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## **The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor**

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### **10. The Bible and Social Justice**

#### **Has Anything Changed in Our Third Millennium?**

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#### **Introduction**

As soon as one steps onto the field of the Bible and social justice, one immediately enters contested terrain. Everything about the task of applying scripture to the complexities of contemporary politics and economic realities is fraught with disagreement and even suspicion. Recent election cycles and public policy debates in the media and the blogosphere witness eloquently how often “people of the book” dispute the implications of that book in addressing current social justice issues. The desire to say something definitive about the justice of contemporary social and economic arrangements seems to meet with uncertainty, even frustration, at every turn.

One possible response, occasionally tempting for me personally in my more irenic moments, is to throw up one’s hands and surrender to the supposedly interminable nature of the incommensurable claims bandied about in the name of the Bible. Perhaps any one person’s interpretation of scripture is just as good as anyone else’s. So, the argument runs, let

us simply abandon all hope of adjudicating rival claims about what can and should be done to alleviate poverty, share resources, redistribute wealth, and hold parties responsible for social ills caused directly or indirectly by their economic behavior. You read the text that way, I may read it this alternate way, but nobody is in a privileged position to judge either of our interpretations. We sink into a stance of resignation; we are fated to witness nothing more promising than a deadlock, an interminable impasse, a theological stalemate. While retaining the modesty required of any responsible attempt to link scripture and ethics, this essay challenges this odd form of resignation.

### **Biblical Hermeneutics Appropriate for Social Ethics Today**

In the interest of taking a stand against this peculiar brand of relativism, I hasten to contend that there are, indeed, right as well as egregiously wrong answers here, just as there surely exist faulty procedures and methodologies for reaching those conclusions. Let me begin by describing briefly two misguided approaches to the use of scripture in social ethics. The first flawed methodology is the familiar one known as proof-texting – abusing Holy Scripture by invoking it in a utilitarian, even cynical way, by selecting isolated passages that conveniently support one’s pet positions. In doing so, the interpreter runs roughshod over the responsible methods of hermeneutics that govern all sincere inquiries into the original intent of the human authors of scripture as well as the *Sitz im Leben* of the texts themselves and the literary genres of scriptures.

If it is no longer necessary to renounce proof-texting, it should also be unnecessary to distance oneself from another faulty hermeneutical method we should all find objectionable. Let me sketch out briefly (over the next three paragraphs) what I mean, because this method seems to have no handy tag such as the label “proof-texting.” The overly simple model of biblical hermeneutics I am thinking of frequently surfaces when would-be social ethicists attempt to rely on scripture for detailed guidance regarding contemporary social relations. Modeled on a logical syllogism or mathematical equation, this simple three-part mechanism proceeds thus. First, scriptural materials are considered as input, as in the raw material at the front end of a mathematical equation. Second, one’s operative hermeneutical principles and commitments supply the function, determining how the raw input is directed and interpreted. The third element, the output, consists of supposedly simple and straightforward ethical conclusions regarding wise public policies, personal obligations or socially responsible courses of action for collective agents and institutions in human society who possess adequate power and resources to accomplish ethical ends. Scripture as input, hermeneutics as function, ethical policy as output. It is all very simple, elegant, and of course completely misguided. The more a theological judgment looks like an algorithm, the less likely it is to respect the relation of human and divine that is at the heart of all genuine religious experience and discernment.

An example illustrates this particular way of misusing scripture. Consider 2 Thessalonians 3:10, loosely translated, “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” Whatever it might have meant in the time of Paul, in the specific context of the community under consideration, this snippet is hardly an adequate basis for constructing a contemporary social policy. It does not take into account any relevant factors (family patterns, work arrangements, cultural contexts) that responsible social welfare policy must consider and take

into account. Yet this bit of scriptural moral exhortation has found its way into recurring public debates on the national scene, notably during the fierce welfare reform debates of the 1990s, and most recently in the 2013 deliberations regarding funding for the food stamp program (now known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP). It has often served as a proof-text and been considered as input into a process of ethical deliberation that invariably spits out certain conclusions about the perils of supposedly overly generous social policies, such as income entitlements.

There are so many ways to construct a case against this egregiously simplistic model, where policy conclusions for our times putatively flow smoothly from biblical materials. First of all, scripture is anything but simple, unitary, and univocal; the canon of Holy Scripture is certainly not a good candidate for the label “input” into anyone’s favored schema of social ethics. Second, any adequate procedure for conducting responsible hermeneutics resembles an art much more than a science. No responsible exegete takes strictly at face value the words of any part of any book of the Bible. To rely on a favorite trope of ethicists, the Bible is not the kind of literature that serves as *revealed morality* – an ethical rulebook that can be employed to judge our actions. Rather, scripture most appropriately serves as *revealed reality* – a wide-ranging portrayal of the place of God in the universe, and humanity’s place in relation to the divine (Gustafson). These sacred writings are intended to form and transform us, indeed to inspire and challenge us for ever greater ethical attainments. One would have to squint rather hard to discover here the stuff of logical syllogisms and mathematical deductions. Thirdly and finally, putative output or conclusions we might discern cannot possibly be judged to be universally and reliably applicable in all social contexts. In other words, there is no straight and indisputable line from scripture-based principles to contemporary policy applications. Even if we can somehow identify a set of ethical principles and moral imperatives within the testimony of scripture, much more work needs to be done to discern the fittingness of particular principles and solutions and concrete policy applications to specific locations, cultures, and historical moments. Above all, the task of applying scripture to social ethics will perennially remain a matter of prudential judgments, again more of an art than a science.

Notice that what I have identified so far in these two faulty hermeneutical methods is a symmetrical set of errors. If proof-texting makes the mistake of asking too little of scripture (namely, simply to play the role of confirming one’s prejudices and prefabricated conclusions), then this latter error asks far too much of scripture (namely, to determine complex solutions to social issues which could not possibly have been anticipated at the time of the origin of these texts). Both these errors ultimately constitute attempts to exploit scripture in order to support a preconceived notion of proper outcomes and policies, often motivated by ideologies that bear no relation to scripture or religious belief in general. The search continues for a proper mode of applying scripture to today’s social justice issues, a way of proceeding that strikes the right balance in our expectations of what appropriate and reliable guidance biblical materials can offer in the third millennium of Christian history.

### **A Reading of Luke-Acts on Material Possessions**

Having thus cleared off some methodological ground, I would like now to venture some firm claims about how scripture can and should shape the moral sensibilities of

Christians regarding social justice. This second part of my essay will set up its third and final section, which considers some recent changes in the shape of the ethical terrain as it pertains to scripture and social ethics. A key assumption behind the remainder of this essay is that scripture remains genuinely *relevant* for the task of doing social ethics today, even if it is not *determinative* in the simplistic ways sketched above. In the course of developing these claims, it may appear that I am taking back some of the force of these introductory comments, where I insist on a certain open-endedness to the meaning of scriptural texts for social ethics. While conscious of running the risk of fostering such an impression, I nevertheless hasten to consult the contents of scripture in order to draw out some normative claims regarding social justice.

Indeed, my intention in this section is to explicate a core of authentic Christian concerns regarding the significance of material possessions, the perils of excessive attachment to riches, the moral imperative associated with the proper dispossession of superfluous wealth, and the proper regard for the needs of the poor and marginalized. It is easy to recognize these concerns as perennial items on any list of genuine elements of Christian social ethics and the faith-based advocacy for social justice. To recognize them is not definitively to settle the details of a socially responsible social policy grounded in scripture, as the foregoing analysis suggests, but to ignore them is surely to overlook weighty and constant concerns of the mainstream of Christian analysis of social relations. Whether we look to patristic sources such as Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, to classic figures of medieval theology such as Thomas Aquinas, to early modern reformers such as Martin Luther and John Wesley, or to the more recent traditions of modern Catholic social teaching and the social justice documents of the World Council of Churches and the social gospel movement that helped inspire them, these themes and imperatives recur constantly in Christian social theology (Troeltsch). This is no mere accident of history. All these figures and traditions looked frequently to scripture in developing a comprehensive picture of the theological significance of material reality, and specifically the proper disposition of wealth and possessions.

It would certainly prove valuable here to consider the influence of the Hebrew Bible, with elements such as the prophetic tradition of social justice advocacy, the consistent denunciation of greed and usury, the call to Jubilee restoration and the importance of proper social order as well as private acts of charity and justice. But to explore these resources in any detail would take this essay much too far afield. Instead, allow me to focus on the New Testament, and specifically the Gospel of Luke. Together with its companion piece, Acts of the Apostles, Luke's gospel contains the greatest abundance of New Testament material offering commentary on the proper attitudes and practices of disciples regarding the disposition of material possessions and the proper use of money. Scripture scholars are fond of pointing out that Luke very frequently comments on the ethics of wealth, but the evangelist does not address this topic in a thoroughly consistent way. Luke Timothy Johnson, for example, slyly states: "The problem we face is that, although Luke consistently talks about possessions, he does not talk about possessions consistently" (233). It is probably wise then, in light of the methodological concerns treated above, not to overreach in a way that posits more of a unitary and univocal message than Luke intends to provide or can reasonably deliver. His gospel, of course, is not intended to serve as a manifesto on this one

aspect of discipleship nor as a delivery system for ethical treatment of this one topic to the exclusion of all else. There surely do remain significant internal tensions in the texts of Luke and Acts. For example, Luke's Jesus arbitrarily allows certain people he encounters to retain much of their wealth (recall the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19) while others (the ill-fated couple Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5) are judged harshly and punished severely (in this case, with death) for withholding from the primitive Christian community even a fraction of their wealth (in this case, the proceeds of the sale of their land holdings).

Be that as it may, Luke's Jesus is at times quite unequivocal about the demands of true discipleship. Luke 14:33, as just one example, sternly identifies the renunciation of possessions as a condition of discipleship. It is hard to put the point more bluntly than Luke's Jesus does here: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Consequently, greed, covetousness and avarice are repeatedly portrayed throughout Luke's account as great evils (see 11:39, 12:15, and 16:14). Christians could spend a lifetime (some probably have!) debating precisely how these commands of Jesus are best interpreted, in ways that are faithful to the intention of Jesus' teaching yet still practical and workable in a given age and set of social circumstances. Are we to understand this stark call for renunciation of possessions as a solemn and absolute obligation, or more realistically as a type of aspirational challenge, one that is meant to be accommodated to specific contexts? If the latter is the case, then the seemingly uncompromising challenge of Jesus to abandon all our material possessions may actually be satisfied through adopting carefully calculated measures and courses of action that display such merits as practical utility and sustainability over the long haul, but fall short of the full and absolute renunciation of all earthly goods, which constitutes the demands of Jesus taken at face value. We can hardly expect every follower of Christ to engage in ultimate acts of kenosis and self-emptying on a routine basis, and allowing the disciple to retain at least some material possessions is one very prominent species of compromise.

History demonstrates that these are by no means idle questions. Just ponder the interminable debates within communities of genuinely renunciation-minded people seeking to discern the most effective courses of action and the best approaches to the holding and disposition of goods. Christian utopian communities, religious orders with strict vows of poverty, even the primitive church community that Luke himself chronicles in the Acts of the Apostles – all struggled mightily to operationalize and institutionalize the challenging words of Jesus with regard to possessions. How difficult it is to balance the sincere intention to follow the counsel of Jesus and at the same time to recognize the necessity of holding and utilizing prudentially sufficient amounts of material goods in order to supply physical and even apostolic needs. Some have been accused at times of excessive scruples (I think of members of the Franciscan religious community who categorically refuse to possess or even store in a convenient place the books they need for their important studies). Others have been accused of laxity and over-accommodation to worldly standards (choose your favorite perceived ecclesiastical financial abuse here: the Bishop with a Mercedes Benz, the religious order with an opulent retreat house in a high-income exurb). But if they call themselves Christians, the one thing that those at both the lax and rigorist ends of the scales will likely do in common is eventually appeal to scripture to justify their chosen policies and courses of action.

In addressing this difficult bundle of questions, what guidance can we glean from the pages of Luke's Gospel? Though producing a comprehensive or even fully satisfying summary lies far beyond the scope of this essay, allow me to offer a brief and selective survey of the materials present in Luke regarding the disposition of material possessions. Susan Calef's essay in this volume cites many of the same materials I take up here, adding the helpful motif of the "economy of salvation"; a fuller treatment has recently appeared in Christopher M. Hays's *Luke's Wealth Ethics*. The guidance found in Luke's gospel comes in the course of the teachings of Jesus, including in parables, as well as in encounters between Jesus and other characters.

In fact, the first significant commentary Luke offers on wealth and possessions comes even before the birth of Jesus. In Mary's Magnificat, Luke 1, we hear echoes of the Old Testament theme of "the great reversal," in which the rhetoric of eschatological justice is employed not only to champion the cause of the oppressed poor but also to denounce the wealthy as somehow culpable and under the threat of harsh judgment. Hostility toward the rich is not, of course, the only stance ever struck in the Hebrew Bible, where affluence is indeed often enough held in high regard and portrayed as a reward for righteousness (Wheeler: 125). But this and subsequent Lukan materials pick up on dominant themes of the Hebrew prophets when they pronounce on the corrupting influence of wealth, particularly when it is paired with the practice of exploitation of the poor and landless. Mary's Magnificat is a strong expression of the insight that, in biblical times as well as ours, injustice is both the cause and result of great concentrations of wealth.

The public ministry of Jesus begins in earnest in Luke 4 with Jesus' reading in the synagogue at Nazareth from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Noteworthy is the mention in this passage of preaching the good news to the poor. Here as elsewhere, the author of the Gospel of Luke clearly works from the assumption that the poor and marginalized will most readily embrace the challenging proclamation of Jesus. Time and again in the teachings of Luke's Jesus and in the stories about Jesus in the third gospel, wealth and possessions emerge as likely barriers to the acceptance of Jesus and the Kingdom he proclaims. The list of blessings and woes in Luke 6, for example, are heavily tilted toward the disinherited and frankly accusatory against the rich. Comparison to the parallel material in Matthew, specifically the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, bears out this characterization. When Jesus missions the Twelve in Luke 9:1-6, and again when he missions the 70 in Luke 10:1-12, the emphasis on traveling light and avoiding luxuries, even those that will guarantee a bare modicum of security for the traveler, is eloquent testimony to an ethic that markedly distrusts wealth and its effects on the mission of apostles. The famous parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 is another place where the value of wealth is relativized. The elite wayfarers who fail to act compassionately are judged harshly, as the narrative speaks eloquently about the proper use of material resources: as presenting an opportunity not for self-satisfaction but for service to others, even those who might belong to groups despised according to ordinary conventions.

Few parables that treat wealth are as direct as the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21. Here Jesus condemns "those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Even though it is hard to know with any precision what alternate courses of action would be morally acceptable for a rich landowner who happened to reap such a

windfall, the parable constitutes a clear word of judgment against the hoarding of wealth. The stunning parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 similarly condemns the tendency of the affluent to overlook the dire needs of the poor, especially when the needy are so close at hand. Equally poignant and even more direct is the story of the inquiry of the rich ruler in Luke 18:18-25, which culminates in the saying, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God."

Luke relates several other parables that provide commentary upon wealth and its proper use. It is hard to overlook the fact that certain of these parables contain considerable ambiguity, even outright confusion. For example, preachers have for centuries furrowed their brows over the convoluted potential meanings of the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1-13. It is easy enough to appeal to the final punch-line of the story, that one cannot serve God and wealth, but it is hard to say how the tale recounted actually issues forth in that conclusion or how it portrays commendable behavior. Similarly, the parable of the talents in Luke 19:11-27 appears to contain some type of message about the use of wealth, but the moral lesson remains obscure.

Notice that we have been observing the various ways that Luke's Jesus heaps praise or blame upon other figures, whether actual interlocutors or fictional characters in parables, depending upon how these figures relate to wealth and how generous they are to others with their material possessions. The last major pericope dealing in some detail with wealth and possessions is the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10. The story fits this Lukan pattern of attribution of praise or blame to some extent, but because our judgment about this brief narrative is complicated by the matter of the rich tax collector's conversion, we need to consider a "before" and an "after" picture. The revised policy for the use of wealth adopted by Zacchaeus is clearly laudable but remains a half measure, consisting of a resolution that constitutes something far short of a complete renunciation of his wealth. Perhaps the moral adequacy of this man's response to the call of Jesus is fated to remain in the eye of the beholder.

A fuller account of Lukan materials regarding wealth would take up in some detail the narrative of the primitive Christian community in Acts of the Apostles. To continue the pattern noted above, there are several vivid stories in Acts in which praise and blame are attributed to particular figures, depending upon their disposition of their property. The programmatic passages in Acts for present purposes are, of course, the summary descriptions of the early church's sharing of all goods in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. Complex questions immediately arise regarding what normative weight this portrayal of an absolute and exceptionless community sharing of goods as practiced by the primitive church holds for later generations of Christians. Tracing the evolving understanding of these passages opens up the entire history of Christian social ethics; it forms a leitmotif for important historical works such as Ernst Troeltsch's classic *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. For some Christians in some eras, the strict socialism of the primitive church was perceived as irrelevant – an idealism that is impractical and even undesirable for any number of reasons. At other times, the practices described in Acts 2 and 4 were perceived as communicating solemn duties regarding the holding and disposition of private property. Voices in the latter category might accuse those in the former category of truncating the practical implications of faith, or of the type of bad faith that gives in to the consistent

temptation to spiritualize away the sharp demands of gospel teachings on wealth. Those in the former category might accuse those in the latter category of a naiveté or romantic sentimentalism that is divorced from the exigencies of economic life. When the two categories of Christians share a common time and stage, it is often evident that “where you sit” determines “where you stand” on these matters.

Clearly, our survey of these Lukan materials does not yield an orderly package of injunctions or policy recommendations for large-scale societies, or even much indisputable ethical guidance for individuals and small groups within society. Nevertheless, even this partial selection of materials suggests certain directions and priorities when the Christian considers the ethics of wealth. If the New Testament’s treatment of wealth falls short of establishing a clear set of core Christian teachings prescribing economic practices, the words of Jesus at least proscribe some behaviors – they at least tell us something about what is out of bounds for Christians. The purpose of material goods is to serve the needs of all people, not to be hoarded by a few successful elites. Superfluous wealth should be directed to those who cannot provide for themselves, for the dire needs of the poorest take precedence over the wants of the affluent. The sincere follower of Jesus will practice compassion by offering alms to the poor whenever possible, and looking for every opportunity to divest of one’s goods for the benefit of others. Otherwise, wealth feeds the temptation to become greedy and exploitative, the very attitudes Jesus consistently denounced.

### **Challenges Arising in the Third Millennium**

The third section of this paper rightly begins with an observation about the difficulty of reconciling these challenging words of Jesus with the Western market society that has developed over subsequent centuries – both the economic institutions of modern life and the social philosophy that undergirds and desperately seeks to justify them. The teachings of Luke’s Jesus are far removed from the ethos of contemporary capitalist societies, even where these societies sport a supposedly Christian patina. While it is probably impossible to reach broad agreement on precisely what practices, attitudes, and institutions *can* be reconciled with the material we find in Luke’s gospel, it seems safe to say that the status quo in our commercialized, hyper-individualistic society is sharply at variance with the wealth ethics of Luke-Acts. If it is clear that contemporary “business as usual” does not match up to authentically Christian views of the proper use of wealth, the next questions to ask concern how we can influence the public conversation about what authentic Christianity calls contemporary disciples to do in the economic sphere. How can we avoid getting further away from a genuine Christian vision of things economic?

The mischievous subtitle I chose for this essay (“The Bible and Social Justice: Has Anything Changed in our Third Millennium?”) affords a clue to my own perspective on this important question. Obviously, the third millennium has not witnessed a change in the actual texts that comprise Holy Scripture. The words on the page are the same, but our ability to read and interpret them in socially responsible ways may have shifted, and not for the better. This is not to say that at some earlier point in the Christian era we enjoyed absolute clarity regarding a biblically inspired approach to the economy. I suspect that no group of Christians ever achieved or articulated an economic ethic that was perfectly in tune with the Gospel. But it strikes me that a truly significant contribution to the conundrum of the Bible



and economic justice would be to identify, at the very least, some things to avoid – certain beliefs, practices, and tendencies that are prominent in our contemporary discourse on economics that are incompatible with Christian discipleship. Even if we are not ready or able to embark on a project of constructive theology that aspires to produce a comprehensive vision of Christian economic life, we can at least draw some bright lines to offer us guidance as we sift through contemporary debates on normative economics.

Obviously, since our vantage point is just a dozen years or so into the third millennium, it is surely not strictly accurate to attribute all these items to developments of the past few years. But I would venture the claim that each of the two items I will now describe has taken root with particular vengeance in the past few years, even where most of the objectionable positions can be traced to thoughts and attitudes that sprouted long before the year 2000.

First, on the level of attitudes and public opinion (at least in Western societies), we seem collectively to appear more comfortable than ever with sharp inequality, even when the data comes from surveys of the attitudes of those at the bottom of the steep-sided pyramids of wealth and income. We eagerly justify income and wealth polarization as somehow reflecting a natural meritocracy of personal value. As a society, we appear less sensitive than ever before to questions of equity and the fair sharing of social burdens, content to allow more and more of the costs and less and less of the benefits of the economy we share to accrue to low-income people and under-resourced groups within society. In fact, it can credibly be argued that we have forgotten the very purpose of the economy itself, as portrayed in Luke's Gospel and other Christian sources: to allocate goods and resources so that all humans thrive, not just a few.

Of course, none of these attitudes is brand new, and the sensitivity towards social justice did not end all at once at the stroke of midnight that brought in that milestone date January 1, 2000. Rather, recent decades (if not centuries) have witnessed a progressive diminution of social solidarity. Shifting philosophies and even cosmologies since the late Middle Ages fostered an erosion of the sense of organic unity in society. From the dawn of the early modern era, the values of mutual benefit and collective action gave way to increasingly absolutist notions of property-holding and self-possession, as individuals came to be portrayed as the sole proprietors of their own faculties and the fruits of their labor (Macpherson). Self-interest came to eclipse common good, and this evolution was justified by social philosophers like Adam Smith who emphasized a natural harmony of interests that enacted a type of social contract that would make no demands upon the well-off, since benefits from free markets would putatively trickle down to the poor majority in due time (Foley). The centuries after Adam Smith witnessed more and more sophisticated (but, arguably, more and more virulent) versions of trickle-down theory.

Now, there have always been greedy people who recognized the demands of the gospel but still chose to hoard wealth for personal gain. But in an age of articulate advocates of a rank individualism, the deniers of the wealth ethics of the gospel by now have ample philosophical cover for their embrace of raw self-interest, even as they cling to the name Christian. After the fall of state-sponsored Communism in 1989, they can even support their preference for hyper-capitalism with arguments that have the ring of practicality and the authority of the worldly-wise, while still clinging to the claim that their philosophies of self-

aggrandizement feature Christian inspiration. It is actually not very difficult to reveal the antinomies between ferocious versions of capitalism and anything that has to do with Jesus of Nazareth. All one has to do is to ask questions such as: Is the basis of this economic system primarily social cooperation or ruthless competition? Are the gains from increased productivity and technological innovation spread broadly, or hoarded by a few? But in order to demystify the economic system and unveil its core components, it is indeed necessary to ask these hard questions repeatedly and pursue them relentlessly. It takes a firm commitment to challenge “business as usual” since the status quo has come to resemble a plutocracy where elites exploit the labor of the vast majority and parlay their strategic advantages into vast wealth, all the while citing a philosophy that amounts to the slogan “God helps those who help themselves.” Call it the “prosperity gospel” or the “gospel of wealth” if you will, but it is hardly compatible with the Gospel of Luke.

The increasing influence of libertarian thought in Catholic circles is one especially stark symptom of this lamentable shift. Libertarianism is the stepchild of classical liberalism and liberal economics, and draws inspiration from particularly individualistically-minded readings of the works of theorists such as John Locke and Adam Smith. The vice presidential candidacy of the proudly Catholic politician Paul Ryan occasioned an opportunity to ponder how it came to pass that an elected official could claim at once the influence of libertarian darling Ayn Rand and Catholic social teaching. There can be no such synthesis; the internal tensions between a hyper-individualistic philosophy of libertarianism and a system of religious social ethics committed to the common good is just too high to be sustainable (Beyer). The most telling aspect of this tension relates to the portrayal of the role of public authority. For libertarians, government is portrayed as an intrusion, not as a privileged agent for the promotion of the common good, for collective action to advance social goals that would languish for lack of another agent to promote them. In the strictly free market society favored by the far right wing, nothing gets done that is not profitable and linked to incentives and self-interest. Conversely, in the mainstream tradition of Catholic social thought, government is the major agent of social coordination, working in tandem along with the non-profit sector. Government is not a threat to our liberties; it *is* us acting collectively to secure the blessings of liberty for rich and poor alike. The Catholic social teaching concept of subsidiarity, itself frequently distorted and misrepresented in recent public discourse, serves as a commonsense normative check on rampant statism or even totalitarianism, and forms a crucial part of authentic Catholic social theory.

These observations about the lamentable trend whereby economic inequality is not only sharpened but increasingly more sharply defended are not mine alone. In the first section of his 2012 World Day of Peace message, Pope Benedict XVI warns:

It is alarming to see hotbeds of tension and conflict caused by growing instances of inequality between rich and poor, by the prevalence of a selfish and individualistic mindset which also finds expression in an unregulated financial capitalism.

The second major development we are witnessing, closely related to the market triumphalism just sketched, is the appearance of ever fiercer attempts to justify sharper social divisions, even beyond strictly economic inequalities. The range of rationalizations

supporting social inequalities seems to widen every year. In his recent work *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel observes: "To a remarkable degree, the last few decades have witnessed the remaking of social relations in the image of market relations" (51). One of the main features of markets is that they produce winners and losers. While this may be an appropriate mechanism for *economic* relations, this logic has pernicious effects when we imagine that *social* relations are properly characterized this way. Very often in the literature of social philosophy there is a slippage from the positive to the normative. Certain authors make the point that there exists a brand of social stratification that springs from competition, and their analysis soon slides into a type of naturalistic fallacy, implying that this stratification is self-justifying and that the way things *are* automatically corresponds to the way things *should be*. It is just a short step to a social Darwinism that posits and justifies sharp distinctions among people correlated to factors that are extrinsic to actual economic performance. Over-generosity to the poor and the losers in competition becomes the primary and unforgiveable fault – not only counter-productive, but ethically perilous as well.

According to the dystopian scenario that follows from such a worldview, the overriding moral imperative morphs from one of leveling or addressing inequality to protecting the status of the winner, as competition itself becomes a center of value. Witness Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's controversial book, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, which offers frankly racist analysis of differential performance on IQ tests and educational attainments. Murray's most recent volume *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* exhibits a comfort with class (if not racial) identification and stratification that is also potentially objectionable. We have two nations side-by-side, Murray contends, split by different levels of opportunity and education. Somewhat similarly, Samuel Huntington's 2004 volume, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, builds on his earlier work on the supposed "clash of civilizations" (1996) to portray a world where solidarity is sharply circumscribed, so that it is impossible to imagine any version of cosmopolitanism or similar brand of commonality at all. So far in the third millennium, social philosophies that posit divisions seem to be holding the upper hand over those which emphasize the possibilities of human commonality, cooperation, and mutual gains. The implications for reflection on the meaning and disposal of material possessions are clear. My responsibilities to others are sharply diminished since I do not belong in a meaningful way to very wide social groupings that might make serious demands upon me and my ownership of material goods. This is certainly an easier moral world to inhabit than the one occupied by affluent hearers of the Gospel of Luke in previous ages. The holding of superfluous material goods, even in very large quantities, is no longer problematic for a denizen of this moral world, where social contracts and compacts have faded into obscurity. As Sandel contends, market practices and exclusive reliance on market ways of thinking can be highly morally corrosive (162).

To the two items sketched just above – namely the deepening of a market triumphalism that affects contemporary views of economic relations, and a diminution of social solidarity that threatens to badly skew all social relations – many other items of profound concern could be added. Whether or not we are prepared or inclined to employ categories such as exploitation, oppression or surplus value of labor, we are well served to pay attention to

precisely how it is that the rich grow richer, as they seem inevitably to do. A scripturally informed perspective will emphasize concern regarding not only the empirical facts relating to distribution of wealth but also about the collective consciousness of our social obligations. Even without citing any biblical materials, Robert Reich did us a great service a quarter century ago when he expressed concern about the “secession of the successful” (282). The former Secretary of Labor and fearless social commentator was referring to the top quintile of the population within highly developed nations, a class of extremely accomplished people (he refers to them as “symbolic analysts”) which has been developing the ability to amass wealth and privilege largely in isolation from the surrounding majority of the population. If the trends that Reich describes are indeed coming to pass, then many parts of the Bible, from the Hebrew prophets to Luke and Acts, are well positioned to shed helpful light on the moral perils that accompany the triumph of these centrifugal forces.

When scripture scholar Bruce Birch and social ethicist Larry Rasmussen sat down in 1978 to produce a book on the topic of biblical perspectives on righteous behavior in the economic sphere, the title they settled on for their prophetic volume was *The Predicament of the Prosperous*. The judgment that suffuses their work and inspires its title is that prosperity imposes obligations – serious duties that, in biblical times as well as our own, generally go unrecognized or remain unmet. Three and a half decades later, the judgment seems inescapable that things have only grown worse. It seems that those who profess Christianity have a more tenuous grasp than ever before on the challenging economic demands of their faith, and a much dimmer view than before of how the gospel calls them to act in counter-cultural ways. Unless something changes the direction of this drift, then members of Christian communities in coming years will have an even further diminished sense of how the ideals of the gospel, the call for sharing and even renunciation of goods as a demand of discipleship, will remain relevant for their times.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to conclude is simply to invite further reflection on the moral status of the economic practices that we take for granted today. This is a worthy research project, one that can be approached from many directions and with the benefit of many traditions, within and beyond Christian sources. For example, my colleague, Franciscan friar Keith Warner, O.F.M., of Santa Clara University, is currently conducting research on the contemporary significance of the often-forgotten Franciscan social theorists of the late Middle Ages. These friars positioned their advocacy for the poor of Europe in terms of the theme of civil economy, and specifically the project of relaxing the ban on lending at interest, or usury, particularly in the fourteenth century as a response to the practical needs of the under-resourced people of the time (Warner). If the Franciscans can retrieve elements of their religious order’s traditions, then so can we Jesuits. I would love to see some worthy Jesuit conduct research into the most neglected appendix to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola, the almost forgotten “Guidelines for the Christian Sharing of One’s Wealth and Possessions” (Fleming: 220-25). This title is David Fleming’s rather free translation; the more literally translated phrase runs: “In the ministry of distributing alms, the following rules should be kept.” The seven so-called “rules” treat the proper ordering of affections, motivations, and priorities that should ideally guide the freewill offering of charitable assistance to the needy. Most noteworthy for our purposes is the insistence by Ignatius on a theocentric thrust for all our acts of generosity – they are to be

motivated by a love of God and for the greater glory of God, not self. Saint Ignatius seems to take it for granted that any mature and sincere Christian will look for every opportunity to share wealth and give alms, living in a simple manner in order to enable acts of generosity. (If his age had featured automobiles, he surely would have penned the popular bumper sticker “Live simply so that others may simply live.”) Ignatius even goes out of his way to mention the edict of the Third Council of Carthage, in the time of Saint Augustine, which stipulates that “the furniture of the Bishop should be cheap and poor” (Fleming: 224). The theme of a truly poor institutional church comes and goes in history, of course, only occasionally taking root in the hearts of leaders powerful enough to do something about the biblical injunctions to share accumulated riches and renounce surplus wealth.

One can hardly avoid noticing that the sponsor of this symposium, Creighton University, happens to be a most encouraging fruit of generosity with one’s possessions – the ethical duty suggested repeatedly in this essay. It was founded in 1878 as a benefaction from a prominent Omaha family. Much of the wealth of businessman Edward Creighton was donated by his widow, Mary Lucretia Creighton, and managed by Edward’s brother, John A. Creighton, who sustained the endowment in its early years. The philanthropy of the Creighton family provides an apt and illuminating example of what happens when someone takes seriously the scriptural imperative for the sharing of wealth with others in need. Would that similar great benefits accrue to the wellbeing of the many, not the narrow enjoyment of a few, from future benefactions of such a great magnitude.

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