

Not everything for sale:

A biblical perspective on economics

by Leonard K. Gashugi

The economic equilibrium need

not remain a pie in the sky.

A boy of 12 looks like a child of 4 or 5. Emaciated, eyeballs turned inward, stomach protruding, he can barely crawl on the sands of southern Sudan. Hundreds of people stand in a queue outside a store in Russia, waiting for a loaf of bread or a piece of meat. In a country once rich in mineral and natural wealth, scores routinely die of hunger in war-ravished Congo. The evening news in the United States carries the good news of a new pill that can burn fat and keep people trim, providing a new cure for the ravages of plenty.

Each continent, each country, indeed every community carries the seesaw of plenty and poverty, the paradox of failure in the midst of success. The economic equilibrium still remains an unattainable pie in the sky by and by.

Is this because we live in a world with an insatiable want for acquisitions? Or is it because nations invest a substantial amount of time, money, and resources to improve economic productivity and compete in the international market, without much thought about improving not only their standard of living but also others? Or is it because the concept of global village has reduced human community to international integration of economic, financial, and communication systems, without the balancing concept of global compassion and sharing?

Forces that motivate and shape countries are similar to those that drive individuals. Individual success is for the most part defined in terms of material possessions and the value of one's own financial assets. We Christians are also caught up in the midst of these power-

ful market forces. We can either float with the current or rise above it. To seek the appropriate response to these seemingly invincible economic impulses, we need to turn to the pages of Scripture to help us draw some basic principles to live by as God's stewards.

First, we will begin with the Creation account to discover the original design for humanity and see how earthly systems were intended to function and relate to one another. Second, we will see the effects of the Fall and how it affected relationships. Third, we will look at how divine intervention attempted to restore some equilibrium to a system distorted by sin. Lastly, we will consider how our decisions will shape the final outcome for us as individuals.

The original design

The Book of Genesis leaves no ambiguity as to how the world came into existence. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).^{*} Within this created order, God established a certain hierarchy and a specific set of relationships. At the top of the created order are human beings, made in God's image (verse 27), and endowed with a special relationship with God that is maintained through communion and obedience (Genesis 2:17). The second relationship is one between man and woman, linking the human race together in a loving and collaborative union (Genesis 2:22, 23). The third relationship is one between God and the rest of the created order. Lastly, there is the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation. The earth then gives them sustenance and in

turn they are given dominion over the earth. This cosmic balance hinges on a crucial test of loyalty on the part of human race. At the end of Creation, "God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

In the economic model of the Garden of Eden, God provides what is needed for survival and well-being. "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden" (Genesis 2:16). Human response was to be one of trust and obedience, of work and concern for the habitat (Genesis 1:26; 2:15). Their obedience was tested by whether they would refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17).

The Fall

Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God affected every relationship. Human beings became estranged from God and went into hiding (Genesis 3:8). Adam, who had looked with delight at his companion, "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," accused her of leading him into transgression (verse 12). The woman blamed the serpent. As a result, God cursed the ground, which would subsequently provide food and other necessities only by human sweat and toil (Genesis 3:13, 17-19).

The pull of materialism began after the fall. Genesis 3:7 informs us that "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Genesis 3:7). Adam and Eve began seeking security in things of their own, making things rather than trusting God for their needs, including garments to cover themselves. Here we see an economic system beginning to evolve in which human beings seek self-sufficiency and autonomy, unknowingly under the influence of Satan. Thus human effort became essential for meeting basic needs. Even so, God showed Adam and Eve that He could still provide for them better than they

could provide for themselves. "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21).

Economic analysis focuses on how human beings interact among themselves and with the physical environment to satisfy their material wants. It does not recognize any other forces at play, although the Scriptures indicate that supernatural forces also influence human endeavors. This recognition offers Christians a different perspective on the forces at play and helps us know how to relate to our economic environment and to market forces. Since the beginning, the enemy has used economic activities and the pursuit of material well-being to provide a false sense of security. Undoubtedly this is one of his most effective ways to distract the masses from seeking true riches. It is, therefore, not a sheer coincidence that across nations and communities the response to the gospel message seems to be inversely related to the level of prosperity.

This economic system, in which we are all participants, is part of the drama that began at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We must choose which side of the drama we are on. As Ellen White said: "We must inevitably be under the control of the one or the other of the two great powers that are contending for the supremacy of the world....Unless we become vitally connected with God, we can never resist the unhallowed effects of self-love, self-indulgence, and temptation to sin."¹ Life on this planet was nearly obliterated as humankind took its eyes off the Creator to focus on worldly power and pleasure. As time passed, human beings deviated further from the original plan and "the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" (Genesis 6:5).

The Fall and the Flood altered the balance between human beings and the rest of creation, rendering life vulnerable to the vicissitudes of nature. Materialism, accompanied by greed and self-

seeking to gain personal wealth, defined the contours of human living. Instead of tilling the soil and exercising dominion over the earth for the good of the community and the glory of God, human economic endeavors became focused on glorifying self. But God did not wish humanity to pursue such a path of self-destruction. He placed before the human race the ideal economic approach through two great events: the choice of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus.

The political economy of ancient Israel

God called ancient Israel to be a nation that would serve as a light to the world. He gave Israel an economic model that we do not typically find in a purely secular market economy. The linkages of the original equilibrium in the Creation model were reintroduced. First, God was once again recognized as the Provider of the land and of the strength to gain wealth (Leviticus 25:23; Deuteronomy 8:18). Second, the tithing system and sacrificial and free-will offerings became the avenue of human response to God's benevolence and human recognition of total dependence upon Him. Third, the principle of mutual obligation typified by the Sabbath (seventh) year as well as the Jubilee year when Hebrew servants were freed and property was returned to the original owner, emphasized the right relationship among humans and with the natural environment (Leviticus 25:1-4; Deuteronomy 15:12-15; 25:13-15). These provisions also addressed the issue of business integrity and economic inequality. They reminded the Israelites that God is the ultimate owner of all things, and His people are only managers.

An appeal for economic justice and compassion toward those in need mark the economic philosophy of the Pentateuch (Leviticus 19:13, 35; 25:22, 37; Deuteronomy 23:24, 25). Throughout

the Old Testament, Israel is consistently reproached by the prophets for oppressing the poor, for "their ill-gotten treasures,...dishonest scales," and urged "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8-11). Unfaithfulness in returning tithes and offerings was considered tantamount to robbing God (Malachi 3:8, 9).

However, the economic reforms God sought to bring about failed to materialize due to greed and disregard for His counsels. Into that socio-economic context came the teachings of Jesus.

The economics of Jesus

Although the framework for restoring the equilibrium had been put in place about two millennia earlier, when Jesus appeared on the scene, the system was in decay and barely reflected the original design. Even the temple court in Jerusalem, meant to be a sacred arena, had been turned into a marketplace. In His most important discourse at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus spoke pointedly on economic matters: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Christ urged His listeners not to be overly concerned about their earthly needs. He pointed out how His Father provided for the rest of His creation, and assured them that they were even more important. In His encounters with people and in His parables, Jesus continued to stress the dangers of being preoccupied with earthly possessions. As Richard Foster observed, "Jesus spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the kingdom of God."² When the young rich ruler declined the call to sell his possessions, give them to the poor, and follow Him,

Jesus told His disciples how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:21-24). The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus also reminds us of the eternal consequences of ignoring the needs of our fellow human beings and devoting our resources to self-gratification (Luke 16:19-31). The ultimate economic advice that Jesus wants to convey is "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Each of us is faced with the choice of whether to serve God or material possessions. According to Jesus, we cannot have it both ways (Luke 16:13). The Book of Revelation tells us that our loyalty to God will be tested by an economic embargo imposed on those who remain true to God. "He [the evil one]...forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name" (Revelation 13:16, 17). Whether we remain true to God will largely depend upon our readiness to detach ourselves from material possessions.

We see this in how Satan tempted Jesus with earthly possessions during their encounter in the wilderness. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only"'" (Matthew 4:8-10). There is little doubt that the seduction of riches is one of the most powerful and effective weapons in the devil's arsenal to entice us—one that many consider harmless, which makes it even more deadly. Jesus' advice to put the service of God ahead of every other consideration is our model and one sure way around anything the devil will

throw at us. We dare not allow him to dim our vision with a dazzling display of fancy gadgets that become obsolete overnight, leaving us forever chasing an elusive dream.

The final outcome

Economics is about making choices as to how best to satisfy our material wants within a limited temporal horizon. But Jesus said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). The Bible evaluates our choices within the framework of eternity. Bible prophecies indicate that we are moving rapidly toward the end of this earth's history. On that day, God will destroy all who have made this world their all, along with everything that they treasured here. But there is a new earth that will be inherited by those of whom this world was not worthy (Hebrews 11:38). If we keep our eyes focused on eternal realities, the folly of trading the goods of this world for the joys that await the redeemed will become obvious. Meanwhile, we cannot afford to lose sight of some vital biblical economic principles.

General biblical principles

1. *God created the world to provide for our physical needs and for those around us.* Nowhere in the Bible is mere abundance condemned. In fact, the Bible names a number of godly men whom God blessed with riches, such as Job, Abraham, and David, none of whom was corrupted by riches. For Christians who are similarly blessed, Paul gives the following advice: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way, they will lay treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that

they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

2. *Preoccupation with earthly possessions is a snare set by the enemy to distract us from true riches.* Again, Paul shares the following insight: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9, 10). Given the prevailing obsession with material success that we find across the globe and Satan's awareness that his time is short, we must be on guard and avoid being entangled in this highly seductive pursuit.

3. *The Bible does not discourage us from engaging in secular economic activities as long as our employment is honorable and our dealings are honest.* Many of the individuals who lent financial and other material support to the early Christian church were well-to-do business people and gifted crafts persons. The list includes Aquila and Priscilla who were tentmakers in Corinth (Acts 18:2, 3) and Lydia who was "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira" (Acts 16:14). Another rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, took upon himself the responsibility of ensuring a dignified burial for the Saviour he had chosen to follow. There are undoubtedly many modern-day believers who have given sacrificially to advance God's kingdom on this planet, and all of us can participate regardless of the means at our disposal. Remember the widow and her two mites!

4. *We should cultivate simplicity.* "Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf" (Proverbs 11:28). Riches are often a temporary blessing that can be lost in a moment. Paul counseled members of the church at Philippi: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but

in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). We are called to be the light and the salt of the earth, and our task is to shed light where there is darkness, and to provide savor where life has lost all meaning.

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Notes and references:

- * All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.
- 1. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1940), p. 324.
- 2. Richard J. Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), p. 19.