

Preface

This book came out of my reflections on the place of money in the church in light of the work I did for my PhD on revelation as desacralization. In so few places in the church is the contrast of Scripture and contemporary belief and practice more evident than in economics. There is no shortage of Christian financial pundits who have supposedly biblical principles for economic thriving. This is amazing when one considers that the writings referenced by these pundits were written in entirely different social and economic situations to our own. There is a profound ignorance of the history of money, evident even in many popular translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, which translate “silver” or *kesef* with “money,” so inviting the reader to import modern economic theory into an ancient society that had never seen a coin, let alone a financial institution. Supposedly God is there as an economist, like Adam Smith’s invisible hand of providence, ensuring that the natural economic laws he established at the creation continue as intended. God is seen as the source of money such that Christians can be stewards of God’s resources. And it would be somewhat understandable if popular Christianity had made a few minor mistakes in the way it thinks about money, erring a little too often on God supporting their chosen careers and blessing their investments. Most all peoples have bartered with the gods. But the problem is just as prevalent, perhaps more so, in professional theology. And this is seriously concerning for the future of academic theology, not to mention a post-Christendom church.

Only recently has a transactional atonement come under scrutiny, but for the wrong reasons. Postcolonial interpretation has helped confirm a contemporary hatred of violence and hierarchy. But postcolonial interpretation, child of Marxism, is itself economic and based in our own modern postmonetary economic system. So attempts to make the atonement non-transactional are still motivated by, and use the logic of, economics. Instead

of a hierarchical atonement, an egalitarian atonement is now emphasized. It often goes unspoken that hierarchy vs. equality, that long-standing social debate going back to ancient Greece, is itself a product of economic thinking and relationships.

So it is not surprising that many Christian attempts at economic ethics work from principles divorced from a robust biblical theology, and so end up basically affirming a version of the contemporary liberal economic agenda. Socialism, communism, and capitalism are all narratives that depend upon a certain perspective of human ontology, what human thriving means, and how it can be achieved. These narratives all have roots in civilizations deeply influenced by some more or less rudimentary reflection on the Bible. As we will see, the idea that humans are naturally self-interested is a secularization of Augustine's vision of original sin, invented in the Renaissance, that removes any notion of original sin from the narrative. Self-interest is supposedly neutral and natural. It is not evil, but is often misdirected. Such a perspective, necessary as it is to economics, creates a Pelagian theology. If what is wrong or dangerous about humans can be harnessed by right and just government, the commonwealth can be ensured and humans can thrive. We can fix what is wrong with our societies if only we discover the right system or theory of how to deal with this ontologically real thing called "The Economy." After reflecting on the actual history of money as given by archeologists and anthropologists, and not the invented stories of mainstream economics, what if we find that the Bible narrates an alternative story to that given by all possible economic theories? What if we find that this story suggests that economics is a human invention in response to our rejection of God and is not an essential part of our nature? What if we find that Jesus is being deadly serious and profoundly intellectual when he says that God and money are entirely separate and contradictory masters? How then can God be in support of our economy? How then will we create an ethic of money that does not call for a simple rejection?

By taking the biblical revelation seriously, which means not treating it as a collection of timeless ethical principles, we must go through the hard work of reading in context, understanding the sweep of the whole story. We can then form a theology from which we can derive ethical applications. If we short circuit this process, Christian ethics will always and everywhere be but a feeble echo, heard long after the original call to action given by those who take a more active hand in forming the world we inhabit. Christian ethics will continue to eviscerate the church by arriving too late with nothing new to say, save for adding some proof texts to what conservatives or progressives have already long believed without reference to the Bible.

I remain resolute that the gospel of Jesus Christ has unbounded power in all possible contexts, not because it affirms or condemns this or that practice of this or that people, but because it subverts all possible worlds and values that people try to create. This book is a call to Christian ethical action. It can find no support outside of the church, because it does not pursue commonwealth, but reconciliation. Reconciliation, as we shall see, subverts any and all past, current, and future theories of economic relations.

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