

COMMENTARY on Luke 4:18-19 (Is. 61:1-3)

According to McAfee Brown,

Isaiah's and Luke's versions are virtually identical. The theme of Isaiah's passage is *reversal*, celebrating the fact that things are getting turned around and offering hope to those who had no reason to hope. Individuals who mourn will be given *a garland* [symbol of rejoicing] instead of ashes [symbol of sadness], the oil of *gladness* instead of mourning, the mantle of *praise* instead of a faint spirit' (Is. 61:1-3). "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall rise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (Is. 61:4). "This verse simply highlights the prominence of the theme of social reversal in the portions Jesus quotes: the poor, whose lives have been one succession after another of bad news, will get good news; the captives, whose lives have consisted of being bound, will be released; the blind, who have been denied sight, will see again; and the oppressed, whose lives have been nothing but enslavement, will be freed. Everything is reversed."¹

According to Kraybill,

Good News to the Poor means releasing, letting go, forgiving, restoring which are the images of messianic hope. This is what the Messiah, the Anointed One, is all about. Using Is. 61:1-2, first, Jesus reveals he is the Messiah. Second, his role is to bring liberating news to the poor, the blind, the slaves, and the oppressed. Third, this is the proclamation of God's favorable year. Then Jesus concludes with dynamite: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' The messianic announcement is alive today in your presence. You are the witness to it. I am much more than Joseph's little boy, I am the Messiah!."²

In Jesus' inaugural speech, he upholds the widow of Zarephath, who accepted the prophet Elijah, and also the story of healing a Gentile leper, Naaman, a Syrian. The crowd could not handle his elevation of a Gentile woman and a sick foreigner as a good example of faith and accepting a prophet of the LORD.³

The Poor

We may do injustice to the Luke's intent if we limit the poor and other categories in the passage (woman, sick, Gentiles) only to a metaphorical interpretation and let such meaning take precedence over the physical and socioeconomic sense. For Luke, the poor is first of all are persons without economic resources. They are the ones given good news and hope, and they receive special attention in Luke's evangelistic program."⁴

In their original O. T. setting, Is. 61:1-2a unquestionably referred to physical oppression and captivity. In Luke 4:18-19, it is clear that Jesus is referring to material and physical problems. The mission of the Incarnate One included freeing the oppressed and healing the blind who are singled out as recipients of Jesus' gospel.⁵

Jubilee

¹ McAfee Brown, *News*, 93-94.

² Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 85.

³ Maynard-Reid, *Evangelism*, 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69

⁵ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 47.

Jesus' statement in Luke ends with a promised announcement: "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." As in Is. 61, this phrase is intended to assure the disappointed that God has not forgotten them, but would come to their aid by ushering in the year of the LORD's favor, "Jubilee," which is a time of salvation characterized by good news for the poor, blind, oppressed, and captives.

This text does not repeat explicitly the four cardinal elements in the Sabbath and Jubilee texts—*cancellation of debts, freeing of slaves, return to family lands, and rest for the land and for workers*. They do however point directly to the essence of the Jubilee mandates in that they promise to overcome oppression and suffering. It goes beyond the specific mandates of the earlier texts and proclaims a comprehensive response to oppression and poverty as God's intention. This text thus serves as a summary of the various Isaiah traditions which speak concretely to the various oppressions, sufferings, and illness of God's people with promises of liberation, hope, and healing.⁶

The literal meaning of Jubilee was certainly good news in Nazareth. The poor could say good-bye to their debts. Those driven into slavery because of debts could now come home. Peasants forced to sell land would see it returned once again to their family. No question about it, this was *very good news!* But there is more. Jesus wasn't making another Jubilee proclamation. This Jubilee message appears in Is. 29:18, 35:5 and 61:1. They are age-old descriptions in Eastern culture for the time of *salvation*, where tears, sorrow, and grief will end. Jesus added lepers and the dead to the list of the saved. Both are missing from Isaiah passages. Listeners in the synagogue would have heard him saying, "The Messiah is here! Salvation is dawning. The Kingdom of God is near. God's presence has broken in among you now."⁷ "The Jubilee had arrived: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He was the good news to the poor; it would be an age in which love would triumph over greed, light over darkness, freedom over enslavement, and hope over despair. Jesus was announcing the birth of a just and peaceful world."⁸

Therefore, the Jubilee prevented those greedy barons from buying up more and more land at the expense of the poor. Jubilee is bringing the outsiders inside so that they are back home for good. Therefore, Jesus decided to act as the liberator who is on the side of the oppressed to free them. Jubilee also lifts up a new image of the oppressed, of great worth, the privileged focus of God's own care. Finally it gives us a new image of discipleship, entering into the way of Jesus with the poor. It carries a new answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Neither passive victim nor dominating LORD, Jesus is the liberating Word of God in solidarity with the poor.⁹

The year of the LORD's favor in the text focuses on liberation as God's primary intention for God's people. Liberation here cannot be spiritualized into a pietistic or religious matter. It is connected with socio-economic oppression, which in ancient times was primarily manifest in the distribution of the land, debt servicing, and labor relations. Throughout its history Israel allowed huge gap between the rich and poor through the practice of usury, the accumulation of land, and slavery. Therefore, the Sabbath Day, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee provided divine mandates to resist and reverse these gaps so that all God's people might enjoy fullness of life.¹⁰ That is the good news!

⁶ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 16.

⁷ Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 93.

⁸ Maynard-Reid, *Evangelism*, 69-71.

⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1990), 93.

¹⁰ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 17.

The important thing is the *nature* of the Jubilee, is a program for radical social change. No one who takes the Jubilee seriously can accuse Jesus of preaching only a “spiritual,” individualistic message. The Jubilee emphasis means that Jesus’ mission is “a visible socio-political-economic restructuring of relations among the people of God.” The message is shatteringly direct: the good news is for the poor and oppressed; it is liberation from bondage, whether the bondage is political, economic, social or all three. Debts will be canceled, slavery will be annulled, and vast land holdings will be broken up. Everything will be restructured.¹¹

McAfee Brown raises questions and answers: Who is most threatened by a reversal of the way things are? Those who have made it under existing arrangement and therefore *like* the way things are. Who is most threatened if prisoners are freed? The jailers, who will not only lose their job but may even lose their lives if the released inmates are sufficiently resentful of their treatment during incarceration. Who is most threatened if oppressed are liberated? The oppressors who have built their own prosperity out of the exploitation of others. It is the *beneficiaries* of an Economic system, a political structure, or a religious establishment who are most threatened by change, most perturbed by talk of ‘reversal,’ most inclined to silence such talk and exterminate such speakers. This is true whether they are deliberately sought to oppress or are merely the compliant recipients of the benefits of oppressive actions by others.¹²

Matt. 11:2-11 Jesus proves that he is the Messiah by what he is doing

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah^{*} was doing, he sent word by his^{*} disciples³ and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’⁴ Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see:⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^{*} are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. ⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone^{*} dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? ^{*} Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” ¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

¹¹ McAfee Brown, *News*, 96.

¹² McAfee Brown, *News*, 97.