

## Law Sub-Track: What is Good for Society?

Does God's Word tell us anything about how society as a whole should function, or is God only interested in what happens within the church? In seeking to love our neighbours, we will want to promote what is good for them - primarily in telling them the gospel, and secondarily in pointing to the pattern of life that God has established for humanity. We will explore together what that pattern looks like and what its implications are for our engagement with legal and public policy issues. The aim of the session will be to help us better understand what kinds of policies we should be advocating in the public square.

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### Introduction

#### A. Where are we?

The societies in which we live fall into a particular place in God's purposes for humanity throughout history. We need to understand where we "fit" to know what God's intentions are for society, in this present age.

1. Goodness of creation, humanity made in God's image → ordered flourishing (Gen 1-2)
2. Fall – distortion, but not destruction (Gen 3:14-4:4; 4:15-16; 9:1-7 etc)
3. Israel and the Law – particular laws revealing God's creation principles, mitigating effects of the fall (Deut 4:1-8, Matt 19:8)

4. Christ's new covenant - the people of God, living in the present but belonging to the future (1 Pet 2:9-11, 16-17; 2 Pet 3:11-13)

5. Christ's return: redemption = creation restored (Rev 21:22-22:5)

→Understanding the present time = looking back and looking forward

**B. Basics of the public good** – true humanism, true freedom (Deut 5:1 – 6:5)

1. Worship, conscience and speech

2. Rest and liberty

3. Family

4. Life

5. Property

6. Justice

### C. Case studies

#### 1. Role of government – God’s servant for our good, to uphold justice

(Exodus 18: 13-27)

Deut 17:14-20 – the limits (c.f. Gen 1:26-30; 2:15-17)

Judges 21:25 “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit”

1 Sam 8:10-22 – the warning

The reality – the kings (e.g. 2 Ch 32:24-26)

Daniel 2:21, 36-44; 3:12-18; 4:27-37; 5:18-23; 6:26; 7:14, 23-27; 8:24-26

The King – John 19:9-16

The charge to the church:

- Acts 5:29

- Rom 13:1-7

- 1 Tim 2:1-7

- 1 Peter 3:5-6

Rev 21:24-26; 22:3

→ government’s role is limited, but crucial

#### 2. Immigration and Asylum – “aliens and strangers”

Context:

Gen 2:8, 15; 3:8, 23-24; 4:12-6 – from home to exile

Gen 6:7-8; 7:7 - Noah the refugee

Gen 11:8 – dispersal of all nations

Israel:

Gen 12:1-2, 12:10-13:1; 15:1-7; 46:3-4 – the migrant who blesses the nations

Ex 3:7-12; 12:38; 23:9 – Israel the refugee

Lev 25:23; 1 Chron 29:14-16 – strangers in God’s house

Presumption of inclusion, e.g. Ex 12:38, 48, 2 Chron 2:17 (and different categories of “stranger”)

Loving the stranger in your midst:

- Ex 22:21, 23:9, Deut 10:19 – you know how it feels
- Lev 19:10-18; 33-34 (Ezekiel 22:29) – economic safety net, laws against oppression
- Lev 16:29; Deut 5:14-15 – rest – but also participation
- Deut 24:17-21, 26:12 – 13 – recognition of vulnerability (N.B. no land allocation)

Recognising distinctions:

- Deut 14:21 – food laws
- Deut 15:3, 23:20 – seven-year debt repayments, interest
- Deut 17:15 – not to be king

Balanced by requirements for “belonging”:

- Ex 12:48-49 - Passover
- Lev 17:8 etc, 18:26, 20:2, Numbers 15:16 etc – observing the law/protection of life
- Lev 25:35, 47-55 – opportunity and equality
- Deut 16:11-14 – joining in the rejoicing

And equality before the law:

- Numbers 15:14-30 – sacrifices and sin offerings
- Deut 1:16 – impartiality in justice
- Deut 24:14 – equal treatment as workers
- Num 35:15 – refuge from the avenger of blood

Ruth “the Moabitess”

Is 56:6-7 – foreigners welcome in the Lord’s “house of prayer for all nations”

Ezra 9:10-12; Neh 10:28-32 – the warning

Jesus’ implementation and radical extension of the Law

Matt 1:1-6, 13-15 – Jesus’ forebears and refugee status

Luke 10:25-37; John 4 – Jesus and Samaritans

Matt 25:34-40 – welcoming the stranger

God's purposes for all nations:

Acts 2: 1-21; 17:26 – 31 – Babel reversed, God's ordaining of national identities

Eph 2:11-22 – God's unified household

1 Pet 2:9-12 – God's nation – exiles among the nations, honouring God among the Gentiles

Heb 11:13-16 – seeking a homeland

Rev 5:9; 7:9 – the nations find home, in the garden city

→ careful balancing of protections for both the alien/stranger and the nation to which they belong

3. Practical examples

#### **D. What does this mean for the present?**

1. God sustains and preserves (Gen 2:10-14, 4:17-22; Ps 145, Matt 5:44-45, Acts 14:16-17, 17:22-29)

2. Applying God's word to each culture

3. The effects of God's (good) law (Matt 15:18-19; Rom 1:18; 2:15-16; 3:19-20; 1 Tim 1:8)

4. Reflecting God's character of grace and truth: being salt and light (Matt 5:13-16, 38-48; 1 Pet 2:12-25)

5. Opposition (Matt 5:2-12, 1 Pet:2:13 – 3:17)

## **Conclusion**

We need wisdom from God, and the guidance of his Spirit, in working out what in practice will be good for each society. Our ultimate goal is not the “transformation of society” as an end in itself, but the promotion of God’s glory by reflecting his character, pointing forward to that day when his good creation is perfectly restored.

### Resources:

Burnside, Jonathan *God, Justice and Society* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants* (Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, 2001)  
Chester, Tim *Good News to the Poor; sharing the gospel through social involvement* (IVP, 2004)  
Grudem, Wayne *Politics According to the Bible* (Zondervan, 2010)  
Keller, Tim *Generous Justice* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2010)  
McIlroy, David *A Biblical View of Law and Justice* (Paternoster, 2004)  
O’Donovan, Oliver *Resurrection and Moral Order: an outline for evangelical ethics* (Eerdmans, 1994) and *The Desire of the Nations: rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1999)  
Schluter, Michael *Roots: Biblical Norm or Cultural Anachronism?* (Cambridge Papers, Jubilee Centre December 1995)

Schluter, Michael and Ashcroft, John *Jubilee Manifesto* (IVP, 2005)

Spencer, Nick *Asylum and Immigration* (Paternoster, 2004)

Wright, Christopher *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2013)