

Economics and the ‘Present Evil Age’

Richard L. Smith

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*Richard L. Smith (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) formerly taught in Prague, Czech Republic and was a co-founder of the Komenský Institute there. He now serves as South American senior advisor for Global Scholars, writes curriculum for use in Latin America, and operates the *Cosmovisión Bíblica* Spanish-language website (www.cosmovisionbiblicaesp.net).*

I. The Divine Economy

The word *economy* has an ancient pedigree. The equivalent Greek term, *oikonomia*, means ‘household administration’ or ‘the law or management of a household’. *Oikonomia* concerns the mechanisms, logistics, expectations, values, structures and practices that sustain human life and enable it to prosper, as well as the natural environment that supports it.

Oikonomia answers such questions as the following: Does everyone associated with this household have fair and just access to raw materials and services? Are equity, opportunity, justice and compassion available to all? Do order, harmony, satisfaction and fulfilment characterize the social relations of the *oikos* (house)? Do all possess the ‘ability to flourish as human beings within the ecological limits of a finite planet’?¹ In other words, is the house managed well, is the householder doing his job, and are the members of the house faithful and productive?

Genesis 1–2 presents God as the omnipotent economist and divine master builder who called forth the life support systems (air, light, land, vegetation) essential for the sustenance of his house. He commanded the earth to produce ‘according to its various kinds’ (Gen 1:11). He provided fruits, grains, and an abundant supply of water. He ordered space, separating land, sea, and celestial objects. He ordained time and regularity, calling forth the twenty-hour cycle, the seasons and the sabbath. He established all the necessary conditions that human beings presuppose at all times and in every activity.

Most importantly, in God’s primal economy there was an edenic nexus of presence (divine sanctuary), peace (*shalom*), and prosperity. Within God’s *oikonomia*, the conditions were in place for all created things to flourish and prosper. Human beings enjoyed all that God provided: dignity, abundance, productive work, intellectual development and meaningful relationships within a secure and sacred environment. They were blessed in every possible way.

II. Reversal

The drastic changes introduced in Genesis 3 as result of sin and judgement amount to a reversal of creation. For this reason, Genesis 1–3 is steeped in contrast and irony. The vice-regent whose sacred duty was to serve and guard the *oikonomia* of God instead brought disarray and turmoil to God’s estate.

In place of two trees in paradise, plus abundance and productivity, appeared weeds, thorns and thistles. Instead of fruitful and meaningful work came sweat and frustration. In the place of contentment and *shalom* came dissatisfaction and discontent. As a substitute for peace and blessing, humans experienced curses, hostility and conflict. In place of stewardship came

¹ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2010), 16.

exploitation and excess. Instead of caring and sharing, there was greed and gluttony. Instead of enjoying a homeland with God, humans faced expulsion and exile.

Human existence ‘east of Eden’ (Gen 3:24) and ‘under the sun’ (Eccl 1:14), therefore, is conditioned by the fall and its accompanying curse. The cultural mandate (Gen 1:28) is carried out in the context of Adam’s sin, Satan’s intrigue, and God’s curse. Mankind has exchanged the truth of God for idols: images, values, self-identities, myths, worldviews, economic systems and religiosities of their own making, which they impose upon the cosmos to provide meaning and stability (Rom 1:18–25). Cultural and civilizational development is skewed by sin and idolatry.

Humans try to replicate Eden and reestablish a religious orientation, but they often settle for visions of utopia, totalitarian ideology, theocracy or empire. They thirst for *shalom*, but they instead experience alienation, disharmony, corruption and fragmentation.

III. The Earth Mourns

Due to the curse, mankind’s relationship with the physical environment was tragically altered. Human livelihood was impaired and threatened. The ground became hostile and yielded fruit only grudgingly. Generally, achieving a livelihood and posterity is a painful experience. Adam, the exulted steward of God’s garden, became a common peasant, struggling for subsistence. In the words of the Preacher, life is ‘toilsome’ and the results of our labour are marginal at best (Eccl 2:20; cf. 1:2).

Since the fall, mankind, imperious and self-referential as the dominant species on earth, has viewed the world as existing for its own sake. In this perception, nature has no intrinsic value and is merely functional, a stage prop for the utopian human project. Because of greed, humans reinterpret and abuse God’s mandate. Like a rapacious elite bent on extracting all surplus within its empire, humans exploit the natural world, waste resources, pollute the environment, and drive to extinction other creatures and vegetation. Those with power wage war for natural resources, limit access to raw materials, and hoard for private use.

Because of the fall, mankind’s *oikonomia* is flawed, self-serving, and idolatrous. Humans do not equitably maintain the values, structures and practices that enable human life to flourish, or the natural environment that supports it. As Christopher Wright says, ‘Trade, distribution and exchange of goods all become distorted by greed, injustice and manipulation of power.’² Because of the curse and sin, the earth lies desolate, stripped bare, in comparison with Eden. In fact, no one really flourishes east of Eden.

So we now live in this ‘present evil age’ (Gal 1:4), as Paul put it, and the sting is clearly experienced in the economic realm. God, the supreme king and householder of the cosmos, expects his human vice-regents to care for, protect and develop what is still his property, for his name’s sake and the benefit of his creatures. Sadly, though, humans often abuse and neglect the natural world and one another.

Men and women use creation to make new things with the raw material God provides. However, they do not extend the benefits of their creativity and productivity fairly to everyone who has the need for or right to them. Humans create cultures that are often cruel, unjust and oppressive.

² Christopher Wright, ‘God or Mammon: Biblical Perspectives on Economies in Conflict’, *Mission Studies* 12 (1995), 146.

IV. Four Case Studies from the Bible

1. Egypt: Who is the Lord?

When Pharaoh asked, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go?’ (Ex 5:2), he was asking a central, even paradigmatic question. In effect, he was raising the issue of who is the true God and what kind of society is best suited for mankind.

Did Pharaoh provide what the people of his land needed in order to live? In which society, Egypt or Israel, could humans flourish? Which was the true land of promise, Egypt (or any other alternative paradise) or Canaan?

The Egyptians had accepted the idea that Pharaoh was the image of the gods and that their social structure had been derived from a heavenly model. Pharaohs functioned as mediators of divine blessing and served as manifestations of heavenly reality.

In the ancient world, Egypt was a land of blessing. As a river civilization with access to the Nile, it was the bread basket of the ancient Near East. Egypt was an enlightened nation with power, prestige and a highly developed culture. However, this culture existed for the elite and was sustained by slave labour and justified by religious ideology.

As in other theocracies of the period, the religious, social and economic system was organized to maintain the status quo and to benefit the interests of the powerful, who represented only about 5 percent of the population. Economic life was centrally controlled to enable the redistribution of the nation’s resources.

Iain Provan noted, ‘In Egypt Israel endured hard oppression at the hands of a human being who is considered within his cultural and religious context to be a god, Pharaoh, son of the sun-god Re and becoming, after death, the god Osiris. This god-king has acquired servanthood from Israel.’³

The Hebrews, on the other hand, voiced their anguish under Pharaoh’s harsh servitude: ‘Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression’ (Deut 26:7). But Yahweh did not merely listen and commiserate; he intervened. He showed the Israelites the way out (*exodus*, cf. Deut 26:8) and in so doing made ‘a distinction’ between himself and the Egyptian pantheon, between his people and the Egyptians (Ex 8:23; 9:4; 33:16).

Egypt, once a place of bounty and provision, had become ‘creation gone berserk’,⁴ an empire of corruption, idolatry and oppression. The plagues and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army functioned as a systematic repudiation and deconstruction of Egyptian religion, as well as of its social and economic infrastructure. No one but the very elite flourished in Egypt’s apostate *oikonomia*.

2. Israel: ‘Like all the other nations’

The establishment of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8 represented a major religious and socio-economic turning point in Israel’s history. Undoubtedly looking towards the great Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires, as well as the ancient Canaanite city states, as models, the Hebrew elders (who made the request and had the most to gain as future royal retainers) expressed their desire to ‘be like all the other nations’ (v. 20; cf. v. 5). In particular, they wanted a king who would ‘go out before us and fight our battles’ (v. 20).

³ Iain Provan, ‘To Highlight All Our Idols: Worshipping God in Nietzsche’s World’, *Ex Auditu* 15 (2000), 21.

⁴ Terance E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 103.

From the divine perspective, however, the underlying motive was apostate and not unexpected: ‘They have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods’ (vv. 7b–8).

The assumption of monarchy was a breach of covenant, a repudiation of God’s rule and an open door to idolatry. It also meant the adoption of new social structures, a new *oikonomia*, a restructuring of God’s house with non-Israelite criteria. The ‘ways of the king’ (vv. 9, 11) were the socio-religious toxin that would poison the entire body politic. With the rejection of divine rule came a host of cultural and spiritual maladies consistent with the curses of Deuteronomy 28, ending in conquest and exile.

For a millennium before David, kings of the ancient Near East served as the emissary of the gods. As the image of deity, kings maintained the divinely underwritten social order and the hierarchy that supported it. Through cult and legitimating ideology, royalty was tasked with holding chaos in check within society and extending civilization through conquest.

This alleged divine right justified the trappings of state and the centralization of power in all realms. A special class of courtiers, advisers, administrators, artisans, clergy and military leadership functioned as retainers, providing goods and services to the elite. A standing, professional army was required, as well as a diplomatic corps. In the economic sphere, redistribution of peasant surplus and the production of commercial crops were centrally controlled. Land tenure was monopolized by the elite and trade routes were controlled by the crown.

For the vast peasant majority, meanwhile, life was onerous, since service to the gods meant service for the king. Labourers were subject to corvée, ponderous taxation and levy, latifundia and debt slavery. Harsh labour and rigid hierarchy resulted in the creation of classes of impoverishment—widows, orphans, and poor families—who received at best the inconsistent patronage of crown and temple.

Understanding these ominous aspects of kingship, Samuel ‘solemnly warns’ Israel (v. 9) that a similar result would befall their nation. Chapter 8 describes the royal prerogatives that would prove oppressive to the nation over time: conscription for the chariot corps; induction as professional military officers; agricultural work on the king’s property; manufacturing weapons; conscription of women as perfumers, cooks and bakers in royal service; confiscation of private land for the ‘servants of the king’; ten percent taxation of all production to compensate the royal ‘officials and attendants’; seizure of the best servants and animals, and a tenth of livestock for the king’s personal use (8:11–16). Worst of all, ‘you yourselves will become his slaves’ (v. 17).

This scenario is a depiction of systemic socio-economic change accompanying the centralization of power and wealth. Land tenure would no longer be based upon divine inheritance and kinship, but would be subject to the whims and stratagems of the court. The economy would no longer operate on reciprocity but on forced redistribution of peasant income. Cash crops for consumption and commercial farming for export would dominate economic exchange. A permanent landless class of labourers would develop, dependent upon patronage and the vagaries of the market. On the other hand, a privileged class of royal elite would emerge, along with a preference for urban life and excess.

In short, Israel adopted the world’s *oikonomia* and thereby repudiated God’s intention for this nation to stand as a distinct testimony to all the earth. As a result, God’s people no longer flourished in God’s land.

3. The Roman Empire: ‘Put an end to war and set all things in order’

Three elements enabled the Roman Empire and produced *Pax Romana*. The first was conquest. The Romans generally did not obliterate entire peoples or places; instead they terrorized populations into economic fealty, enslaving some people while crucifying the leading rebels to intimidate everyone else into submission. Neil Elliot commented:

The peace that Rome secured through terror was maintained through terror, through slavery, defined by conquest and scrupulously maintained through constant intimidation, abuse, and violence ... on the ideological plane through imperial cult and ceremony, the rhetoric of the courts ... and in an educational system that rehearsed the ‘naturalness’ of Rome’s global hegemony.⁵

The second element was the patronage system, a network of economic and political relationships that secured the loyalty of local aristocrats. A patron gained status and praise by engaging in a hierarchical relationship with clients who received benefits. The clients were bound to the patron out of a sense of obligation; the patron maintained the relationship through further giving.

Roman propaganda portrayed Caesar as the ultimate patron and model for all patronage activity. The emperor was understood as a paternal protector, granting communities or individuals their status, privilege, resources and access. Recipients were required to manifest subservience and loyalty to Rome in response to its ‘friendship’. In this way, the Roman elite used patronage as an instrument of social control. Everyone found their place within the patronage pecking order.

The third essential element was the imperial cult, which provided the ideological glue that held the social, economic, cultural and religious pieces together by persuasion through image and ritual. According to Roman ideology, the gods had helped Caesar to bring peace, order and salvation to earth. They had created a new eschatological era that flowed out of Rome’s bosom, blessing the earth with salvation through the *Pax Romana*. Augustus was the representative of a new kind of human being and brought good news (*euanggelion*) to the conquered nations.

4. Israel under Pax Romana

Israel keenly felt the social, religious and economic impact of the *Pax Romana*. From the time of Julius Caesar, Judean peasants paid a percentage of their crops annually as taxes, while also continuing their traditional tithes and offerings to the temple. By the time of Jesus’ birth, many Judean and Galilean peasant families had been forced off their land.

Virtually a whole generation was decimated in certain areas by the devastation and enslavement that resulted from Roman and Herodian conquests. Many were forced to borrow at interest from wealthy creditors among the priestly elite. (One of the principal acts of the rebels who took control of Jerusalem at the outbreak of a revolt in 66 CE was to burn the public archives where the records of debts were kept.)

During the first century, a growing disadvantaged and disgruntled peasant population opposed the Jewish ruling class, perceiving these elites as illegitimate, compromised and exploitative because of their economic relationship with Rome. The high-priestly families, who owed their tenure in office to Herod and his heirs, were originally not native-born Palestinians

⁵ Neil Elliot, ‘Anti-Imperial Message of the Cross’, in *Paul and Empire*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 170.

but powerful Jewish families imported from the Diaspora; accordingly, they looked to Rome more than to Jerusalem for direction.

Infamous for their exploitation of the poor, these elite families were held in very low esteem by the lower priestly class. As wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs in commerce and agriculture, they opted for the status quo and preferred *Pax Romana* to rebellion. As a result, social bandits arose who sought to redress peasant grievances by playing the role of Jewish Robin Hoods, raiding the wealthy landowners and the representatives of foreign domination.

The people of Israel staggered under the burden of heavy taxation, unjust government and corruption. The ordinary priests and Levites, sympathetic to the cause of the poor with whom they identified, often worked as day labourers and were inclined to support nationalist movements such as the Zealots.

From 59 CE on, the internecine strife between the different economic and ideological strata of temple clergy intensified. The temple elite retaliated by withholding the common priests' tithes and tried to starve them into submission. In view of this corruption and foreign oppression, many people withheld the required tribute to Rome and the lower priestly orders discontinued the daily sacrifice for the Emperor's well-being. Rome construed this action, which occurred in 66 CE, as overt rebellion. The full-scale insurrection that ensued a few weeks later was directed as much against the priestly aristocracy as against the Romans.

V. Implications

1. Empires today

It is clear from the biblical story that we can never return to Eden as such. Neither will any Babelite attempt to 'make a name for ourselves' succeed (Gen 11:4). A societal vision that 'reaches up to heaven' (v. 4), based on apostate theocratic assumptions (whether of Babel, Egypt or Rome), will not create a sabbath-like environment in which humans can flourish or that honors God. Nor will any Christian imitation or attempt to become 'like the other nations' please God, strengthen the church or serve mankind.

Because human beings retain the *imago Dei*, we are hard-wired for extension, development, growth, even globalization. But because we are fallen, the usual result is conquest, empire, mono-culturalism (consumerism, for example), subjugation, exploitation, plunder and extinction. Culturally and economically, empires consume whatever is productive (namely, economic surplus) and distinctive in host peoples.⁶

Sadly, history is a litany of tragic quests for paradise lost or for utopia on earth: Babel, Pharaoh's kingdom of the Sun God, Caesar's *Pax Romana*, the medieval Holy Roman Empire, modernity's myth of progress, Nazism, communism and totalitarianism. All of them testify that human beings are created in the image of God but instead worship and serve idols. As a result, we create endless substitute religiosities and alternative gospels, as well as group identities and economic policies that end up creating a kind of hell on earth, a foretaste of dreadful things to come.

⁶ Empires are inherently totalizing through symbol, ritual and system. Brian Walsh and Silvia Keesmaat observed: 'Empires project an all-embracing normality. Not only do empires want us to think that reality is totally composed of the structures, symbols, and systems that have been imperially constructed, they also want us to believe that the future holds no more than a heightened realization of imperial hopes and dreams.' Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 161.

How many millions have perished because of empire and its cousin, colonialism, throughout human history? God alone knows the suffering and injustice inflicted due to the divine right of kings, manifest destinies and myths of progress. How often have lands been acquired, peoples dispersed, access to the sea or trade routes expropriated for purposes of security, gain or glory? How often has mankind raped the earth of its natural resources, failing to steward God's goodness? How many people have been enslaved or exploited for want of manpower or greed?

And of even deeper concern to us, how often has Christianity affiliated with the powerful and prosperous but overlooked the victims of empire? Surely, for all this creation groans.

Christians should, therefore, be continuously wary of incarnations of the cultural mandate gone awry. Whenever we hear a neo-Babylonian battle cry, 'Let us build ourselves a city ... that we can make a name for ourselves'; whenever would-be Pharaohs exclaim, 'Who is the Lord?' (or 'Who is the true God and the real people of God?'); whenever God's people declare, 'Give us a king to lead us'; or whenever an ideology proposes to put an end to war and set all things in order, the church should beware.

2. A new empire

Since the end of World War II and coinciding with the maturation of capitalism during the second half of the twentieth century, a new kind of empire has emerged: the globalization of consumerism. Mass consumerism is an all-embracing reality with imperial ambitions, seeking to homogenize peoples and cultures into a global civilization of manufactured expectations and engineered through the advent of modern communication. In one sense, it is the Enlightenment's myth of progress in the form of luxury for all. Or, as Simon Patten declared, consumerism provides a 'new basis of civilization', enabled by a 'pleasure or surplus economy'.⁷

Benjamin R. Barber provides an especially apt perspective on the globalization of consumerism. In an earlier study, he labeled consumerism and its extensions as 'McWorld'—an empire of tastes, images, brands and lifestyles modelled on the fast-food ethos of McDonald's and the vicariousness of Disney World. Consumerism is a shopping fantasy or virtual reality come true, 24/7. Barber explained McWorld as

an entertainment shopping experience that brings together malls, multiplex movie theaters, theme parks, spectator sports arenas, fast-food chains (with their endless movie tie-ins) and television (shopping networks) into a vast single enterprise that on the way to maximize profits, *transforms* human beings. ... McWorld itself is a theme park, a park called Marketland where everything is for sale and someone else is always responsible and there are no common goods or public interests and where everyone is equal as long as they can afford the price of admission and are content to watch and consume.⁸

⁷ Quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991): 69. This rosy outlook is contradicted by economist Tim Jackson: 'But those who hope that growth will lead to a materialistic Utopia are destined for disappointment. We simply don't have the ecological capacity to fulfill this dream. By the end of the century, our children and grandchildren will face a hostile climate, depleted resources, the destruction of habitats, the decimation of species, food scarcities, mass migrations and almost inevitably war.' Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, 203.

⁸ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 97, 137 (emphasis added).

In a recent book, Barber depicts consumerism as the process of global ‘infantilization’, or an ‘induced’ and ‘enduring childishness’ packaged and exported as a totalizing narcissism.⁹ Infantilization is an idolizing of dissatisfaction and acquisitiveness, expressed through Western symbols typified by Hollywood mores. Through the lure of celebrity culture and its would-be icons, infantilization has infiltrated every sphere of our existence: personal identity, spiritual aspiration, ecclesiastical life, education, sports, spatial organization, and systemically in social and economic policy.

3. Consumerism and evangelicals

During this formative period, many Christians enthusiastically welcomed the new consumer economy as God’s provision for American society. They also promoted and adapted commercial theory and practice to promote their own religious and private enterprises. Evangelicals seemed just as enamored with the principles of corporate management and the quest for efficiency as their more liberal and secular counterparts. Both sought to use business principles to improve the operation and outreach of churches and parachurch organizations.¹⁰

After World War II, the relationship between evangelicalism and consumerism (the New Right preeminently) grew synergistically and exponentially. According to Bethany Moreton, the emergence of mass consumption enjoyed the energetic support of conservatives, both secular and evangelical.¹¹ Moreton recounts the intimate relationship between many Christian colleges, the service industry, mass consumption (Wal-Mart in particular) and the emergence of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE). In 1985, a typical SIFE graduate eagerly testified, ‘I feel like I’m ready now to go out and evangelize the country for free enterprise’.¹²

SIFE participants were encouraged to learn that they were the proud disciples of Adam Smith. Paul Harvey, the Christian pundit and radio personality, declared triumphantly at a Wal-Mart gathering that they had created something ‘better than communism, socialism, and capitalism. We have created enlightened consumerism’.¹³

It seems, however, that many evangelicals have not yet discerned the idolatry of systemic mammon-worship in our culture—the idolization of dissatisfaction and acquisitiveness. We have not confronted the discontent, greed, entitlement, sensuality and sexuality in the church, infected by the culture of consumerism. We have not discerned the compatibility of mass consumerism and postmodernity. We have not come to grips with the imperialistic aspirations of consumerism

⁹ Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 3–37.

¹⁰ In 1908, the influential text *Principles of Successful Church Advertising* argued that churches should utilize the same scientific advertising principles as business to achieve the same success. In 1917, the book *Church Advertising: Its How and Why* described Jesus as the first ‘successful church advertiser’. In 1925, *Advertising the Church: Suggestions by Church Advertisers* declared confidently that ‘Jesus commanded his disciples to advertise. ... Translated into modern terms, he would say put your light on the lamp stand of the newspaper and in the candlestick of the billboard. ... Set your city of salvation on a hill of publicity.’ And in 1928, *Moody Monthly* asserted, ‘The Holy Spirit was the “Sales Manager”, the pastor was the first assistant sales manager, and every church member was a “salesman of greater or lesser efficiency”.’ See Gary Scott Smith, ‘Evangelicals Confront Corporate Capitalism: Advertising, Consumerism, Stewardship, and Spirituality 1880–1930’, in *More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History*, ed. L. Eskridge, L. Noll, and M. A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 39–80.

¹¹ Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹² Moreton, *To Serve God*, 197.

¹³ Moreton, *To Serve God*, 248.

as an alternative gospel, a skewed version of the cultural mandate and an apostate utopia on earth. Sadly, we will likely reap ‘all kinds of evils’ fostered by the ‘love of money’ (1 Tim 6:10).

VI. Conclusion

The spiritual and ethical context in which we engage in economic activity is indeed complex. Our inner beings are skewed by sin and we cannot truly know ourselves. As Jeremiah wrote, ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?’ (19:9).

A malevolent supernatural dimension is at work (Eph 2:1–3; 1 Jn 5:19). Satan attempts to create a counterfeit kingdom with himself as the head, ruling over fallen mankind in a curse-filled physical environment. There is also an ethical and social dimension, for this is a ‘crooked and twisted generation’ (Phil 2:15). Corruption pervades every aspect of our relations and society (1 Jn 1:16). The Bible testifies that ‘money answers everything’ (Eccl 10:19), greed is idolatry (Col 3:5), and that the love of money is ‘a root of all kinds of evils’ (1 Tim 6:10).

With regard to commerce, John Wesley said it well:

Wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.¹⁴

Yet despite the presence of sin and Satan, the divine economist did not abandon the creation or his mission (Acts 14:17). Thanks to God’s common grace, there are opportunities to experience God’s beneficence in this world. We must acknowledge, also, all that is admirable and beautiful in culture that exists ‘under the sun’. We can praise God for his continuing witness in our fallen *oikonomia*.

For this reason, in the economic realm Christians should pursue the common good as well as the glory of God. We can gladly support and applaud worthy ventures (social entrepreneurship, for example) by those who disagree with us. In fact, even the lust for empire often produces positive benefits in public health, education, economic development, and transportation and communications infrastructure.¹⁵

Further, because of the transformation brought about by the gospel, economic power and entrepreneurship can produce tremendous benefits. Hospitals, literacy, higher education, social services, micro-finance, economic education, scientific research and high-quality scholarship occur when God’s people give generously and wealthy Christians invest liberally in God’s kingdom.¹⁶

There are many examples in the Bible of the wise stewardship of wealth, such as David, Job, Joseph of Arimathea, Lydia, and the churches who contributed to Paul’s collection. In fact, the Bible is full of economic commentary and wise counsel about money.

¹⁴ Quoted by Max Weber in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 2003), 175. A similar idea is expressed in the anonymous proverb: ‘The gospel had a daughter, prosperity. The daughter ate the mother.’

¹⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); Benjamin M. Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Stephen Mansfield, *The Search for God and Guinness: A Biography of the Beer That Changed the World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

Yet at the same time, we must never forget that our cultural aspirations and economic expectations are conditioned by the *eschatological* mission of God. ‘We are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet 3:13). The prophets spoke about a *future* cosmic renewal characterized by peace, prosperity and a reversal of nature, often introduced by the idioms ‘at that time’, ‘in that day’, and ‘in the last days’ (Jer 31:1–6; Isa 2:2; 11:6–9; 35:1–10; Hos 2:18–23). These promises were cast in terms of curse reversal, sometimes explicitly using the expression ‘like Eden’:

On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. They will say, ‘This land that was laid waste has become like the Garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.’ (Ezek 36:33–36)

In other words, God’s plan for creation remains undaunted. He will restore his *oikonomia*. He will provide a renewed physical environment in which to tabernacle with his holy people again. He will put Humpty Dumpty back together in all his pre-fall glory—and so much more. One day, God will unveil his cosmic empire, a homeland free of sin and Satan in which human beings can truly flourish.

In the new heaven and new earth, *homo economicus* will be alive and active (Isa 60:4–11, 17–21; Rev 21:24). The ‘dismal science’ of economics will be transformed to yield dignity, abundance, productive work and meaningful relationships within a secure and sacred environment, just like Eden but even better.

Until that time, we must never forget that anything we do is inherently problematic and that this is manifestly true in the economic realm. In fact, concerning all things economic, we should pray earnestly: ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!’ (Ps 139:23–24).