

It's All About Economics

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My time in Haiti last April got me thinking more deeply about the relationship between the gospel and economics. Most of Haiti's problems are economic. True also in many other countries.

At times it appears that economics rules the world. Much of the news, and much of our lives, are taken up with economic concerns. This is especially true today, with the emergence of a really global interdependent economy. Rising fuel costs touch all our lives indirectly, if not directly. The mortgage crisis in the United States has shaken financial markets worldwide.

Economics is a biblical concern. In the Old Testament, the Jubilee laws required basic economic justice. Jesus also talked much about economics. Many of his parables highlight economic issues. Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25). We are to trust God for the needs of life. And yet questions about food and clothing—"what to eat, what to wear?"—are basic economic issues we face every day.

That's true of nearly everyone in the world, regardless of culture or religion. We are economic beings. God made us that way. We live in economic relations with each other and with the earth, which provides most of our food and clothing.

Biblical Economics

The gospel, in fact, is *all about economics*—not just in a monetary sense, but in a deeper sense. In fact, economics is a biblical idea and concept. Today when we think of economics we think of money and budgets, but the Bible gives a broader and more profound picture of economics.

The Apostle Paul uses the term "economy" several times in his writings. The Greek term is *oikonomia* and is the source of the words "economy" and "ecology" in English and related languages. The root word is *oikos*, which means household. Literally, *oikonomia* means household management. In the Roman Empire of Paul's day the term was also used more broadly, for example to mean the management of a city. From this our modern sense of economy derives. ("Ecumenical," referring to the whole inhabited world, is also related.)

Paul speaks of "the economy of God," for example in Colossians 1:25. In English, modern versions generally translate *oikonomia* as "commission," "plan," or "administration; the older King James Version usually translates it as "dispensation." The fundamental meaning is God's overall purposeful plan.

What is that plan? Ephesians 1:10 states it most concisely: "to bring all things in heaven

and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” Paul says this is God’s “economy” (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time.

God does indeed have an overall plan of salvation for this world, and (by definition) it includes all economic realities. The kingdom of God touches every area of life, including economics. And so Paul says, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

As Christians, we need to ask about the broader implications of the gospel for economic life in our own societies and globally. Since so much human suffering, in Haiti and elsewhere, has to do with economics, we should ask: What is the gospel answer? Since prosperous nations are tempted to live a materialistic life and forget God, we should ask: What does the gospel say about economics? (There is, of course, a literature on this; here I summarize my own views.)

Three Key Economic Principles

For guidance on economic questions, we look to biblical teachings on the kingdom of God. The Bible teaches principles of economic life that apply to each person, to the church, and to society generally.

At the broader level of society, the gospel of Jesus and the ethics of the God’s reign help us discern three broad economic principles that apply both locally and globally.

First, every society needs *viable basic economic structures that are grounded in sound economic and ethical principles*. Free exchange of goods and services, the freedom to produce and sell food or goods at a fair price, and fundamental honesty and integrity are basic in any culture and are taught in Scripture, either explicitly or implicitly. Dishonesty, deception, and corruption undermine healthy economic activity. Political and economic corruption is one of the most malignant diseases undermining economies worldwide. A sound economy requires not only economic opportunity but also integrity.

Second, every society requires *ethical economic development that benefits the whole society and protects the environment*. In the last decade, a number of countries have seen strong economic growth. Among the larger nations, this is true especially of Brazil, Russia, China, and India—the so-called BRIC nations.

But economic growth by itself is not enough to produce a healthy and just society—as the above examples clearly show. The great strength of capitalism is that it increases wealth and opportunity; its great weakness is that, due to human greed and self-centeredness, it tends to concentrate that wealth in the hands of the few and make poor people even poorer. A healthy and just society requires a sense of public responsibility; a sense of stewardship of wealth for the benefit of the whole.

Just as importantly, it requires a recognition of human interdependence with the physical environment. Environmental costs have to be factored into economic considerations. And the goal everywhere must be sustainable economic development in

which the earth is safeguarded and replenished, allowed to flourish. (Government should play a key role here.)

One of the saddest sights I saw in Haiti was mile after mile of tree stumps along a major (dilapidated) highway. Trees are cut down for fuel for cooking (or to sell for fuel), because people are desperate. But in the long run, this only makes matters worse, destroying the very environment that must be protected if people and the nation are to become economically self-sufficient. Healthy economies require both social solidarity and ecological responsibility.

Third, every society needs the *infusion of Christian values and virtues so that people are not subverted by materialism and self-centeredness*. Since we used to serve in Brazil, I am pleased to read of the economic growth there and especially that the gap between rich and poor is being reduced. Thanks to economic growth and enlightened government policies, significant numbers of people are rising from poverty into the middle class. That's good, but from a Christian standpoint, it's not enough. Economic success carries its own dangers—especially materialism and individualism.

What is the answer to materialism, individualism, and self-centeredness? The biblical answer is accountable Christian community and a vision for the kingdom of God—God's will being done on earth as in heaven. The most just and successful society would be one that is most Christian. By this I mean, not necessarily the one with the most Christian church members, but the one that most fully incarnates the values and virtues Jesus taught, the values and virtues of the kingdom of God.

In the area of economic and ecological ethics, Christians can and should partner with other religious and public-interest groups that promote high ethical standards. But the Christian ethic, and therefore the faithful growth and witness of the church, Christians believe, is essential.

The Role of the Church

The church of Jesus Christ has a crucial and indispensable role to play in this picture. The gospel provides the essential resources for the three economic principles outlined above.

First, *the church can help build viable essential economic structures based on honesty, integrity, and mutual responsibility*. Microenterprise has a key role to play here because it helps the poor (especially women and children) and builds community and shared responsibility. Microenterprise and microfinancing should be a basic part of Christian mission worldwide. Also, Christians of integrity, compassion, and expertise can help build just economic structures and enterprises on a larger scale.

Second, *the church can help build an ethos of mutual civic responsibility—the best interests of all people—as well as ecological stewardship*. Christians need to help people see both that creation care is an essential part of Christian discipleship, and that failure to

consider the earth's welfare is shortsighted economically, as well.

Third, *the church must win people to Christ and form Christians into accountable communities of discipleship* where the subtle temptations of greed, materialism, individualism, and self-centeredness are confronted and overcome. Much of the biblical instruction concerning the church focuses on building accountable, Christ-like community. This is necessary not only for the spiritual wellbeing and integrity of the church, but also for the health of the larger society and economy.

As I write, the earth is facing a global food crisis. This is an economic, not just a humanitarian, crisis. It has to do with just and effective distribution of food at fair prices so that all earth's peoples, and especially the poor, have enough to eat.

This is a Christian concern. Jesus said, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:35). "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). Sound economics based on biblical principles is essential to feeding Jesus' brothers and sisters worldwide.

The gospel is all about economics—about God's provision and our faithful stewardship of all he has given us, both spiritually and physically.

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