

Of One Heart and Soul

sermon digest

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Acts 4:31-37

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When we set out on this journey through biblical economics several weeks ago, Carolyn cited the slogan attributed to James Carville in the 1992 presidential election, "It's the economy, stupid," to note the importance of economics in our lives. As the story goes, Carville hung a sign with three statements in the Little Rock campaign headquarters intended only for the eyes of the campaign staff. The economic recession led to focus on the economy and the public exposure of the slogan that was credited with winning the election. A couple of years later I quoted the slogan, negatively I might add, in a sermon and was chided by a parent because it contained the uncivil word *stupid* that she was trying to eliminate from her son's vocabulary.

We have an economics problem. I was sympathetic and apologized; however, others thought the pejorative term was *economy* rather than *stupid*. Steve Keen's 2001 book *Debunking Economics: The Naked Emperor of the Social Sciences* sets out to establish (p. 1) "Why the public needs to know that economics is intellectually unsound." The primary complaint was that economists claim mathematic high ground that it cannot hold in the real world. In 2000, a group of French economics students published online a complaint about the classroom approach to their field. Professors of economics claim mathematical precision for their field that does not fit reality. They called it "autistic," divorced from reality. The science of economics is like the weather forecast. The forecast is often wrong, but we keep listening because of the importance of the weather to life, and it is the only game in town.

In 1776, Adam Smith's *Wealth of the Nations*, established the direction of modern economics on concern for "self-interest." The crass side of the principle is portrayed in the movie "Wall Street" in Gordon Gekko's famous "Greed is good" speech. If you recall the movie, the Wall Street tycoon was portrayed as cold, calculating, and cruel with absolutely no interest or concern for who gets hurt.

In ancient Greece, Aristotelian economics was primarily concerned with the ethical, social issues of managing and distributing consumable resources. The primary concern of economics was the common good, not a way to land on top. An interesting article turned up in *Christian Century* in 1995 (Feb 22) written by an economics professor Robin Klay and one of his students C. Gryzen, "Six Economic Myths Heard from the Pulpit." The article noted that most economists affirm Adam Smith's powerful incentive "self-interest" and free markets as servant to the public good. As I read the article, I realized that the sermons we have delivered for the past several weeks have been up to our necks in repeating Klay's "Economic Myths." I would acknowledge that the economics professor was not trying to debunk the church or to ridicule pastors. I would agree with his statement, "No economic system, however well articulated, mimics the kingdom of God," and with many of his arguments that economists promote the general welfare. His school Hope College was founded in 1851 as a Christian college in the Reformed tradition, and his article is laden with endorsements of capitalism attributed to John Calvin.

The global food crisis became public knowledge in the 1970's and set in motion pressure on institutions, religious and secular, to feed the hungry of the world. I recall a maxim that grew out of the effort: "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach him to fish and feed him for a lifetime." A missionary in Bangladesh followed this principle to build and stock fish ponds in that poverty-stricken country. The Heifer International project endorses this principle; certainly good economics.

However, the Christian conscience cannot ignore the poor and hungry of the world who have nowhere to fish, no ground on which to grow food, and often inadequate physical strength and health to work. Shall Christians apply the principles of Spenserian Darwinism, masquerading as good economics, "survival of the fittest," or in most cases, the wealthiest? "Them that has, gets" becomes the guiding principle of economics that perhaps causes pastors to promote "Economic Myths." Professor Klay does a good job of presenting arguments that protect the interests of business, while demonstrating that the people at the bottom of the pile need to wait for the economics to trickle down to their level. He seems to have no interest or awareness that some folks die while waiting for the economy to reach them.

We have a Christian model. Well, here I go again. The Christian principle of economics is more

concerned with the people who are at the bottom of the pile than the folks at the top. Biblical economics elaborate principles of sharing in the tradition of Jewish Jubilee, leaving grain in the field for the poor, and condemning usury, and compassion for the poor and the stranger. Biblical economics seems to put God on the side of the bottom side of society. Steve Keen takes on (p. 23) “The Calculus of Hedonism: why the individual pursuit of self-interest does not maximize social welfare.” He accuses modern economists of living in the pocket of the wealthy and ignoring the pain of the poor.

I recall my first real encounter with poverty. I was a freshman university student. I had taken a ministry job leading music and youth for ten dollars a week in a rural community, Aquilla, Texas. Since I spent the entire day Sunday in Aquilla, someone had to feed me. There were no eating establishments or stores in the rural community. One Sunday we were invited to lunch with a rather large family. The wife worked at a cleaners in Hillsboro operating a pressing machine, while the husband struggled to run a small farm. We sat down to a very meager meal of one chicken cut into enough pieces to give everyone a bite. I realized that the children had been instructed in advance to take what was left after the guests were served. I sort of lost my eighteen-year-old appetite that day, and I felt bad about taking my ten dollars.

Having grown up in a thriving industrial economy where anyone who could breathe could get a fairly decent job, I suddenly discovered that my experience was not the whole world. The people we visited that day were not lacking in intelligence or effort. They lacked education and opportunity, and I doubt that any of their children would ever be able to attend the large university thirty miles away.

An ancient solution to economic deprivation is a blip on the radar of the early church in Acts. A large part of Acts deals with economic issues relative to the situation of a Jewish minority trying to survive under the domination of the pagan Roman Empire on one side and the Jewish religious establishment on the other. New Testament scholar David May reminds us that the first century economic context of Christians was not identical to ours. We may find similarities, but we need to be careful about taking descriptive moments in biblical church history as prescriptive rules for social structure. The communal existence of this church was a solution for the time and place that was not attempted on a larger scale.

I recall a lot of backpedaling in my youth about the rather shocking statement in Acts that early Christians may have been communists: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” I came of age during the cold war with the Soviet Union, the days of the John Birch Society when *communist* was treated like a four-letter word and Christians were certain that whatever the early church did with property, it could not be called *communism*. It certainly could not be called Marx-Lenin *communism*, but it certainly contained elements that the atheist Karl Marx saw as the ultimate end of the communist revolution—no poor among us. The fiscal idea of depositing all membership wealth in one bank account is beyond comprehension. No wonder this idealistic venture of the early church has been treated as an experiment rather than a model for the proper organization of the church, but a few exceptions should be noted: some of the Roman Catholic religious orders, some Anabaptist bodies of the Reformation, the Shakers of American origin, and no less than Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farm started in 1942. We might also note that many of the nineteenth century attempts to build utopia were communal economies that often broke down because of the exploitation of the people by the leaders.

In a hostile environment, secular as well as religious groups have historically turned to a communal economic existence in order to survive. This seems to be the desperate direction taken by the early Christians, but the economic light should not rest on the social structure that was chosen. The objective of their commune, “not a needy person among them,” is the real story here. The economic image of Christian community was not the norm; it was the ideal, the rare, or maybe the ultimate hope.

Whether or not some economist or capitalist decides that this is bad economics, the question we must ask as followers of Jesus is whether the elimination of poverty is worth claiming as our ultimate end as church. If we do, we will have to continue to talk about money and politics in the church.