welfare of the governed and enforces the rule of law is necessary for the development He desires. It might be said that government was instituted to enable the fulfilling of God's service delivery program for humankind. Therefore, it was expected that the rulers and kings of Israel would be devoted not only to enforcing justice but also to the welfare of their subjects, especially the poorest and weakest members of society. The bible reveals that no metaphor for kingship was more entrenched in the popular vocabulary of ancient Israel than that of a shepherd with his flock. As such they were expected, as Ezekiel 34 makes clear, to feed the hungry to put the welfare of their subjects first by guarding and protecting the vulnerable, strengthening the weak and healing the sick (these latter two terms presumably refer to caring for the poor and righting the wrongs they suffered). This led the Israelites to pray, *'Give the king your justice, O God... (so that he may deliver) the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper... has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight'* (Ps 72:12–14). By upholding the divine principles of law and justice, rulers promoted and enabled peace and prosperity for all their subjects.

Thus leaders, rulers and their officials, who help them govern, must not be like the sons of Samuel who when they ruled *'made money dishonestly, accepted bribes, and perverted*

justice' (1Sam 8:3 NET). They are not to govern for self-enrichment but to serve. The desire for self-enrichment among those who govern distorts the fundamental God-given purpose of government in all societies and is denounced many times over in the Bible. They are not only to do this by punishing wrongdoing and attending to the needs of the poor but by setting themselves an example of good administration. Perhaps you will forgive me for illustrating this with the old Indian proverb, 'Monkey see, monkey do.' (Not that the ruled are monkeys, far from it!). This is vital because kings, rulers, government officials, and all leaders, establish the moral tone of a people and nation. Even if priests and prophets speak out against corruption the king has the ultimate influence, and any change had to come through him, since he alone had the power to dismiss corrupt officials and punish them,

The role of business and commerce in facilitating God's plan

The second, admittedly a more diffuse, institution that God instituted to facilitate his plan to develop the world so that humankind would be able to abound and multiply was that of business, trade and commerce. In Genesis 1:28, 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion...' carries this implication. Indeed, the word 'subdue' has the idea that humankind is to make the earth's resources beneficial for themselves. Trade, business and commerce played and play an essential role in fulfilling the command found in Genesis 1:28.

It is nowhere explicitly stated in the Bible, but when we look at men and women we see that the desire to trade appears to be an essential part of the human character. This propensity to trade appears to have been implanted in them from the beginning, and thus must be related to humankind being made in the image of God. As Adam Smith, the founding father of economic theory, commented 230 years ago, humankind has an intrinsic 'propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another.' This propensity includes discovery, finding out and exploring what is new, networking, sharing, swapping, production, possession and maybe delight in bargaining. Thus, trade and exchange have played a crucial developmental role in history, being perhaps the most important external stimuli to change and development in art, science and Technology. In fact, archaeologists have found evidence of long-distance trade dating back to prehistoric times in the Stone Age, perhaps as much as 40,000 years ago with the beginning of the Mesolithic period (Middle Stone age).

Even though the good results of this desire to trade have been corrupted by sin, resulting in greed, exploitation, cheating and corruption, it still has an overall beneficial result. Trade and commerce are regulated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy in a way that indicates that they were considered necessary and beneficial to society. Solomon's trade and fleet of trading ships are seemingly mentioned with approval in 2 Chronicles 9. Then Tyre's (an ancient city in Lebanon) prosperity seems to be applauded and to have brought benefit to many (see Ezekiel 28:11-15). Indeed, it seems that business is so essential for the welfare of all, that the Bible testifies that God needs to regulate it, as well as government. It is clear that society cannot develop and realise its God-given potential without the trust that allows trade, commerce and business to flourish. He therefore detests dishonest businessmen who bribe and cheat, and thus destroy social trust, in order to make unfair profit.

In many references the bible commands fair-trading and rigid ethical commercial practices. The reason, from a human perspective, is that only if there are honest and faithful practices

in business, as well as in government, will the fairly distributed abundance and development that God desires be produced. This is so important that the bible states that, '*God detests anyone... anyone who deals dishonestly*' (Deuteronomy 25:13-16).

God's detestation of all forms of corruption in government and business

These wrongs are even more detestable because they corrupt God's revelation of what He is like to us. What sort of God is revealed to the poor when a corrupt, cheating, bribe taking 'power-elite' have everything and they have very little? In contrast the scriptures reveal a God of justice. He is impartial, which means he treats everyone equally and cannot be bribed. 'For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes' (Deut. 10:17 NIV2). Thus, He detests all corruption and bribery along with all unethical practices, as these offend his character.

He particularly detests corruption because He is a God of love and compassion who cares for the poor, vulnerable and defenseless in human society. This means that not only does he have an absolute detestation of corruption, because it ethically wrong, but also because it results in the exploitation, oppression and impoverishment of society and obstructs the service delivery everyone needs, and the poor in particular, corruption defeats God's plan for the world and His purpose for humankind. In fact, the issue of the governance of human affairs is *a matter of life and death* to God Almighty. Hence, some of the strongest societal condemnations in Scripture are reserved for kings, governments, leaders and officials who are partial, unfair, and extract bribes in order to enrich themselves.

Thus, a truly fearsome warning is given to them in Ezek 22:24-31:

"Son of man, say to the land (the nation of Judah), 'You are a land that has not been cleansed or rained on in the day of wrath.' There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her... Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain... The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice... So, I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."

We must ask ourselves, "Could this apply to the land of South Africa?"

Daniel and Nehemiah as biblical examples of rulers and officials who combatted corruption

Thus, God's desire is that his people, especially influential leaders, take a stand against corruption. Such were Daniel and Nehemiah, who contributed to effective service delivery in the Persian Empire and Jerusalem respectively, through their stand against corruption.

Daniel is held up as an example of a righteous ruler, being a top government administrator, in whom even his enemies could find no evidence of negligence or corruption (Daniel 6:4, 5). It is interesting to note that Persia (present day Iran) was the first empire to introduce the

exchange of goods for coinage so as to become a monetary economy. The resulting increased trade across the empire necessitated that transportation and travel became more efficient and effective. Thousands of miles of roads were built and even a postal service was introduced to link up this enormous domain. Along with the construction and improvement of existing roads, a public works system was introduced and a standardised weights and measures system was also implemented.

It is quite possible that in his role Daniel would have had to handle the allocation of tenders for the Persian emperor that resulted in, what may be described as, the first historically recorded service delivery program. His incorruptibility would have earned him enemies because it restricted opportunities for contractors and lower officials to enrich themselves by overcharging and/or collusion on tenders and/or embezzlement of the finances. He, however, refused 'to look the other way' or accept bribes. His enemies decided to 'set him up' to get rid of him, and succeeded in having him thrown into the lion's den. Many whistle-blowers and those who have opposed corruption have been metaphorically 'thrown to the lions' in the recent history of our country. Yet God so values honest, brave men who have faith in Him that he saved him. As a result, the tables were turned and his corrupt accusers were thrown to the lions, who made a good meal of them! Where are the rulers in South Africa who are prepared to protect those who combat corruption and punish those who are corrupt? If God has to do it, it may become very unpleasant for some of those in high places.

One hundred years later Nehemiah (Neh. 5:14–15) is recorded as proclaiming that his administration (in the 'Jerusalem municipality') was incorruptible and that he had not enriched himself at the expense of the Jerusalem taxpayers, as previous governors had done. He was there for the benefit of those he governed by improving the security needed for trade, commerce and social interaction to flourish, by rebuilding the wall, which may be regarded as a form of service delivery. The question arises, 'Why did he have to insist on his honesty?' Probably because those he upset by his honesty accused him of the corruption they practiced themselves, a tactic the corrupt have used to this day!

The role of the third institution

In conclusion, the Bible indicates that corruption flourishes when it is not punished by the ruling authority, is practiced with the connivance of the religious community (Ezekiel 22:26), and no one is prepared to stand openly against it as Daniel and Nehemiah did. Moreover, it would seem that it proliferates whenever there is a lack of transparency and openness in government and business. This emphasises once more the relevance for today of Psalms 11 and 82, which speak of the morally corrupt as shooting from, 'the shadows at the upright in heart' (Ps 11:2) and walking about 'in darkness' (Ps 82:5) referring to the way they detest transparency.

Must we just suffer then? The answer is a resounding 'no!' Because of the failure of institutions of government and business God raised up a third institution. He added the church so that His good plans for development would also be achieved through the preaching of the gospel, which transforms lives, and creates an alternative society reflecting God's love. Likewise the church today (as the priesthood of all believers) must be prepared to warn all kings and rulers, in any nation of how God detests their corruption, irrespective of the respect required by Ubuntu or any other tradition towards rulers, in order give them a

