



# F.A.C.S. REPORT

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## What's Inside:

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## THE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF GRACE

*by Ian Hodge, Ph.D.*

**T**HERE IS HOPE among Christians that they can make a difference in the world around them. For Christians in Australia, this means hoping that Australian society or parts of it, can be made better in some way.

There is also hope among Christians of life eternal, based on the fact that God has graciously dealt with their sin (i.e. disobedience) in Christ and therefore made a way of salvation available. This is an act of grace (i.e. unmerited favour) on God's part and thus forms the foundation of the Christian Gospel.

Some difficulties arise, however, when grace is attempted to be used in ways that are unwarranted, and especially when grace is mixed with political and economic theory in the wrong way.

The purpose and drive for some of the change in the nation, therefore, is often questionable. Unfortunately, well-meaning people with little understanding of what the Bible teaches use religious words and phrases as an excuse for offering the very opposite of

what the Bible teaches. This is what happens with the word "grace."

The argument for a "grace" version of either politics or economics is curious because it is an attempt to introduce the theological notion of unmerited favour into the topics. Clearly the idea of unmerited favour as it is applied to economics by some groups is a denial of the words of our Lord who said, "if anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (II Thess. 3:10). There is no evidence in Scripture that either our economics or our politics should be based on grace, unmerited favour. But there is more than ample evidence that both our economics and our politics should be founded upon righteousness and holiness. These are defined in both the Old and New Testaments as the Ten Commandments. The New Testament, however, adds a new dimension to the Commandments by adding the word *love* to the list of things defined by the Commandments (I John 5:3).

Eliminating the Commandments out of the issues of modern politics or

economics is the necessary step to allow definitions to become man-made rather than God-made. Thus, calls for an economics of "grace", where the wealth of the nation is to be calculated and distributed equally among the residents of the nation, is simply another form of socialism - this time disguised as Christianity. Socialism, however, goes against the idea of private ownership of property which is established by the commandment forbidding theft. You cannot steal what belongs to everybody.

Even if there were an economics of grace described by the writer using the phrase, it is difficult to imagine that this requires the equal distribution of the nation's wealth to all. The Bible speaks of a real place, of real eternal punishment for some people, those who are not saved by the grace of God. God's grace, therefore, cannot be construed as being universal for everyone, otherwise everyone is saved and hell is a place where no-one ends up. God's grace is not universal, it is selective. So if an economics of grace is to be biblical, it too should be

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selective as to who should receive a portion of the nation's wealth.

In another instance, a prominent clergyman has been calling for increased tax reform because he believes the present tax system allows the rich to avoid and evade paying taxes. This is certainly true, as evidenced in a recent, well-publicised court case. In this instance, however, the legal challenges were not intended to escape paying taxes where they were due. They did no more than question through the courts the legality of certain taxes being levied. In this high profile case, the taxpayer won.

To call for tax change because some people have the capital and the will to fight in the courts to keep their wealth, however, is to argue for a legal system based either on covetousness or envy — unless it can be shown that God Himself demands these taxes to be paid to the government. There is a glib and silent *assumption* in many Christian leaders that citizens are to pay *whatever* taxes the politicians decide they should pay. They forget that Zaccheus, the tax collector, returned fourfold the money he had stolen. A legal tax collector, Zaccheus was most probably a tax farmer; that is, he paid

the government a certain amount of money for the rights to collect that much plus extra for himself in a particular geographical location. In short, Zaccheus guaranteed the government a certain amount of income in return for the rights to collect the taxes plus profit in a defined geographical region.

But neither Zaccheus nor our modern clergymen can ever decide where the point of theft occurs in taxation until they determine where God Himself draws that line. This requires just a little Bible study, but it is not a difficult or impossible question to answer. The alternative? Allow the civil authorities to determine the point of theft, thereby allowing them to the determiners of what is right and wrong. This makes the political order god. No amount of explaining can get around one clear point in the Bible: we are to have *no other gods* — including the civil authorities.

Therefore, in order to respond to the issue of taxation it first of all requires that we determine the true bounds of political action. It also requires us to determine *how much* tax the political order is *morally and legally* entitled to in order to carry out these functions assigned to it by God. Once these are determined — and only once they are determined — can the genuine debate about godly government begin and come to a God-honouring conclusion.

## Tithing and Taxation

**I**N A RECENT ARTICLE the clergyman mentioned above argued that "taxation is an extension of the Hebrew notion of stewardship or tithing that assumes moral responsibility for one another." The accuracy of this statement is open to question and disagreement.

*First*, what is meant by the idea that we are "morally responsible for one another"? For the Bible also speaks about a moral responsibility for ourselves (e.g. "if anyone will not work, neither let him eat") and a moral

responsibility for family members.<sup>1</sup> Nor does the Bible require us to be our brother's keeper. This was the assumption of the murderer, Cain, who claimed he didn't know where his brother was because he was not his brother's keeper. God ignored his appeal because it was an attempt by the murderer to use an argument he knew was true to justify why he did not have to respond to the question. Cain was not his brother's keeper, but he was his brother's brother, with all the attendant moral duties due to a member of the family. But the same duties do not attend to those outside the family, otherwise how could Scripture urge us to provide for ourselves and families over and above providing for others in the community.

*Second*, tithing was a proportional amount based on *increase*, and not on the capital of the individual or family. The proposed GST for Australia, while a flat 10% on most purchases, does not eliminate completely other taxes where the rich pay a higher amount than the poor. The purpose of the GST is twofold: to broaden the tax base — i.e. make *everyone*, including low income earners pay the tax — and increase the revenue to the government coffers. The writer recognises it is an attempt to increase tax so that "26% of the population dependent upon the government" will not miss out on their payment.<sup>2</sup>

*Third*, the tithe was not to be collected by imposing a 10% tax on buyers when they purchased goods. This may have made it easier to collect the tithes, but it wasn't the way God said it should be done. People had a *responsibility* to pay their tithes, but there is no evidence that because people failed to do this the politicians were to step in and solve the problem by enforcing payment. This is a prerogative God has reserved for Himself, as witness the discussion in Mal. 3:8ff.

*Fourth*, while Israelites had a responsibility to pay tithes, there is no evidence that these were to be paid to the political state. The Levites in Scripture were not the equivalent of the

1. "But if any one does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8, NASB).
2. This number seems too low. Both government workers and welfare recipients depend on the taxes collected, and combined these two groups make up far more than 26% of the population.

modern politicians. There are three possible uses for the tithe recorded in Scripture. Tithes were paid to the Levites (Num. 18:20-24), they could be used by the taxpayer himself to celebrate God's goodness and bountiful blessings to the tither and his family (Deut. 12:1-19), or once every three years they could be paid directly to the poor and needy (Deut. 14: 28, 29).

It is a vast stretch of Biblical teaching, not warranted by any method of reasonable exegesis, that can argue that tithing and modern taxation are in any way related, that contemporary taxation systems replace tithing, or that the notion of "moral responsibility for one another" requires the government to tax some people at higher rates in order to redistribute wealth. This is the argument of socialists and demagogues, not Biblical scholars.

Our clergyman claims the introduction of tax changes is needed to keep paying the 26% of the population who are dependent upon taxes as their primary income. We would ask: where does it say in the Bible that people other than the Levites and the poor and needy should live off the tithing system (cf. Deut. 14:29)? Only the Levites had this privilege, and if it is to be argued that modern politicians are the new Levitical order, then we must also demand that the modern Levites ensure that only the worship of Yahweh is condoned and practised by them. Note also that "the alien" — the foreigner — in the town had access to the tithe. These biblical examples cannot be equated with family allowances, old-age pensions, and the myriad of other social welfare programs that are part of our modern taxation system.<sup>3</sup>

There is some biblical evidence that the social welfare recipient should live off a tithe paid every third year, but this amounts to less than four percent per annum of the tither's *increase*. If modern taxation is to take its example from tithing, then let it begin by first of all taxing increase, not capital. This is a long, long way from a 10%

GST — and attempts to justify the GST or other progressive taxes on biblical grounds are impossible.

## Cheap Grace

IT IS A TRAGEDY that phrases such as "the politics of grace" or as used by other writers, "the economics of grace" have become part of the debate. Phrases such as this are an attempt to claim religious truth for the argument presented when, in fact, the arguments themselves cannot be supported by any evidence in Scripture. But that is why the phrase is used, rather than a display of Biblical evidence for the position stated. The truth of arguments is not substantiated by taking religious phrases out of context and making them our slogans for political or economic theory.

It is a further sad commentary on our age that the clergymen of the land sit in silence when one of their colleagues shows such poor biblical scholarship. Where are the clergymen who will defend the right to private property explicit and implicit in the commandment, "you shall not steal"? Where are the clergymen who will defend the Triune God as the only law-maker, which is meant by the command "you shall have no other gods before me"? Where are the clergymen who will recognise the politics and the economics of envy and suggest to those who espouse such ideas that these do not conform to the moral requirements as laid down by God Almighty?

We need *alternatives*, and the choices offered to us in the politics of economics or the politics of grace are not alternatives but more of the very great moral problem that surrounds our age. This is the unwillingness of individuals to submit themselves *totally* to the God of Scripture. They enthrone the political order as the greater distributor of economic justice, either by encouraging more ungodly taxation,

or by suggesting that the political order should hold a monopoly on the creation of money and distribute it freely to all citizens so that they can live without working. Both notions make the political order more than the Bible defines it. And both cheapen and demean the meaning of grace as explained in the Bible.

In Scripture, the political order is to dispense justice — God's justice. Nowhere in the Bible do we find the equal distribution of wealth a standard of God's justice. What we do find are inequalities of wealth — and these are created by God. While it is also true that those who have been given much, from them much will be required, there is no evidence that those who don't have the wealth should create a political order to enforce a redistribution of wealth.<sup>4</sup> God has ordained that work — and more of it, together with the godly use of wealth — is the way He has planned the distribution of wealth throughout the peoples of the world.

There is no evidence in the Bible to support the idea that 26% of the population — or even two percent — should live off the hard-earned wealth of others in the community that has been confiscated by the political order in order to keep them alive. Just as there is no evidence that a tax of any kind on commercial transactions is the way God has ordained for the political order to raise its finances. And if the political order is raising finances by any other means than those ordained by God, we may safely say that the political order is being its own god and defining for itself what its actions might be.

Nor is there any evidence in Scripture that the political order can simply manufacture money and distribute it by any means without at the same time destroying the value of money. By mixing half-truths with real problems, the notions offered in the name of "grace" are not biblical notions at all but the theories of engi-

3. Not to mention the thousands and thousands of government employees who are dependent upon taxation for their jobs. These workers cannot be equated with the tithing recipients mentioned in the Bible. Those government employees that are not in legitimate (i.e. God-ordained) areas of work are parasites who live off the wealth of those who work in the community. Like many parasites, they tend to want more and more until their host is consumed and, in this case, the nation is bankrupted.
4. This is why, in earlier times, welfare recipients were not permitted to vote, since it was recognised that welfare recipients who vote are effectively using the ballot box to put their hands in their neighbour's pocket. Theft, in any form, was recognised, and social systems were designed to make it difficult for theft to occur — even "legal" theft.

neers and demagogues who do not accept that the words of St Paul ("if anyone will not work, neither let him eat") are also the words of God Himself. If they do not accept this proposition there can be no appeal to Scripture as the arbiter in the debate, since they have already rejected the sixty-six books of the Bible as being not only the words of the author but the inspired Word of Almighty God.

## Grace and the Ten Commandments

**T**HERE IS, HOWEVER, another perspective on the politics and economics of grace: that those who were once rebellious against the God who made them now become sons and heirs with Christ — by grace through faith. This has been done in spite of their rebellion and rejection of the Triune God of scripture and His standards of right living. But in so making them sons or daughters — but all heirs — He fills them with His Holy Spirit so that now the law of God becomes a delight as their standard of right living. This law of God, as expressed in the Ten Commandments,

begins with the idea that there shall be no other gods. That means, amongst other things, no other law makers, since God — and therefore His Word, the Bible — is the true source of all law.

Thus, a politics of grace and an economics of grace that does not attempt to tell us what are the God-ordained boundaries of activity for the political state, are not grace at all. Rather, they are a politics or an economics of ungodliness and unrighteousness — for both views continue to make man the determiner of right action and right living. Both enthrone the political order as the creator of justice and righteousness in the land when these are things that can *only* be achieved by implementing the commandments of God in all spheres of life.

There are no political or economic solutions outside of the Ten Commandments and all that these contain. To argue otherwise is to create another set of commandments as the key to living and therefore another god as the source of those commandments. Therefore we must choose: we can have political and economic "grace" as offered to us in the theories of men, or

we can choose the true grace of Scripture that frees us from bondage to sin and opens our eyes to the silly ideas of men who do not really intend to follow the Commandments of God. Sin itself is defined in the Bible as disobeying the commandments of God (I John 3:4). So the choice we must make is between the definition of grace as given in the Bible or the definitions of grace given by clergymen who try to equate taxation with tithing, and others who think the equal distribution of the nation's wealth to all somehow equates with God's grace.

These fallacious arguments thus misuse the notion of grace, confuse its real meaning, while at the same time use grace in a most ungracious manner to justify ideas that have nothing at all to do with God's wonderful grace to miserable sinners. True grace we need, for this is our salvation. But the notions of grace as offered in the ideas of the politics or economics of grace cannot save us or achieve their political or economic ends. As such, the notions of a politics or economics of grace that misrepresents or omits the Commandments of God are not grace but an exercise in futility.

### ATTENTION SYDNEY-SIDERS

A breakfast has been organised by one of our subscribers for those on the FACS mailing list and other interested people.

**Venue:** The home of Graeme and Anne Mitchell, 1 Ursula St, Winston Hills. Tel: (02) 9624 6421.

**Date:** Saturday, April 24, 1999. The breakfast will commence at 8:00 am and finish at 10:am. A \$5 charge to cover the cost of breakfast is payable.

Please **RSVP by April 19**, by phoning (02) 9624 6421.

Further information can be obtained from either Graeme or Anne Mitchell on the number above, or from Rev Bob Burcher, (02) 4739 0671