Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice

Murray W. Dempster*

Recognition is expanding in Pentecostal circles that the church's mission and ministry of evangelism should be augmented to include a commitment to social justice. "The Gospel cannot be proclaimed fully," observes Manoel de Mello, "without denouncing injustices committed by the powerful." In this challenging statement, the Pentecostal founder of "Brazil for Christ" verbalizes the conviction of a growing number of Pentecostal leaders: the church's evangelism efforts need to be authenticated by a ministry of social action that puts into practice what it preaches.

Although recognition of the need for the church's social involvement has increased significantly among Pentecostals over the past two decades, very little serious theological work has been devoted to the development of a pentecostal social ethic. As a consequence, current engagement in social ministry among Pentecostals seems to depend more on the individual conscience of influential leaders and the time-bound exigencies of politics and culture than on broadly-shared theological agreements concerning the nature of the church and its moral mission in society. The pentecostal community is still sorely in need of a social ethic to inspire, direct and validate its ministry of promoting and instituting social justice.

In constructing a pentecostal social ethic, church leaders will find it necessary to look to the Old Testament moral tradition to discover the biblical injunction for God's people to pursue social justice. Social justice is not an explicitly articulated ethical category within New Testament moral theology, although it is certainly implied in the New Testament as we shall see in the concluding reflections of the article. But it is the Old Testament that presents social justice as the will of God for society and mandates the people of God to pursue it.

The purpose of this article is to identify five ethical principles from the Old Testament moral tradition that can instigate and nurture social concern in the pentecostal community. These five basic features of Old Testament social ethics are its theocentric foundation, its concept of the Imago Dei, its portrayal of the covenant people, its prophetic tradition of social criticism, and its Jubilee teachings. After developing these Old Testament ethical principles and suggesting their relevance for pentecostal social concern, the article concludes with a hermeneutical argument.


A dominant feature in the biblical portrayal of Jewish life is the theocentric orientation of the Jewish people. God was at the center of all Jewish life—its social, political and economic practices and institutions. Their social life modeled their view of who God was and what God did. This theocentric orientation is crucial to understand the basis of Old Testament social ethics. "The character, will, word and work of God," according to Professor Walter C. Kaiser, "supply the determining principle and central organizing tenet of Old Testament ethics." Thus, from its theocentric orientation, a fundamental moral axiom came to dominate Israel's life: "What God is in his character, and what God wills in his revelation defines what is right."

To determine what is morally good, therefore, requires the prior theological determination of who God is. For God and the good are inextricably linked together. Every theological statement describing God's character and action simultaneously is an ethical imperative prescribing who God's people ought to be and what they ought to do. As God is, so God's people should be. As God acts, so God's people ought to act. This principle of the imitation of God, according to T. B. Maston, "is the nearest thing we have in biblical ethics to one unifying theme or motif."

Against this theocentric foundation which links theology, ethics, and social life together, the unfolding of the revelation of God in the history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament takes on crucial significance. As Israel came to a more complete understanding of God's character through the mighty acts of God's self-disclosure, their conceptions of the moral foundations of their political, economic and social life expanded and deepened. R. E. O. White, in his study of Biblical Ethics, provides an overview of Israel's progressive revelation of God and the corresponding ethical implications which Israel perceived in God's revelation for its social life.

White shows that in its early history, Israel viewed Yahweh as a deity who related to them within the context of its tribal life. While the Canaanites had Baal as their God, the Israelites had Yahweh Sabboath—Yahweh of the Hosts—as their defender (1 Kings 18:17-40). On the basis of this early view of God's character as Israel's vindicator, Israel developed a corresponding ethical view to structure its nomadic life grounded in moral instincts such as