

2nd Opinion: The Bible ties freedom to debt relief; we should too

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PHILADELPHIA (RNS)—The Liberty Bell contains an unforgettable inscription: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land and unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

This stirring quotation from Leviticus in the Old Testament succinctly expresses the hopes and promises of America. It is a timeless message not only to us, but also to liberty-loving people all around the world.

People from every state and every nation—nearly 2 million each year—travel to Philadelphia to see the Liberty Bell with their own eyes.



Yet few of the Liberty Bell’s visitors know the biblical verse excerpted on the bell’s shoulder also contains God’s instructions for a “jubilee,” in which he commanded the Israelites to free their slaves and return property to its original owner every 50 years.

From Abraham Lincoln’s immortal Emancipation Proclamation to our ongoing, if imperfect, progress on civil rights, Americans proudly celebrate freedom from bondage. In a sense, we hope our rhetorical and actual

commitments to liberty can atone for building our nation upon the institution of slavery.

But returning property to its original owner? The idea strikes us as anti-capitalist if not downright un-American. As a theological concept, many Americans of faith prefer to heap “jubilee” upon the pile of biblical commands we would prefer to qualify, explain away or ignore altogether.

Yet our reinvigorated leadership in the global movement for debt cancellation would show rich countries and poor ones we take our founding principles and international leadership seriously.

Ugly downside of globalization

While the spread of market capitalism and democratic governance has lifted untold millions out of poverty, globalization and international markets came with an ugly downside in much of the developing world.

Many poor nations owe debts to rich nations and international financial institutions they never can repay. Futile attempts to service their debts often force debtor nations to spend scantily, if at all, on education, health care and other services countries with advanced industrial economies instinctively provide.

This downward spiral leads to cronyism, corruption and even violence. It significantly retards the progress of both development and democratization.

The overwhelming burden of crushing debt consigns millions of people in dozens of states to lives of poverty and suffering.

It need not be so.

The world possesses enough money to forgive the debts poor countries owe rich ones without the rich feeling much pain at all. All that is missing is

political will.

Market forces deaf to justice

In a world still filled with suffering, it can be frustrating to witness political processes and market forces that seem deaf to injustice.

But sometimes the faith factor makes a difference in politics.

In 2000, Irish rock star Bono tirelessly walked the halls of Congress, drumming up support for debt cancellation. A committed Christian, Bono appealed to members' faith. He won the support of key congressmen, including then-Rep. John Kasich, now governor of Ohio and a Republican presidential candidate. That fall, Congress appropriated \$435 million for debt cancellation.

While Greece's debt gets the most attention, structural problems in the international financial system create perilous debt scenarios around the globe, particularly in Africa.

Puerto Rico is \$72 billion in debt. Its status as a U.S. commonwealth makes it ineligible for bankruptcy protection and from emergency financing from the International Monetary Fund. Puerto Rico's religious leaders, including the archbishop of San Juan, have called for federal intervention to restructure the island's debt.

A Jubilee Year of Mercy

The United Nations is urging a more standardized, impartial and transparent global bankruptcy system. Pope Francis endorsed a global bankruptcy process on his recent trip to Latin America. The pope has called for a Jubilee Year of Mercy to begin Dec. 8. As he inspires all people of goodwill to reflect on and embody mercy, this holy year should be a breakthrough for the debt-relief movement.

In the United States, mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders have tried for years to make debt relief a political priority. But when faith movements are broad and diverse, they become difficult to ignore.

The moment is ripe to bring conservative evangelicals into the ecumenical coalition for debt relief, since they have more international connections and keener instincts for justice than they did a generation ago.

Debt relief would improve prospects for political and economic flourishing for millions of people in dozens of countries. It is literally a life-and-death issue.

Americans want to share our best ideals. We want the message of the Liberty Bell to resonate globally. Surely there is room in our lives of comfort and abundance to make the promise of jubilee ring true for all the world's people.

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