

God's People and the Seduction of Empire

By Graham Turner

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This book is a compelling read with useful material for group work. With the world experiencing change and upheavals on an unprecedented scale, it is a timely call to attention for Christians both lay and professional, as well as those working in commerce and industry. Instead of seeing the decline of church congregations in the developed world as the death throes of Christendom, Turner sees this as just one of the many casualties of empire-building in a social climate where individual identity, personal ambition and self-serving concentration of power hold sway with an ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots. "Empires come in many shapes, sizes, guises and styles. Our contemporary empires are sometimes more difficult to detect than the imperial nation states of the past. Yet today's empires influence and control so many aspects of our lives without us realising, unless we stop to think about it. While not every nation, corporation or organisational structure acts like an empire, most tend to. It is as if groups of people with any degree of power have a default setting they cannot help but move towards. This in time becomes a major flaw, if we allow it.... It does not have to be this way, but sadly we are seduced into following the way of the big, the better, the impressive, the successful and the powerful. It is a hard temptation to resist" (p.33).

In contrast he selects the biblical concepts of the commandments (Sinai), diversity (Babel), respite from work (Sabbath) and a chance to recover (Jubilee) as being God's way for humankind. He outlines the counter-intuitive values of God's kingdom described by Jesus, where love is power, loss is gain, the suffering can see themselves as blessed, outcasts become insiders and failure can be the springboard to new life. In particular he sees the liminal state where all seems lost as the place where true prophecy will arise. This is sure hope, no

matter how confusing and threatening the times may be.

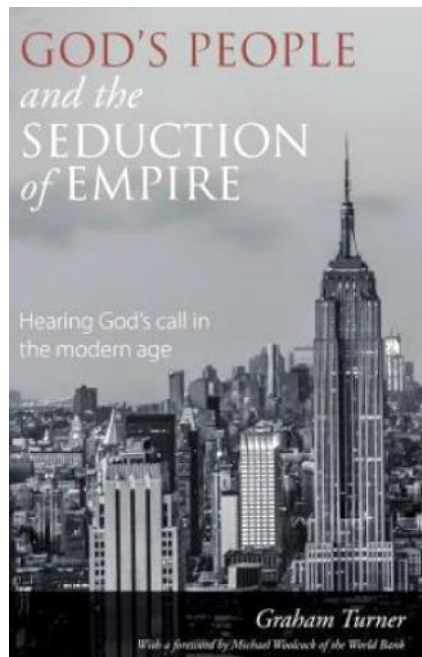
Making his points about the ten commandments received in Sinai, God's new way after oppressive exploitation in Egypt, Turner takes the case of the rich young man in Mark's Gospel. He points out how Jesus omits the early

commandments that would enable the rich man to earn salvation by pious observance. Jesus simply lists those applying to neighbour: murder, stealing, adultery, false evidence, and then, 'defrauding' (as in Leviticus 19:13) instead of coveting, implying that riches accumulate from defrauding others. In Jesus' answer to go sell everything, redistribute wealth and set the poor free, the system that gave the rich man his privilege is exposed. Today it seems that hardly a week goes by without yet another case of corporate or individual sharp practice being exposed.

Turner sees in the story of the Tower of Babel a fortress mentality of sticking together for safety in numbers, rejecting both diversity and trust in God. A monumental,

'collective ego' is erected on the backs of the poor as with brick-making slavery in Egypt. This picture of empire-building by concentrating power and wealth in one place opposes God's purposes of outreach and diversity. The industrial exploitation of workers making bricks in India and textiles in Bangladesh are cited as examples. But similar woes such as the quest to build the tallest skyscraper and the most powerful weapons are aided and abetted by designers, industrialists and financiers.

Busyness is seen as a disease of empire, where our lives are crammed with an extent of activity that has become a mark of importance and significance, even a virtue. This 'fast' approach has a tendency to make people controlling, hurried, superficial and impatient – with deteriorating diet and health so often the outcome – at the expense of colleagues, family and themselves. "We




need contemplation and silence today probably more than at any other time in our history, yet Sabbath rest is more elusive than ever” (p.73).

The Jubilee principle is seen in the cancellation of debt, liberation of slaves and captives, allowing fields to lie fallow and redistribution of land or property that has been accumulated. The case is cited of an independent banker in Iowa who held mortgages on several farms, banker and farmer belonging to the same church. During a farming crisis the banker decided that as the farmers were his neighbours, rather than foreclose on them he would extend the loans with a holiday on interest, thus unwittingly practising Jubilee. What a contrast with the punitive conditions imposed by corporate bankers on struggling companies in times of crisis!

It was in the desert of Sinai that God’s people found new direction, in exile in Babylon that God’s ways were rediscovered, and under the dominance of empires that great prophetic writings arose. It is in these critical times where all seems lost that new hope arises and we should

expect the same today, when the church has been marginalised by the empires of secularism, if only we will listen to God and stop trying to recreate the past empires of Christendom.

By following God’s way and working together in the solidarity of fellowship to resist the Seduction of Empire, God’s people can find wholeness, freedom and fulfilment, despite the cost in worldly terms. This freedom lies in a space of tension between the secular structures of the civilised world and the values of the Kingdom. “God is not against large companies or organisations.... God is against self-serving systems or groupings of people that seek to lead others deeper into enslavement, exploitation and domination. God’s passion is strongly anti-imperial because of the tremendous suffering it produces. God’s story is about leading people out of enslavement into freedom with him, with each other and in harmony with all creation. It is only in this we can find the foundation for our wealth, security and well-being” (p.31). All this is presented in a thoroughly readable and thought-provoking narrative. 



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