

## Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

# Economics

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# Editorial

Gordon Zerbe

*“Love the LORD your God . . . with all your strength.”  
(Deut. 6:5)*

**T**aking “strength” in Deuteronomy 6:5 to denote property, productive and financial assets—an interpretation Jesus agreed with (see Mark 12:28–44)—the Essene voluntary renewal movement required all who covenanted with the community to present a full financial disclosure of assets. The community imposed serious penalties for lying in matters of wealth, and members made vows never to obtain wealth unjustly and to take special care of the neighbor, especially those who were oppressed, poor, or migrants. Displaying many similarities to the picture of the earliest assemblies of Jesus loyalists in Jerusalem (Acts 2–6), some Essene

**Drawing on a shared scriptural heritage, New Testament writings and Essene writings display a marked interest in what we would call economics, including systemic analysis but also personal conduct.**

communities took this understanding to involve a commitment to full economic community and the renunciation of private property, while other streams of Essenes required members in their various livelihoods to contribute around 10 percent of their income to a common pool to sustain a system of mutual aid and assistance to people in need in their region.

Drawing on a shared scriptural heritage, New Testament writings and Essene writings, now recovered as the Dead Sea Scrolls,

display a marked interest in what we would call economics, including systemic economic analysis but also directives for communal, interpersonal, and personal conduct in the realm of economics. Like the Gospels, the Scrolls include warnings about the seductive power of Mammon, denunciations of the ruling class of Judea for their oppression of or insensitivity toward the poor,

pronouncements on the literal applicability of sabbath-year and jubilee-year legislation, and affirmations of the virtues of renouncing any personal striving for wealth.<sup>1</sup>

When the apostle Paul presented his gospel to the apostolic “pillars” in Jerusalem, and solidified a formal partnership with them, he claims that the only particular stipulation they laid on him was that he take seriously the economic aspects of Jesus’s teaching—that he “remember the poor”—something he claimed he was already eagerly committed to doing (Gal. 2:9–10). Paul’s own letters show a remarkable interest in economic relationships, in particular toward forms of local and global mutualism under

**When Paul presented his gospel to the “pillars” in Jerusalem, the only particular stipulation they laid on him was that he take seriously the economic aspects of Jesus’s teaching—that he “remember the poor.”**

the framework of partnership (without a hierarchy of donors and clients) and equality, where ultimately no one has either excess or lack, replicating the manna economy of the wilderness. Mutual aid appropriate to a partnership, says Paul, is an obligation in obedience to the gospel, but still somehow voluntary as a display of love.<sup>2</sup>

Ancient writers, biblical and extrabiblical, did not conceptualize economics as a distinct and separate domain of life. Rather, what we call economics (pertaining to various relationships of production, exchange, and consumption) was embedded in the varied relationships and traditions of local communities, of kinship, and of politics. Ancient economic realities (relationships and structures) and concepts were so different from those of the modern capitalist world that the particular relevance or application of many biblical perspectives or directives at times seems elusive. For instance, we live in a world in which most of our economic relationships are completely abstract, monetized, and impersonal (“the market”). What the Bible invites us to recover is the concrete, personal dimensions of economic relationships (pertaining to our neighbors near and far): our relationships to the means of production, to modes of exchange and distribution, and to the dynamics of consumption.

This issue of *Vision* is designed as a sampler on economics in quite general terms, engaging different topics and various parts of

our scriptures, from differing perspectives and in varied contexts. In assembling them here, I hope that these diverse contributions

**The Bible invites us to recover the concrete, personal dimensions of economic relationships to the means of production, to modes of exchange and distribution, and to the dynamics of consumption.**

will provide inspiration for continued wrestling with the economic dimensions of the gospel, working out what it means to love God with our strength, using the various aspects of our assets.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See further my “Economic Justice and Non-retaliation in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Implications for New Testament Interpretation,” in *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*, vol. 3 of *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 319–55.

<sup>2</sup> See further my “‘Partnership’ and ‘Equality’: Paul’s Economic Theory,” in *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2012), 75–92.

### About the editor

Gordon Zerbe is professor of New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has been teaching an undergraduate course on “New Testament Economics” for the last fifteen years, bringing students majoring in business, international development, theology, and other fields into animated and productive conversation.

## The pastor must not flee Speaking to economic justice

J. Nelson Kraybill

**M**aria from my congregation in Indiana reported during Advent 2013 that the body of her twenty-one-year-old nephew Roberto had been found in the Arizona desert.<sup>1</sup> The young man was from Maria's hometown in Honduras, making his way to *El Norte* in search of a living wage and a stable society. Crossing the desert undocumented, he broke his ankle in an isolated place and ran out of water before he could get to help.

The family needed to raise thousands of dollars to get the body back to Central America for burial. Since neither Maria nor most

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of her relatives in Elkhart have documents, they could not travel to Honduras for the funeral and had to grieve here.

More tragedy visited the family on the same week that Maria got news of Roberto's death: her twenty-seven-year-old cousin in Honduras was murdered, the victim of gang activity or drug traffic retribution.

On the Sunday after Maria got all this news, I had planned to begin my pastoral prayer with the text, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." I had not anticipated when I prepared for worship that just before prayer I would share news with the congregation of a young man dying in the desert. The confluence of ancient prophecy and present tragedy shook me to the core.

### Who is responsible?

It is too simple to suggest that the United States alone is responsible for such suffering among Latin American peoples, but my country has not always been helpful. I wear clothing and buy products produced in Latin America and elsewhere at salaries far

below minimum wage in my homeland. In the name of democracy, and sometimes even in the name of Christianity, my country has tried to destroy governments in Latin America that threatened the access of North American businesses to natural resources and cheap labor.

Trapped on lower rungs of a global economic and political ladder, some impoverished people in Latin America turn to unhappy alternatives for survival. Some get involved in narcotics trafficking for drugs to be sold in North American cities, including Elkhart. Gangs emerge in Latin America as unemployed people seek power or identity in violent associations. Millions desperate for opportunity or a stable society risk their lives to come illegally across the border into the United States.

### **Hosted in Latin America**

Four years ago, before heading back into pastoral leadership, I spent a month in intensive Spanish-language instruction in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. I wanted both to improve my language ability and to have sustained contact with people in a developing country. For two hundred dollars a week I was hosted—lodging and meals—in a private home. The fee I paid included four hours daily of one-on-one language instruction with a teacher who had a master's degree in linguistics. It was cheaper for me to study and be hosted in Central America for a month than to live at home in Indiana.

Even as a pastor on church worker salary, I was a wealthy visitor in a country where the average per capita income is \$240 per month.<sup>2</sup> The household where I stayed always had a nearly empty refrigerator; the family lived too close to the edge financially to stock food in advance for more than a day or two. An adult son in the household was working undocumented in New York—and regularly forwarded money to Guatemala that would allow him upon return to build a house for his wife and children who remained in Central America.

My language teacher took me on a trip across Guatemala aboard *camionetas*—brightly painted, smoke-belching public buses that people in Central America use daily. These are recycled American school buses retired from carrying schoolchildren in *El Norte*. “Guatemala is the rubbish bin of the United States,” my

teacher said matter-of-factly. “We use your old buses, cell phones, appliances, and computers.”

### **The pastor should not flee**

Civil war devastated Guatemala from 1960 to 1996, killing more than 200,000 people, and it was not just a local feud. Guatemala was one square of a global chessboard on which empires competed for political hegemony and access to cheap resources.

A martyr from that war captivated me, and I wanted to see where he lived and died in Guatemala. I traveled to the indigenous Mayan village of Santiago Atitlán, on the edge of Lake Atitlán in the central highlands. Nestled in stunning beauty

between volcanoes, Santiago Atitlan was an epicenter of violence when fratricide tore apart the nation.

Inside the austere Catholic church in Santiago Atitlán, the gentle eyes of Father Stanley Rother gaze down from a large photograph. Below the picture is a quote from this Oklahoma native who spent thirteen years ministering in the maelstrom of civil war: *El pastor no debe huir* (The pastor must not flee).

**Below Father Stanley Rother's photo in the Catholic church in Santiago Atitlán is a quote from this man who spent thirteen years ministering in the maelstrom of civil war: *El pastor no debe huir* (The pastor must not flee).**

The story behind Rother's midnight martyrdom in 1981 goes back at least to 1952, when Jacobo Arbenz was president of

the country. His government decided that United Fruit Company—a North American enterprise—could no longer monopolize farmland to raise bananas for export when many Guatemalans were hungry. Vast tracts of land had been *given* to the fruit company by a previous Guatemalan government in exchange for building a railroad—a railroad that the fruit company then monopolized to export their products. Without taking land already in production, Arbenz expropriated United Fruit Company properties that were lying fallow, and distributed farms to 100,000 landless peasants.

### **The octopus of economic reach**

With imagery reminiscent of the beast in Revelation 13, some



journalists of the era referred to United Fruit Company as *el pulpo* (the octopus) because its tentacles were everywhere. The fruit company had close connections with the Eisenhower administration in an era when many Americans saw communism as a global threat. Not surprisingly, there was a military coup in Guatemala in 1954, orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency. Decades of dictatorship followed. Peasants lost farms that Arbenz had expropriated for their use. Resentment and poverty boiled into revolt in 1960, followed by thirty-six years of civil war.

Indigenous (Indian) people—40 percent of the population—were the poorest in Guatemala. Many received land under Arbenz, and some joined the armed resistance. During the 1982–83 presidency of “born again” General Efraín Ríos Montt—a man championed by American televangelist Pat Robertson as a Christian hero—the government responded with breathtaking brutality. Scores of indigenous villages were wiped off the map, with thousands of men, women, and children massacred. The message of Ríos Montt’s *frijoles y fusiles* (beans and guns) campaign among indigenous peoples effectively was, “If you are with us, we’ll feed you. If not, we’ll kill you.”<sup>3</sup>

### **A prophet’s bold stand**

Father Rother was not a political activist, never endorsed violence, and did not align with the rebels. But he had been assigned as pastor among the dispossessed and suffering people of Santiago Atitlán, and resolved to stay through the turmoil. When twenty members of his congregation disappeared, murdered by rightwing death squads, Rother started a fund to support their families.

Anyone supporting or identifying with the poor in that politically volatile situation was in danger. Even “shaking hands with an Indian has become a political act,” Rother once wrote in a letter to friends.<sup>4</sup> Warned that he was on a death list, Rother briefly returned to Oklahoma, but came back to Santiago Atitlán just before Holy Week in 1981. *The pastor must not flee.*

At midnight in July of that year, masked gunman entered the rectory, found Rother, and shot him dead. By dawn a thousand Tzutuhil Mayans gathered in restive silence in front of the church. A Carmelite sister, sensing volatility in the situation, led grieving townspeople in singing resurrection hymns.<sup>5</sup>

## Be part of a better future

Part of my pastoral prayer on the week Maria got bad news was, “God, forgive us as a nation for taking much of this continent from indigenous and native peoples, then telling them they cannot come in because the land is ours now. Forgive us for buying cheap clothing made by people who do not receive a living wage.”

Neither I nor my congregation is directly to blame for poverty and violence in Latin America, and guilt mongering has little effect. But personal connection to economic and political suffering in another country awakened me and my congregation. We might be part of a better future. We might lobby for immigration reform. We might be willing to pay more for bananas or shirts so international companies can provide adequate salaries in Honduras.

**Neither I nor my congregation is directly to blame for poverty and violence in Latin America, and guilt mongering has little effect. But personal connection to economic and political suffering in another country awakened us.**

We might share the benefits of democracy, health care, and education with other nations rather than pedaling arms.

Despite our professed political ideology as a nation, it did not matter half a century ago that President Arbenz of Guatemala was democratically elected. When he no longer served American national interests, the United States had him removed. We might contact lawmakers and insist that foreign policy consider what is best for people in distant lands, not simply what will protect our economic interests. We might recognize that the United States, Canada, and a few other

highly industrialized countries collectively manage imperial interests that sometimes shade into idolatry and greed.

## Empires bring good and bad

Since the dawn of recorded history, empires have been a reality, and they bring good along with the bad. United Fruit Company built railroads, worked to eradicate malaria, and often paid the highest wages in rural Guatemala. But *wealth* went to stockholders in North America. Just enough wealth went to Guatemalan elites to get them to pacify their own people. This pattern of empires using local indigenous rulers to serve the interests of empire goes

back to biblical times. In Jesus's day it was the Herod family pacifying and subduing the Jewish people on behalf of Rome.

Chilean author Pablo Neruda, in his 1950 poem "La United Fruit Company," uses scathing sarcasm to depict how international companies extended empire into his country:

Cuando sonó la trompeta,  
estuvo todo preparado en la tierra,  
y Jehova repartió el mundo  
a Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors, y otras entidades:  
la Compañía Frutera Inc.  
se reservó lo más jugoso,  
la costa central de mi tierra,  
la dulce cintura de América . . .

*When the trumpet sounded  
everything was prepared on earth,  
and Jehovah gave the world  
to Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors, and other corporations.  
The United Fruit Company  
reserved for itself the most juicy  
piece, the central coast of my world,  
the delicate waist of America . . .*

### **Biblical empires**

Empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece all appear as prominent actors on the stage of Old Testament history. In the New Testament, the single prominent international power is the Roman Empire. Rome appears as a harlot in the book of Revelation, and its empire is a beast. The harlot city is "fornicating" with kings of the earth, drawing them into illicit economic, military, and spiritual alliance.

When the author of Revelation anticipated the collapse of the "harlot" Babylon/Rome and its empire, he gave a harsh summary of how the imperial economy worked: "All the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants

of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury. . . . And in [Babylon/Rome] was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth” (Rev. 18). In these phrases we see the shadow side of empire: a web of political, military, and economic power ends up killing saints and countless anonymous victims—saints such as Stanley Rother in Guatemala, victims such as Roberto in the desert of Arizona.

### **Empires dazzle**

The Roman Empire was dazzling with its magnificent architecture, impressive administration, invincible army, and promise of economic opportunity. The much-celebrated *pax Romana* (Roman peace) brought a kind of stability to the Mediterranean world that millions welcomed—although there always was a veiled fist or unsheathed sword to accompany the *pax*.

The liturgical or patriotic expression of first-century collaboration with Rome was emperor worship. Herod the Great, even while magnificently rebuilding the temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem, was constructing centers of emperor worship in Palestine at Caesarea, Sebaste (Samaria), and Baniyas (Caesarea Philippi).

This is the paradox of empires: they typically espouse noble ideology or religion but also use brutal force to secure political and economic advantage. The “peace” of the Roman Empire, backed by divine emperors and legions of soldiers, ultimately led

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to the crucifixion of Jesus and destruction of Jerusalem. Lofty ideals of socialism, protected with machine guns, ended up with a *gulag* in the Soviet Union. Pursuit of democracy, safeguarded by the Central Intelligence Agency, led to the coup against a democratically elected president in Guatemala in 1954. Today troops from democratic and “Christian” Western powers occupy and subdue Iraq and Afghanistan, with the result that hun-

dreds of thousands have died.

### **Pope Francis**

Recently the new bishop of Rome—the first from Latin America—stepped into the global limelight to address economic issues:

*Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? . . . Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape (Evangelii Gaudium 53).*

Here a Catholic leader addresses issues that make this Mennonite uncomfortable. I am accustomed to speaking out on peace issues. But am I ready to preach and act on matters of global economic

**I am accustomed to speaking out on peace issues. But am I ready to preach and act on matters of global economic justice that impinge upon my lifestyle or my retirement accounts? Can this pastor flee from speaking out about a growing gap between rich and poor?**

justice that impinge upon my lifestyle or my retirement accounts? Can this pastor flee from speaking out about a growing gap between rich and poor in North America and around the world?

### **What am I willing to risk?**

Paul the Apostle worked to bring economic sharing across international boundaries by getting relatively wealthy churches of Macedonia and Greece to contribute to an impoverished church at Jerusalem. Paul bases his argument for economic sharing on the incarnation: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was

rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Economic justice and sharing are linked to the theological core of Christian faith; they are not optional extras.

As my congregation responds to the deaths of Maria’s Latin American relatives—tragedies related to economic inequality—we also will consider Paul’s commitment to take risks to address

injustice. Paul made a risky trip to Jerusalem to carry the money gift, and ended up a prisoner in Rome after the disturbance his visit to Jerusalem caused. Most historians think Paul died when Nero killed Christians after the great fire in Rome in AD 64. Paul died because his missionary vision included economic justice.

What am I willing to risk for economic justice in service to the gospel? *The pastor must not flee.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Both “Maria” and “Roberto” are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank estimate for 2011. See [http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/gtm\\_aag.pdf](http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/gtm_aag.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Victor Perera, *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 330. In 2013 a Guatemalan court convicted Rios Montt of genocide and sentenced him to eighty years in prison. *New York Times*, May 10, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Perera, *Unfinished Conquest*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> John Rosengren, *St. Anthony Messenger*, 2006; online at <https://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/jul2006/feature1.asp>.

## About the author

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## Companionship on Seattle streets From transaction to mutuality in ministry

Jonathan and Melanie Neufeld

**W**hen Seattle Mennonite Church decided in the early 1990s to purchase and renovate a mothballed movie theater as its home for worship and congregational life, the group made the decision largely on practical grounds related to the affordability of the building and access to parking. What God put before the congregation as a result of our move into the commercial hub of the Lake City neighborhood we could not have anticipated.

**Seattle Mennonite Church and neighborhood people experiencing homelessness were sharing the same space, and the congregation needed to wrestle with questions of what and how much they were called to offer in response.**

It is natural that when people experience homelessness and other kinds of suffering resulting from poverty, they seek help wherever they can get it. Seattle Mennonite Church is the congregation located closest to the heart of our neighborhood, so people in need come to our building. Young adults in the congregation recall times when as children they would arrive for Sunday morning

worship and would have to step around people sleeping outside the doors who had sought sanctuary in the courtyard of the church building.

The church and the community of people experiencing homelessness were sharing the same space, and the congregation needed to wrestle with questions of what and how much they were called by God to offer in response. People in traumatic crisis who attended church on Sunday morning had a significant impact on the congregation's worship life, and staff working in the building during the week were overwhelmed by the emergencies that cropped up daily to consume seemingly endless amounts of energy and time.

## Offering companionship

Not wanting to control the planning process, not wanting to act out of an assumption that the congregation knew what our neighbors who were experiencing homelessness needed, we began to invite people in the community to join us for a shared meal every

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month. These monthly meals became the context for our learning how to offer companionship.

The meals were characterized by careful listening, in the belief that the one who is experiencing suffering of whatever kind has an inner awareness of what she longs for and what her hopes are for her future. Yes, this inner awareness can be shrouded by experiences of trauma, poverty, abuse, and addiction, but these deep intentions and identity

remain. This inner sense of self is God's gift to every person, and it roots in every person a sense of worth, identity, and purpose in life. The intention of companionship is to listen for and coax out this inner awareness which coexists with and is enmeshed in the experience of suffering.

## Avoiding transactional ministry

One outcome of this companionship and deep listening was an effort to avoid familiar patterns of transactional ministry, in which one group is seen to have superior knowledge, excess wealth, and surplus resources needed by another group, which simply need to be given or transferred to the people in need. This model of ministry has been likened to what happens in clonal colonies of Aspen trees. Aspen colonies are forests of thousands of trees, covering many hectares of land, all derived from one seedling and connected by one root system. This forest of trees can deliver nutrients through its roots from locations of abundance to the places where they are needed. This kind of redistribution of economic resources has a definite place in the mission of the church, especially in response to emergencies including natural and other disasters. This model is relevant for the church and society as we respond to inequity on a personal, systemic, local, and global scale.



But if relationships are based solely on a model of transaction in which people with relative privilege give resources to people in poverty (of whatever kind), the result can be even greater imbalance and inequity. In such places of imbalance, resentment can enter relationships, as people in communities of relative privilege feel that all they are being asked to do is give, give, and give again, while the resilience, giftedness, and talents of people on the receiving end of redistribution are undermined and left to languish, hidden from view.

Seeking to avoid this familiar scenario that transactional ministry can create, and attempting to set ourselves on a path toward shared experience, mutuality, and collaborative ministry, Seattle Mennonite began with fellowship, with human-to-human

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connection. These times of fellowship were the setting for asking questions: What is the experience of homelessness like in our neighborhood? What resources can we all contribute to our response, in ways that are person-centered, trauma-informed, and recovery-oriented?

### **Stop, drop, and roll**

Our neighbors experiencing homelessness expressed a desire to make it to medical appointments, follow through on housing opportunities, and look for work. But carrying all your belongings on your back inhibits your ability to pursue your goals. And large backpacks not only create chronic pain and physical impairment, they also put your experience of homelessness on display and so subject you to stigma, fear, and exclusion by the broader community. The alternative to carrying your bag on your back is to stash it in a bush or behind a dumpster and thus run the risk of losing everything to theft or the “litter patrol.”

Seattle Mennonite Church has a building, and it could be used to store people’s belongings. *Stop, Drop and Roll* was born as a result of conversation with these neighbors. It is a safe storage program: people can *stop* by first thing in the morning, *drop* off their things, and use the restrooms to freshen up and then *roll* out into the day in search of work or to get to their appointments—

without fear of losing what little they had, and without the stigma and the physical strain of carrying all their belongings on their backs. In the evening the church opens again to allow people to claim their belongings and share a meal.

### **Kitchen access**

Also emerging from the companionship of fellowship was a second kind of collaboration. People experiencing homelessness in the congregation's neighborhood did not lack access to food but did need a place to prepare it. Food stamp programs and food banks had plenty to offer, but much of it was unappetizing when eaten cold or raw. Most churches have kitchens, and Seattle Mennonite's became the community kitchen for Stop, Drop, and Roll.

People could be overheard discussing menu options, each one offering to collect a needed ingredient. The evening hours would see the arrival of people and ingredients, and in short order a shared meal would emerge from their contributions and preparations. These were truly times when one could witness how the pooling of resources had a multiplying effect in the experience of the group. Yes, the congregation has resources to contribute to the response to homelessness, but those resources are shared as one part of a larger whole. That dynamic invites everyone to contribute what they can for the benefit of the group.

What could be more valuable than creating space in which people—even as they live with homelessness, mental illness, addiction, or other chronic conditions—can share their gifts and talents? One sometimes hears a Christian declare that he won't help someone who struggles with addictions, because he doesn't want to enable self-destructive behaviours. Perhaps that is an effort at self-justification, an excuse for doing nothing to help. Enabling need not be seen as a bad thing; it can also be needed encouragement, placing opportunities in front of people that can become occasions for making healthier choices and reducing harm. Instead of withholding opportunities until people have proven themselves to be deserving or worthy, we hope to participate in creating settings in which people can pursue recovery.

### **God's Li'l Acre**

Now, more than seven years since the inception of Stop, Drop,

and Roll as a weekly affair, these familiar rhythms recur Monday through Friday at our day center. The center has been named by community members; they call it God's Li'l Acre. It is a place of predictability, safety, and sanctuary in the midst of a sometimes hostile world—which could only be of God.

An early spokesman from the community likened the day center to an watering hole in the savannas of Africa, a place where a variety of animals come, rest, drink, and do not consume one another. This same man, so incredibly invested in our shared discernment and so gracious in calling our congregation into relationship, clearly identified our task as a congregation in and with community. He would often pray, "May the prick of compassion be the hammer that helps us drive our nails straight."

We still get calls from congregations who hear about what we are doing and want to help by making sandwiches for people experiencing homelessness. We have to explain yet again that we don't provide food for our neighbors, just a place for them to feed themselves and one another. What we could use though, we tell them, is your time, your presence, your encouragement, your love, and your openness to being loved by someone whose life

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experience may be very different from your own. Our intention is to point away from the familiar experience of transactional ministry toward the abundance that can be experienced in community.

One definition of homelessness is the experience of being totally and completely alone: of knowing that at the end of the day that there is no one alongside you, no one to share life with you, no one to encourage you, no one there but you. No one thrives in complete isolation. Our long-term intention

in focusing on companionship and fellowship is to be part of creating experiences of community. It all begins with one-on-one, human-to-human connections. It doesn't come about when the person of relative privilege seeks to save or change the person who is suffering. Instead there must be a deep listening for the words, the dreams, the hopes that are already within the individual.

When a person is ready to move toward a future she dreams of and hopes for, what she may need most is a companion, someone to walk alongside her as she steps onto a new old path. It is a path that will lead to other people, in churches, in agencies, and in care centers. Through such companionship we participate in opening up the possibility of rebuilding the true wealth of a society for one who is suffering. It is the wealth of community, a web of caring, a cloud of witnesses, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Such a community welcomes every person and depends on the wealth that emerges when each of us brings the gifts God has given us, for the blessing and growth of the whole.

### **Note**

For a deeper exploration of companionship and community building, read *Souls in the Hand of a Tender God: Stories of the Search for Home and Healing on the Streets*, by Craig Rennebohm and David W. Paul (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008); and *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

### **About the authors**

Jonathan and Melanie Neufeld have served Seattle Mennonite Church as community ministers since 2007. They are blessed to be able to encourage and be witnesses to the incredible transformation that can occur when a neighborhood comes together to work to end the experience of homelessness.

# God has sent the rich away empty

Mary H. Schertz

**F**or all Jesus's emphasis on wealth and possessions, especially in Luke but in the other Gospels as well, the topic gets short shrift in the contemporary church. Money—how we use it and how we feel about it—may be the only issue of discussion more sensitive, and more fraught, than sexuality.

**In the contemporary church, money—how we use it and how we feel about it—may be the only issue of discussion more sensitive, and more fraught, than sexuality.**

Still, if one reads the Gospel of Luke, particularly if one reads it through as a whole, the way one reads a biography or novel, it's hard to escape the centrality this issue has in the good news of the gospel. The song Mary sings, as she is putting together what has happened to her personally with what this strange pregnancy means for her people, is a case in point. She rejoices that God's act in her life includes bringing down the mighty and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53). Luke alters Matthew's beatitude about the poor in spirit in significant ways. He omits "in spirit," and he adds a correlative woe: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your comfort already" (6:24).<sup>1</sup> These differences make it difficult to argue that Luke is using poverty and wealth as spiritual metaphors. Rather, in Luke's Gospel Jesus is talking about real-life poverty and real-life wealth.

Jesus's teaching about poverty and wealth continues in the travel narrative in Luke (chapters 9–19). Again, Luke alone of the evangelists includes harsh cautionary tales about the use and misuse of wealth. In Luke, Jesus tells the story of the rich farmer who planned to tear down his small barns, build bigger ones, and relax in his great wealth (12:13–21)—only to die that very night. Jesus tells the story about the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31). Here he describes a rich man and Lazarus, a very poor one. Both

have died: Lazarus is resting at the side of Abraham while the rich man is in torment. The problem here, as Jesus points out, is that in life Lazarus begged in vain for crumbs from the rich man's table.

With stories and sayings like these, we might conclude, as the disciples did at one point, that rich people cannot belong to the kingdom of God. They, and others around Jesus, bring up the

**If one reads the Gospel of Luke through as a whole, the way one reads a biography or novel, it's hard to escape the centrality the issue of wealth has in the good news of the gospel.**

issue after an encounter with a rich ruler who wanted to inherit eternal life. In that context, Jesus observes that it is harder for a rich man or woman to enter the kingdom than for a camel to be threaded through a needle. Jesus's audience is exasperated. Well, who can be saved? (18:24–25).

We, like those early followers, might well also conclude that the only way to live a faithful life in the favor of God is to renounce all earthly possessions and join the company

of the voluntarily poor. We have marvelous examples of people who have done just that. Monastics and new monastics, Anabaptist intentional communities, notable individuals such as Millard Fillmore and Mother Teresa—are all inspiring instances. Doing likewise is clearly a profoundly formational way to follow Jesus. Making a choice of voluntary poverty is a delight to God and a blessing for the church.

But the vision of Jesus (as Luke portrays him) for how we are to relate to money and possessions in our lives is broader than voluntary poverty. Jesus's vision includes all of us, whatever our calling. Living Christianly *always* involves our money, our possessions, and how we use them. This is true whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. This is true whatever our options and obligations are. This is true no matter who we are or what we do.

## **Two quest stories**

Luke has interspersed seven quest stories in his Gospel.<sup>2</sup> In these stories a person approaches Jesus with a quest for something of vital importance for human life and well-being. There are obstacles to the fulfillment of this quest—sometimes offered by the circumstances surrounding the quest, sometimes internal to the quester, and on one occasion imposed by Jesus himself. In the

course of the story these obstacles are overcome—or not—and the quest is fulfilled—or not. Three of these stories occur toward the beginning of the Gospel in the Galilean ministry section. They include the stories of the paralytic (5:17–26), the centurion and his ill slave (7:1–10), and the anointing woman (7:36–50). Three of them occur toward the end of the journey narrative as Jesus is nearing Jerusalem. They include the stories of the ten lepers (17:11–19), the rich ruler (18:18–30), and Zacchaeus (19:1–10). The last, and most poignant, is the story of the repentant thief on the cross (23:39–43), who with Jesus forms the last community of healing and hope in Jesus’s earthly ministry.

Two of these stories, those of the rich ruler and Zacchaeus, deal with money and possessions, and they are helpful in our own

**Two of the quest stories in Luke’s Gospel, those of the rich ruler and Zacchaeus, deal with money and possessions, and they are helpful in our own quest to live Christianly with material gifts.**

quest to know how to live Christianly with material gifts.

*The ruler and eternal life* (18:18–30). In the story of the rich ruler, the matter of vital human importance is the quest for eternal life. Jesus presents the obstacle. He cites the law, or part of it. The Greek word for “eternal” can also connote “abundant.” Jesus notes that what this ruler really wants is not so much to live forever but to have a meaningful, abundant life—something to which every human can relate. Jesus’s very Jewish assumption

here is that the correct following of the law is what leads to an abundant life. He speaks of five of the ten commandments. They roughly follow the order given in Deuteronomy 5:16–20.

But the ruler is not convinced. He contends that since he was young he has observed all the laws that Jesus is quoting to him. Still he lacks satisfaction. Something more is needed to fill his yearning heart.

Here at last we get to the heart of the matter, and it is yet another obstacle. For Jesus, discipleship involves keeping the law within a framework of caring for the poor and following him. In 12:33, the disciples are enjoined to sell their possessions and give alms. Here the ruler who has fulfilled the law from his youth is told that the one thing he still lacks is the distribution of his possessions to the poor. What completes a life lived within Israel’s

covenant is a concern for the poor, who have the ear of Israel's God. Treasure in heaven follows that act of discipleship.

But the ruler is unable to bridge the span. When he hears Jesus's words, he becomes sad, for, as the text tells us, "he was very rich." His response—or rather, his lack of response—leads to Jesus's observation about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Wealth once again proves to be a formidable barrier between the one who wishes to have eternal life and the entrance to abundant life in the kingdom. As we have already noted, Jesus likens wealth to a camel and access to the kingdom to the eye of a needle.

**Zacchaeus** (19:1–10). The story of Zacchaeus is a companion piece to the story of the ruler in chapter 18. Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector but a head tax collector. In his standing in the community, in his wealth and power, he is similar to the ruler. Nevertheless, the outcome of this quest story is quite different.

The differences become apparent in verse 2. Zacchaeus is seeking to see Jesus. He is not trying to justify himself by evaluating himself as a follower of the law; he is not seeking eternal life.

**Zacchaeus is a character who goes against type. While he may be the counterpart of the ruler in terms of his social location, in his looks and behavior he is more like a child.**

His goal is different. He is simply trying to see Jesus. But he cannot, because he is too short to see over the crowds. So he runs ahead and climbs a tree in order to see better. What the story sets up here in a few terse words is a character who goes against type. While Zacchaeus may be the counterpart of the ruler in terms of his social location, in his

looks and behavior he is more like a child. He becomes an example of exactly what Jesus has been saying about the kingdom being made up of those who receive it like children, his observing that with God not even getting a camel through the eye of a needle is impossible.

Zacchaeus, for all his small stature and tree-climbing ability, is fully an adult. The repentance he completes and the restitution and generosity he enacts are fully the decisions and actions of an adult. But his receptivity and enthusiasm, his charisma, are the qualities of discipleship that Jesus values in the children who come to him and the people who follow him, leaving family and



possessions, through Galilee and on the way toward Jerusalem.

Jesus tells Zacchaeus to come down from the tree because “it is necessary” that he, Jesus, stay in his—Zacchaeus’s—house today. It is a short and prosaic sentence, but it resounds with other themes in Luke’s Gospel. The appearance of the Greek *dei* (“it is necessary”) is always significant in Luke’s writing and points here, as elsewhere, to what is at the heart of God’s purposes for Jesus. Staying at Zacchaeus’s house is as much a part of the work of the incarnation as suffering, dying, and being raised are. Zacchaeus responds quickly and joyfully to the invitation to invite. Again, he exhibits those qualities of receptivity apparent in children, so difficult for jaded adults, and so essential to entering the kingdom. The childlike quality at work here is not innocence—Zacchaeus is

**The childlike quality at work here is not innocence—Zacchaeus is hardly innocent—but readiness of heart and mind to embrace the topsy-turvy values of the kingdom.**

hardly innocent—but readiness of heart and mind to embrace the topsy-turvy values of the kingdom.

Others in Zacchaeus’s community are much more typically “adult.” They grumble about Jesus’s propensity to eat with sinners. This response is typical of the resistance to his mission that Jesus has had to deal with all along. But Zacchaeus is not deaf to the grumbling, and furthermore, he accepts the judgment contained in their words. Here he

proves himself to be fully and impressively adult. He stops and announces that he intends to give half his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold anything he has gained through fraud. It is an act with public as well as private ramifications. Depending on the extent of his fraud, which is not stated in the text, Zacchaeus may not have impoverished himself completely. But he has fulfilled the requirements of the kingdom and done so with great joy and grace.

Note the order of events in this text. There is no sharp division between the work of God in Jesus, and Zacchaeus’s own movements and actions toward his salvation. Zacchaeus is seeking Jesus. Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus. The setting is a setting of communion and hospitality, and from that setting flows personal transformation as Zacchaeus responds with generosity and justice. In the end, Jesus announces that these actions and interactions are

the work of salvation, a salvation that restores Zacchaeus not only to God but to his community as well. The penultimate declaration of Jesus is that Zacchaeus is “also a son of Abraham.” In his repentance and restitution, Zacchaeus has become not only a follower of Jesus but also a restored son of Israel.

The very last statement of Jesus in this text is a statement of the purpose of the son of humanity: to seek and to save the lost. There is little doubt that Jesus is seeing in what has just happened with Zacchaeus something of a summation of his life work. Yes, this is why he is here on earth.

### **Then who can be saved?**

Many Christians in North America can and likely should identify with the rich ruler and Zacchaeus. Although few of us would

**Into our comfort comes the quiet and pointed observation of Jesus: One thing you lack. Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow. How do we meet Jesus seriously and in good faith, with his challenge before us?**

describe ourselves as wealthy, in a global sense it is likely that Jesus would include us among those for whom it is difficult to enter the kingdom of God. With the comforts of home ownership, cars, more clothes than we can wear out, more food and drink than we need, easy access to health care, and savings in the bank, comes the quiet and pointed observation of Jesus: One thing you lack. Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow.

How do we meet Jesus seriously and in good faith, with his challenge before us? How do we admit that, yes, we still yearn for that thing we lack, that abundant and eternal life? Why is this so hard?

With some hesitancy, I venture the notion that part of the problem with the way many of us and many of our churches (including congregational resource centers, publishing houses, and seminaries) have handled issues of money and possessions reflects a tendency to treat the topic ethically rather than spiritually. My hesitancy is twofold.

First, we have *spiritualized* these questions—to the detriment of the gospel, and to our own detriment. Spiritualization lets us off the hook. We think that as long as we are *willing* to give God everything we have, to sell what we have and give it to the poor and come and follow Jesus, we don’t need to actually do that. Or

we think that as long as we understand that our true wealth is heavenly, we can do whatever we want with our earthly wealth. Such mental maneuverings do a disservice to the seriousness with which Jesus addresses issues of wealth and possessions. They also do a disservice to us.

My second hesitation is that sound ethical thinking is the best antidote to spiritualization. I do not wish to play down or minimize in any way the importance of good, hard ethical thinking. It is important work in behalf of the church. We need careful thinking about consumption of goods, global economic disparities, stewardship, and war taxes. We need to consider class differences, and how those distinctions contribute to poverty. We need to look closely at poverty and its impact on society. Furthermore, we need careful study of all these issues in light of the gospel message and in light of Jesus as Luke portrays him.

### **The son of humanity came to seek and to save the lost**

But the gospel goes beyond even such careful ethical reasoning.

**The core problem is that acquisition of more than we need separates us from God and from our fellow human beings. The core possibility is that releasing what we have acquired beyond what we need brings us into unity with God and our fellow human beings.**

Jesus's teaching on wealth and possessions aims right at the heart of the matter. The core problem with wealth and possessions is, in the gospel light, also the core possibility. The core problem is that acquisition of more than we need in order to supply basic human needs separates us from God and from our fellow human beings. The core possibility is that releasing what we have acquired beyond what we need brings us into unity with God and our fellow human beings. Like the disciples who released their boats to follow Jesus, we are never asked to release wealth and possessions as an end in itself. Neither holiness nor joy is fully lodged in the release. Holiness and joy are fully lodged in the "in order to."

Release is part of that. It is the first step into freedom, a freedom for which we long, and for which we were made, whether or not we know it. Jesus covets that freedom for us. It is a freedom—holiness and joy—that brings us home at last, at home with God and at home with our fellow created beings.

Whatever the range of wealth and possessions in a congregation, this message of release, freedom, joy, and holiness is one that we need to hear. Hearing Jesus on wealth and possessions certainly does not excuse us from the difficult work of discernment. What are basic human needs? What falls outside this category of need? What defines acquisition beyond need? What does release entail? How do business opportunities, businesspeople, investment, and investors fit into the picture? How do we care for institutions in light of need, release, freedom, and joy? What happens when our responsibilities involve the basic human needs of other people, sometimes many other people?

The teachings of Jesus are meant to speak into these discussions, not circumvent them. But the goal of these discussions in the light of Christ is not perfect answers. It is not perfect Christians, or perfect congregations, or a perfect world. The goal is light, free, joyous Christians and light, free, joyous communities of faith. The goal is Christians and communities of Christians who can tackle hard questions and come to hard conclusions with an uplifted heart, a lightness of being.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless noted otherwise, translations are from the NET Bible ([net.bible.org](http://net.bible.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Tannehill, *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 1 of *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 111–29.

## About the author

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## Are the poor really blessed?

Jamie Arpin-Ricci

**A**fter nearly eight hours of standing in the sun, Amy and I were physically and emotionally exhausted.<sup>1</sup> It was a surreal time. Even the paramedics and police officers waiting with us on the street corner joined in our quiet conversation. Nervous laughter thinly covered our uncertainty and deep fear. But what had brought us together was no laughing matter.

Amy lived half a block from our home with her brother Andrew. She had been part of our life long before we formed our inner-city church, Little Flowers Community. Ever passionate about Jesus, Amy had shared with Andrew her love for and hope in Jesus, which he gladly embraced. This gifted young man soon became part of the Little Flowers family, his whole countenance changing for the better in spite of his untreated mental illness.

Which is why I had been unprepared for Amy's call earlier that morning. While she was visiting across town, she had received an emergency phone call from local police informing her that Andrew had scaled the fence opposite their home, gaining entry to a construction site. He had climbed several stories on the scaffolding there and was threatening to jump. Since I lived seconds away from her house, she asked if I would go there and wait until she arrived. Grabbing my keys, cell phone, and hat, I jogged the half block to where the police were trying to talk Andrew down.

My heart leapt into my throat as I watched him sprint across narrow, bouncing boards to the far end of the scaffolding. Throwing off the planks that made up the walkway, he cut himself off from all immediate access and leaned out over the edge. It was clear that he was terrified, confused, and not himself.

Before long, crowds began to form as people in the neighbourhood were drawn to the scene. Amy arrived, and we stood together there, watching and praying. The day dragged on. Surely after Andrew had spent so many hours high on the scaf-

folding, it was clear that he was not prepared to jump. Just in case, though, I positioned myself so that I could continue to watch him and keep Amy informed, as she stood with her back to the scene. I can only believe that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired me to stand in that way, because moments later Andrew leaped to his death. The instant he jumped, Amy saw the pain and disbelief on my face. As soon as her brother's body had fallen to the ground, grief came crashing down on her and she cried over and over: "No! No! O God, please, no!"

With Andrew's devastated sister sobbing into my chest, her fists clenched on my coat, I was overwhelmed by the gravity of what had just happened—the absolute, irreversible loss that Amy

**A common misconception is that we face a binary choice between two opposing options, material poverty or spiritual poverty. Jesus and his followers would have seen these two realities, the spiritual and the material, as inseparable aspects of a single whole.**

was feeling, that all of us were experiencing. Death is never easy, but this death was so tragic, so sudden, so violent. I had no words. All I could do was hold her and share her grief.

### **Spiritual poverty or material poverty?**

When faced with the stark reality of unimaginable suffering, our carefully articulated theology, our spiritual platitudes, and our easy assurances of salvation seem to crumble. How, in light of such loss and suffering, can we ever call ourselves blessed? Again and again in our inner-city neighbourhood, the devastation of poverty makes itself apparent,

yet all my life I have quoted this scripture without a thought: "Blessed are the poor . . ." I wonder now, what could these words possibly mean?

The phrase "poor in spirit" has been a source of great debate throughout church history. Was Jesus advocating poverty as a blessed state? Are these words a further affirmation that, like the rich young ruler, we must sell all we have and give to the poor in order to follow Jesus? Should we, like Francis of Assisi and other saints, take Jesus literally? Or is the inclusion of "in spirit" an indication that Jesus was talking about something more spiritual, relating to the attitudes of our hearts and not to actual, material poverty?

An all-too-common misconception is that we face a binary choice between two opposing options, material poverty or spiritual poverty. The posing of this choice is related to a false dichotomy that pervades our Western worldview, separating the “spiritual” world from the “material” one. Jesus and his followers, on the other hand, would have seen these two realities, the spiritual and the material, as inseparable aspects of a single whole. We must therefore consider both elements in order to understand the integrated whole.

### **Who inherits?**

The words “Blessed are the poor in spirit” would likely have called to mind several scriptural texts Jesus’s followers had heard all their lives. Poverty or humility of spirit was a posture commended in their religious texts, prayers, and other practices of faith. In the face of their enemies and their own prideful negligence, God’s people knew full well their need to be contrite in spirit and humbly dependent on God (see Ps. 34:4–6; Zeph. 3:12). Prophetic writings clearly commend living in humility and repentance: “But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2; NRSV). The King James translation of this verse makes a connection between poverty and humility or contrition: “But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.”

Familiar though Jesus’s listeners were with this language, the notion that poverty is connected to inheriting God’s kingdom would have come as something of a shock. They were not strangers to the idea of God’s reign breaking in in times of trial or exile, but salvation in those cases had come through defeat of their enemies and in liberation from bondage, often after communal repentance. Now Jesus seemed to be saying that *in the midst of their poverty* they would inherit the kingdom. Liberation from Roman oppression did not seem to be on his immediate agenda. Somehow Jesus was inaugurating a kingdom in which the weak and the defeated are his blessed heirs. This was not the messianic revolution they were expecting.

Those who seemed to be positioned to inherit were Pharisees and Sadducees, whose righteousness was characterized not so

much by humility and poverty of spirit as by careful adherence to the law, or by their exercise of priestly and political power. While ordinary people grumbled at what they saw as collusion or compromise, many recognized that these religious men had influence among their Roman overlords, thus providing at least a buffer for the Jewish community as a whole. Surely these leaders were the ones who would inherit the kingdom.

Instead, Jesus's words reflect a paradoxical shift in expectation. They foreshadow his words in Matthew 20: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26–28; NIV).

### **Taking pride in poverty?**

These words might have stirred some smug satisfaction among ordinary folk, all too eager to see the powerful and self-righteous taken down a peg. But as the implications began to sink in, their pleasure would have been short-lived. After all, if the commonly accepted categories of righteousness that kept the religious leaders

**Jesus was not inviting the poor to take pride in their poverty, as though it were evidence of their righteousness. Neither poverty nor prosperity is evidence of righteousness.**

in their positions of authority were dismantled, Jesus's new articulation would allow no one to escape responsibility. Where one's acknowledged sin and inadequacy would have provided ordinary people with an excuse to avoid living in accordance with God's commands, that very brokenness now held the potential to produce humility and contrition, to make them poor in spirit.

Jesus was not inviting the poor to take pride in their poverty, as though it were evidence of their righteousness. To adopt that view would be to make the mistake the religious leaders made, but in reverse. Neither poverty nor prosperity is evidence of righteousness. Rather, Jesus is speaking of a poverty that is not accidental or circumstantial; instead it is an intentional relinquishment. If we make poverty an external commodity with which we purchase



righteousness, we lose sight of the inner transformation born of humility and contrition that God is seeking and nurturing in us.

Jesus is declaring here that the humble and repentant heart is fertile soil for the growth of his kingdom. The poverty of spirit he desires is not a humility of false piety or exaggerated self-deprecation; he is commending the heart that knows its dependence on God for forgiveness and restoration, a heart that sees and acknowledges both the brokenness and the strengths within it. Such a heart has no place for pride manifested either in arrogance or in self-centered loathing. When we find ourselves responding to God's grace in the light of our own sinfulness, then we are already in the kingdom of God.

### **The bondage of material wealth**

With this foundation of humility and contrition clearly in place, Jesus could have avoided the language of poverty. The Greek word used for "poor" is explicitly connected to material poverty. Was Jesus using the word in an awkward way, ignoring the confusion such an association might cause? Of course not. The fact that Jesus said more about the challenges associated with material wealth than about any other topic demonstrates that he would not have casually used such language here or anywhere. It is clearly an intentional use, and we would be remiss to ignore or minimize it.

In his classic work *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, John Stott affirms the overlapping meanings of this word. First, he demonstrates that the Old Testament concept of humility and contrition was born out of a dependency rooted in material need.<sup>2</sup> Second, he recognizes a pattern: "The rich tended to compromise with surrounding heathenism; it was the poor who remained faithful to God. So wealth and worldliness, poverty and godliness went together."<sup>3</sup> While being poor in spirit entails acknowledging our spiritual bankruptcy before God, it includes a more holistic declaration of dependency.

One of the most significant hints we have that Jesus also intends in this beatitude to point to poverty as such is the parallel blessing found in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20–26). Here the list of four blessings is followed by a set of matching woes. Each blessing, then, is paired with a woe, which contrasts

with and informs the meaning inherent in the corresponding blessing. With this understanding, we can better understand Jesus's intentions. In this case, the first beatitude in Luke 6 reads: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (v. 20).

Luke clearly did not use "poor in spirit," but this fact alone does not demonstrate that Jesus intended a material application, for the connection to humility and contrition would still have been assumed by the average Jewish listener. However, when we look at the matching woe in verse 24, it becomes clearer that material poverty is in view: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort."

With this understanding, we can then recognize that the first beatitude in Matthew's Gospel is speaking to more than metaphorical poverty; rather, it makes a deliberate connection to material wealth and poverty. But the questions remain: What did Jesus mean? Was he really saying that it is a blessing to be poor?

### **Poverty is no blessing**

The combination of meanings of "poor in spirit"—pointing both to literal poverty and to humility—has often been overlooked or minimized among Christians, especially those who live in affluence. Focusing on humility and repentance, they become comfortable with that end of the spectrum, unaware of (or unwilling to contemplate) the other—material—side of Jesus's meaning and its implications for their own lives. It has been encouraging to see this trend shift in the church in recent years, bringing an increased awareness of the economic and political dimensions of Jesus's teaching. But in pursuing this corrective path, we must be careful not to make the mistake of going to the opposite extreme, focusing on the material and ignoring the spiritual aspects of poverty of spirit.

One thing has become crystal clear to me after more than fifteen years of missionary service, most of it in an inner-city context: poverty is no blessing. Billions of people worldwide needlessly suffer and die because of complex and far-reaching factors associated with poverty. Disease, exploitation, persecution, slavery, misogyny, murder, and genocide flourish in contexts where the poorest of the poor reside. This suffering was never

God's intention. In no way was Jesus saying that the dynamics of poverty are good. Rather, he was speaking of his capacity to redeem our suffering, to subvert the powers of sin and death for his glory through the power of his resurrection. The state of poverty can open up opportunities allowing us to engage redemptively with God's work in freedom from attachments, distractions, and compromises that draw us away from God.

Yet throughout the church's history Christians have had difficulty holding together the tension in these two extremes. More often than not, when Christians have failed to hold together the material and the spiritual, it has been a result not of blatant disregard but of well-intentioned but misguided emphasis on one

**Poverty is no blessing. But poverty can open up opportunities allowing us to engage with God's work in freedom from attachments, distractions, and compromises that draw us away from God.**

extreme over the other. Few of us could argue that consumerism and materialism have not had devastating and corrupting effects on the church in our culture, predisposing us to minimize, ignore, or even reject the material implications related to being "poor in spirit." But as we seek to address neglect of the material dimension, we ignore at our peril the ways neglect of poverty of spirit can lead us into dangerous territory.

Few examples better highlight the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of this spectrum than the life of St. Francis of Assisi.

The Franciscan order he founded adopted a severe vow of poverty: they would trust God to provide food and shelter through begging and working alongside the poor, with whom they generously shared. The Franciscan friars were mendicants, relying for their survival entirely on alms given to them. While Francis's literal adherence to this vow contributed significantly to the authority he had in the church and to his positive impact on the culture of his day (and beyond), his extreme asceticism also had damaging effects. Even Francis, finding himself prematurely at the end of his life, repented to his suffering body for subjecting it to excessive austerities.

But Francis's commitment to owning no property and living as a mendicant was an expression of his passionate devotion to Christ and his attempt to follow Jesus's teachings as literally as he

could, seeking to find the blessings associated with being “poor in spirit.”

### **Voluntary and involuntary poverty**

Some have criticized Francis on this account. These critics charge that the Franciscans’ “voluntary poverty” trivialized the involuntary poverty of the truly poor, those with no alternatives. They argue that linking poverty to religious devotion provided an excuse for wealthy Christians to withhold charity and fail to confront systemic injustices that contributed to the very poverty they sought to relieve. Instead, the rich could view people in poverty as holy and justify withholding alms as a way of supporting the poor in their righteousness. Further, some critics have suggested that the popularity of the Franciscans led to a situation in which much of the alms that would otherwise have been given

**Rather than affirming poverty, Jesus is exposing the dangers of wealth and privilege. This is a critical distinction, because many passionate Christians romanticize poverty as they move toward lives of “service to the poor.”**

to the poor were instead given to the growing number of wandering friars.

While criticisms may oversimplify the matter, we should heed their caution. With evangelical Christians giving increased attention to issues of social justice, and with the rise of new monastic movements in which people choose to share life among the poor in the “abandoned places of empire,” how we relate to poverty is increasingly important. For many of us, to be poor in spirit includes attempting to divest ourselves of our wealth, to identify with those on the margins. Many

who embrace lives of simplicity and service alongside the poor have done so voluntarily. We choose to give up something of our wealth and privilege—even as we recognize that the very freedom to choose this kind of poverty is itself an expression of privilege. While this does not negate the value of such commitments, it should compel us to have a great deal more caution and intentionality as we seek to embrace a more holistic spiritual poverty.

### **Affirming poverty or exposing the dangers of wealth?**

Rather than affirming poverty, Jesus is exposing the dangers of wealth and privilege. This is a critical distinction, because many

passionate Christians romanticize poverty as they move toward lives of “service to the poor.” They equate their “sacrifices” with noble gestures of love and self-denial for the sake of the poor whom they have come to save. While embracing a form of external poverty, they fail to grasp the need for the humility and contrition on the other end of the spectrum.

And for what should we be contrite and humble? For many of us, our material, educational, familial, and social privilege was inherited in part at the expense of others. Our participation in and failure to address the rampant materialism in our culture and in our churches also indict us. Giving up wealth and privilege to share life among the poor is something believers do, not simply for

**Whether or not we are called to live among the poor (and not everyone is), all Christians are called to repent of the sin of greed and materialism, embracing sacrificial lives of radical generosity, hospitality, and simplicity.**

the salvation of the poor but also for the salvation of the rich (Luke 6:24). After all, if we are servants of our king and his reign, then all we give (material or otherwise) is his, to be used for his purposes and glory, not our own. It is no credit to us to give to those in need what is neither ours to begin with or intended for our use alone.

### **Imitating Christ**

While extreme in his interpretation, St. Francis’s embrace of the vow of poverty was not (as is often popularly suggested) primarily

a matter of identifying with the poor. Rather, Francis was attempting to identify with and imitate Christ alone, whom he believed had embraced voluntary poverty. For Francis, incarnation itself was an act of humility and love. That Christ went on to identify with the poor was only natural and to be expected. Christ was the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned one. Francis would have vehemently rejected any identification with the poor that was not first rooted in this primary identification with Christ, for without Jesus at the center, life among the poor risked becoming mere activism and social posturing. Only in identifying with Christ could he have any true connection to his neighbour, whether poor or rich.

When we grasp this understanding, the implications for all Christians are staggering. Whether or not we are called to live

among the poor (and not everyone is), all Christians are called to repent of the sin of greed and materialism, embracing sacrificial lives of radical generosity, hospitality, and simplicity. For in following the example of Christ—identifying with him and his uncompromising commitment—we discover what it means to be truly poor in spirit. It is only through identifying with Christ that we can begin to identify with the poor in meaningful and mutual ways.

When confronted by the suffering and sadness of poverty, as we were with Andrew's suicide, we understand what it means—and does not mean—to be blessed. Yet in the days that followed his death, our community came together to mourn and comfort one another, encountering a peace and intimacy few of us had ever experienced in the church. And in that grace we find our hope and are truly blessed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Names have been changed to protect privacy.

<sup>2</sup>John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 38.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 39.

## About the author

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# Rotting riches

## Economics in the letter of James

Alicia J. Batten

**T**he New Testament Epistle of James has had a rocky ride in Christian history. Among the reasons for its inconsistent and sometimes negative treatment, or its simple neglect, have been the judgment that it lacks structure and theological sophistication (it includes no reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus, for example), and the difficulty of placing it historically and geographically.<sup>1</sup> But it was Martin Luther's assessment of James as counter to the reformer's emphasis on justification by faith alone that was most damaging to the letter's reputation.<sup>2</sup> Despite Zwingli's and Calvin's great admiration for James, and the fact that it was a favourite among Anabaptists who especially appreciated its rejection of oaths and emphasis on a discipleship that consists of both faith and works,<sup>3</sup> Luther's criticism of James as an "epistle of straw" has had an enduring effect on its subsequent

**James is direct in its criticism of the rich and the pursuit of wealth. Yet this dimension of the epistle is an important irritant that needs to remain in focus today.**

reception. And, because of the profound impact of German and Swiss Lutheran scholarship on biblical exegesis and interpretation, Luther's opinion has influenced traditions and practices much further afield than the confines of the academic guild.

There are other aspects of this epistle that have made it unpalatable to Christians in a variety of locations. James, as anyone who reads it even quickly and in a cursory manner

can see, is direct in its criticism of the rich and the pursuit of wealth. Such teachings have not been well received by numerous interpreters in the past, or by some contemporary readers, perhaps especially because churches often rely on gifts from wealthy donors. Yet this dimension of the Epistle of James is an important irritant that, although it may rub some the wrong way, needs to remain in focus today.

Three notable passages in James address rich and poor. The first is James 1:9–11, which considers the fate of a lowly brother who will rise in exaltation, and contrasts it to that of a rich person who will fade away in the midst of his activities. Next is the castigation of the letter’s recipients for showing favouritism to the wealthy man who arrives in the assembly sporting fine clothes and gold rings: he is offered a good seat, while the shabbily dressed person is ordered to stand or to sit at their feet (James 2:1–4). James criticizes those who presume that they will be doing business and making money in the days to come (James 4:13–17), and follows it directly with an invective against the affluent (James 5:1–6). These rich receive no mercy, as the author scornfully assures them that their riches have rotted, their clothes have been eaten by bugs, and their gold and silver have rusted. That rust will in turn be evidence against them and will eat their flesh like fire.

Historically, various interpreters have managed to tame these passages somewhat. For example, J. B. Mayor in his erudite commentary on James published in 1892 observed that although British churches displayed much elitism that should be corrected, he had no objection to the practice of allowing the wealthy to pay for the right to sit in certain pews. Mayor simply thought churches should also provide some free and open seating that was just as good as the pews of the wealthy.<sup>4</sup> Apparently elitism is acceptable in moderation.

One factor bearing on the topic of economics in James is the question whether the wealthy are members of James’s audience. Interpreters have not come to a consensus on this issue, but those who think that the rich are within the community tend to take the “heroic” view; these interpreters argue that James is calling on the affluent to humble themselves and demonstrate a certain heroism in their loss of wealth. Others take the “ironic” view, contending that the rich are outsiders and that all they can do at the end of the day is boast, ironically, in their own humiliation.<sup>5</sup> The affluent have no hope, for according to James 1:9–11 and James 5:1–6 they are facing doom.

It is important to remember, though, that harsh language of this sort can have rhetorical uses. James may be addressing a diverse array of people at varying social levels. Some of them may



identify with these rich and thus will feel compelled to change their ways, while others may identify with the poor. Most in the audience, however, are in between, for James is clearly calling on them to care for the poor—evidence that at least some of them must have the means to do so.

Commentators agree that in James, one's relationship to money has significant bearing on one's relationship to God, yet "many avow that our text does not implicate modern capitalism or Christians who run businesses for profit."<sup>6</sup> I would disagree. James is writing from a context in which "the economy" was not perceived as a separate sphere that functioned according to market principles; economics was embedded in other aspects of life and society, including religious and family life. There was a notion of limited good, in that the more land, power, or honour one person gained, the less others had. Thus the "economy"

**The pursuit of inordinate wealth, which in the contemporary world might be lauded by many as admirable and a mark of success, would not have been universally admired in antiquity.**

would not be perceived as "growing" in the way that we hear it described today. Rather, it would be "evening out," in that the gain of some is seen to be at the expense of others.

In addition, various writers objected to acquiring wealth through exchange and charging interest, because the goal of gaining more wealth was seen as "unnatural" (money does not grow on trees!). On the other hand, acquiring more through agriculture in order to support a household is natural, because food is then consumed so people can con-

tinue to live.<sup>7</sup> Gold and silver serve little purpose; they cannot be eaten, only hoarded. Riches thus simply rot in James.

The pursuit of inordinate wealth, which in the contemporary world might be lauded by many as admirable and a mark of success, would not have been universally admired in antiquity. Extremely wealthy people who stored up their treasures were often labelled as greedy and soft. They were even judged immoral. An author long before James's time describes "wealth's people" as "fat rogues with big bellies and dropsical legs, whose toes by the gout are tormented."<sup>8</sup> Although it was not considered good to be poor, for that would mean that one had lost status and material security, being rich often led to sharp criticism from moralists,

because it indicated that one had much more than one needed in order to be self-sufficient.<sup>9</sup>

James, then, like other ancient authors and figures, warns against the quest for wealth, for such pursuits lead to the suffering of others such as the poor man in James 2:2, or the exploited labourers in James 5:4. In the ancient world, possessing great wealth often meant that one could bribe officials within the court system, and thus it is not surprising to see James say that the rich oppress people and drag them into court (James 2:6). It would have been tempting for some in James's audience to fawn over rich patrons, for such people provided significant funding or other benefits, such as protection. Yet ultimately such patrons would want to extract something in exchange for extending favours to those in less fortunate circumstances, and this "exchange" usually led to overt exploitation. James is therefore opposed to relying on so-called donations from the rich.

It is also significant that the epistle's teachings on wealth parallel certain sayings attributed to Jesus. These parallels have been noticed since the early Christian era.<sup>10</sup> For example, James 5:1–6 may be drawing on the woes uttered against the rich as preserved in Luke 6:24, which may, in turn, find their origins in one of Luke's possible sources, the Sayings Source Q.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the teaching about your heart being where your treasure is (found in Luke/Q 12:33–34) reveals similarities to James 5:1–6.<sup>12</sup> Another example of parallel texts on economic issues is James 2:5 and Jesus's blessing of the poor found in Luke/Q 6:20. Here, James has reconfigured the beatitude to suit his overall argument against showing partiality to the rich and causing dishonour to the poor.<sup>13</sup> James never cites Jesus, and there is considerable discussion among biblical scholars about why he does not, but he is inspired by Jesus's teachings and adapts them, perhaps with a sense that at least some people in his audience are aware of their ultimate source. The people for whom James writes are not those with whom Jesus interacted, but he conveys some of Jesus's wisdom, modified to serve the needs or address the failings of those in James's own context.

James reminds people forcefully that they must care for the poor, *materially*. In his day, there was no social safety net that people could rely on if they were in dire straits, and most people

struggled simply to meet their daily needs. Slavery, which was widespread, was largely the result of indebtedness. Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that there were likely some “middling households,” but apart from such households (which might have kept a couple of slaves) and the tiny but extremely rich elite

**James’s epistle is a brief but pointed text, and its insights are useful in prodding us to question and challenge the political and economic shifts that increase the gap between the wealthy and the poor.**

class, most people lived at a subsistence level,<sup>14</sup> and many required assistance in order to survive.

Despite many progressive economic and social developments in our world now, the plight of people in poverty remains an immense injustice, given that many others have much more than they need. Moreover, some social psychologists have made the troubling observation that the more money people possess, the more they feel entitled to their wealth and the less likely they are to share.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps, we might conjecture, the author of James understood this latter tendency only too well, and that is why the letter is so relentless in its criticism of the rich. But as Steven J. Friesen has observed, with “the rise of capitalism . . . what [James] called arrogant and evil became codified as standard economic practice.”<sup>16</sup> The writer of the “letter of straw” would probably find outrageous the constant encouragement we hear from political and business leaders to “grow the economy” and increase our consumption. James’s epistle is a brief but pointed text, and its insights are useful in prodding us to question and challenge the political and economic shifts that widen the gap between the wealthy and the poor, and to think creatively about how we all might live more equitably together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here we must remember, however, that many New Testament texts are difficult to date and to locate precisely.

<sup>2</sup> The most famous example of harsh criticism of the Epistle of James is Martin Luther’s declaration that it was a “right strawy epistle,” in the preface to his 1522 German translation of the New Testament. Luther’s attitude toward James must be viewed in light of Luther’s own theological development, however, as well as the debates he engaged in with those who defended James and used it to challenge Luther’s ideas. For a survey of the treatment of James during the Reformation, see Timothy George, “‘A Right Strawy Epistle’: Reformation Perspectives on James,” *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 369–82.

<sup>3</sup> Some Anabaptists argued directly against Luther on the issue of grace, using James as their support. See George, “A Right Strawy Epistle,” 379.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (London: Macmillan, 1892), 197.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of these two views, see Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (1987; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 41–44.

<sup>6</sup> Dale C. Allison Jr., *James: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (London: T & T Clark, 2013), 641.

<sup>7</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics* 1.3.17–35.

<sup>8</sup> Aristophanes, *Plutus* 559.

<sup>9</sup> See Alicia J. Batten, “The Degraded Poor and the Greedy Rich: Exploring the Language of Poverty and Wealth in the Letter of James,” in *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 65–77.

<sup>10</sup> For a review of parallels discussed since 1833, see Dean B. Deppe, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James* (ThD diss., Free University of Amsterdam, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> “Q” stands for *Quelle*, a German word that means “source.” Since the late 1800s many New Testament scholars have come to the conclusion that Q, now lost, served as a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Chapters and verses in Q normally reflect Luke’s numbering.

<sup>12</sup> For discussion, see John S. Kloppenborg, “The Emulation of the Jesus Tradition in the Letter of James,” in *Reading James with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James*, ed. Robert L. Webb and John S. Kloppenborg (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 137–41.

<sup>13</sup> See Wesley Hiram Wachob, *The Voice of Jesus in the Social Rhetoric of James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), for a full study of James’s use of this beatitude.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Walter Scheidel and Steven J. Friesen, “The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 61–91.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Paul K. Piff, “Wealth and the Inflated Self: Class, Entitlement, and Narcissism,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40 (January 2014): 34–43.

<sup>16</sup> Steven J. Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will: Explanations of Poverty in Four Proto-Christian Texts,” in *Christian Origins*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 246.

## About the author

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# Full stomach, faulty memory

## A sermon on Deuteronomy 8:6–18; 15:1–11

Dori Zerbe Cornelsen

**W**e are daily awash in choices and opportunities, and many of us are affluent enough to be able to choose among many options. Many of us make many choices even before we get out the door in the morning. Our stomachs are full, we have built fine houses and live in them, our income and assets have grown, our retirement funds are increasing, and our possessions keep multiplying.

As the people of Israel stand on the verge of possibilities in the land they are about to be brought into, Moses begins to say:

“When your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied . . .” (Deut.

**The promise is vast: “You will lack nothing.” But in the next breath we read: “Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God.” Why the caution?**

**The people are leaving the wilderness behind. What could go wrong?**

8:13; NRSV). Apparently the people can expect that everything they have will multiply, multiply, multiply. Repetition is a literary device biblical writers used when they wanted to call the reader’s attention to something important. Why might it be important for God’s people then—and now—to pay attention to the words of this text?

### **What is at stake?**

Like the people first addressed in this text, our very identity as people of God and our loyalty to God’s way are at stake. The

speeches of Moses collected in the book of Deuteronomy are a testimony to God’s generous, faithful activity toward the people of Israel, even in the face of their failures. Their identity depends on their remembering God’s activities in their behalf; they are to cultivate a memory capable of inspiring loyalty to God’s ways.

The speech in chapter eight anticipates the end of Israel’s long sojourn in the wilderness. It describes the bounty of the good land they are about to enter: it is a land flowing with streams, with

springs and underground waters. (Remember, they've just been wandering in the desert!) It is a land that will produce wheat, barley, fig trees, vines, pomegranates, olive trees, and honey, and there will be no lack of bread. And what is more, the land has abundant resources of iron and copper—assets able to produce incredible wealth. The promise is vast: “You will lack nothing” (v. 9).

But in the next breath we read: “Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments . . . which I am commanding you today” (v. 11). Why the caution? The people are finally going to leave behind a journey of hardship in the wilderness where they have been tested for forty years. What could go *wrong*?

### **God helps those . . .**

What *could* go wrong? When the people of Israel are settled comfortably in this good land, they could forget that they are a people who rely on God to protect them and provide for them. This warning is meant to jolt them out of dozing off, their stomachs full from feasting on the bounty of the land (think the tryptophan effect that sets in after a Thanksgiving feast). When “all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God” (v. 13–14).

North America is full of stories of individual perseverance and success. Many of us can bring to mind stories in our own family histories of achievement in the face of hardship. Hard work and success may even be our own experience. Many of us have made it in this land of plenty.

Be mindful when you've made it, this Deuteronomy text urges. When you've settled comfortably, when you are well fed and successful, beware! Your success and the multiplying of your assets may lead you to feel self-satisfied and entitled. Is this the reason so many people believe the popular saying “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible?

### **A gift kept long enough seems like a possession**

The problem reflected in Moses's warning to the people of Israel is *not* that God is no longer trustworthy. Rather, because comfort could replace the people's awareness of their complete depen-

dence on God, Moses knows that their identity could shift. They could begin to trust in themselves and say: “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth” (v. 17).

Now wealth is not condemned in this text. In fact, the promise is that assets will accumulate and multiply in the good land. Moses’s words do not condemn hard work or criticize dedication to one’s career or censure the kind of perseverance amid hardship that yields success.

What Moses identifies is the danger that attachment to what makes us comfortable can compromise our true identity. When our stomachs are full, our temptation is to look around at everything we have accumulated and simply be satisfied with ourselves. We can forget that everything is a gift. When we’ve eaten our fill, we can forget to bless the Lord.

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Deuteronomy writes that Moses wanted to remind people that God would give them what they needed, whatever land they were in. They were to be on guard, because “a gift kept long enough begins to seem like a possession . . . separated in the memory of the recipient from the giver, so that the giver is forgotten.”<sup>1</sup>

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Mark Allan Powell in his book *Giving to God* uses the metaphor of house-sitting to explore this tendency. People who house-sit have access to all the amenities of the abode; for a time they can pretend that it’s their place. Now, what if these house-sitters decided to change the locks and claim the

house as their own? Suppose when the owners confronted the house-sitters, the sitters’ claim would be, “Hey, the house is mine—you *gave* it to me!”<sup>2</sup>

### **As wealth increases, sensitivity decreases**

When we forget that everything is a gift, we can begin to believe that whatever we’ve gathered is ours: we earned it, deserve it, and we can do with it whatever we please. In several recent social class experiments, researchers have shown that increased wealth is associated with decreased sensitivity to others in one’s social

environment. Paul Piff, postdoctoral scholar in the psychology department of the University of California, Berkeley, conducted several experiments documenting that as wealth increases, people

**Research shows that as wealth increases, people are more likely to see themselves as deserving good things in life and entitled to better outcomes. At the same time, they are less likely to show compassion for others.**

are more likely to see themselves as deserving good things in life and entitled to better outcomes; they feel that they have directly contributed to or been directly responsible for the increase, even when they have inherited their wealth. At the same time, they are less likely to show compassion for others.<sup>3</sup>

Moses suggests that to resist the amnesia that seems to accompany a full stomach, which leads to becoming complacent and self-satisfied, God's people are to reaffirm their identity and "keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and fearing him" (v. 6), and by being careful not to "forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments" (v. 11).

### **An every-seventh-year reminder**

Deuteronomy 15 lays out a gracious commandment given to the people of Israel as a way to draw them away from claiming the gifts of God as theirs to possess. In the seventh year people are to cancel debts in the community.

Moses questioned whether this remission of debts would be necessary, given the promise that "there will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today" (v. 4-5). We know that it didn't work out that way.

Cancellation of debt may not sound all that gracious to those of us who live in societies that depend on debt to spur economic growth and increase prosperity. For Moses's audience, on the other hand, debt was often a sign of desperate need. It could be the result of crop failure, accident, illness, or death. Because our wealth tends to lure us into believing that we are owners of what God has entrusted to us, Moses continues: "If there is among you anyone in need, . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward



your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be” (v. 7–8).

Even when the seventh year is just around the corner and all debts will soon be cancelled, the hands of those able to give are to remain open in sharing. Because the identity of the people of God is formed by the story of God’s grace freeing them from slavery, caring for them in the wilderness, and settling them in a land of abundance, they are to be generous. By opening their hands to the needy they are to remember that everything entrusted to them is a gift. If the data gathered from social class experiments cited above is reliable, a context of affluence is likely to be one in which people become hard-hearted and tight-fisted rather than open-handed.

### **Keep the gift circulating**

Ched Myers of Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries suggests that for us to resist the temptation to cling to what we have been given, the gift must always move. The natural abundance of creation lasts only as long as the gift circulates.<sup>4</sup>

Paul encouraged Timothy to exhort his congregation to practice circulating their gifts. We can hear echoes of Deuteronomy 8 and 15 in his pastoral letter to Timothy: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:17–18).

Like Moses, Paul’s antidote to the failure of memory that comes with a full stomach is generous living. Rather than dozing in a state of self-satisfaction, we can wake up, choose to take hold of life that really is life, and be generous with the gifts that we have been given. We can put our money where our mouth is when we say we love Jesus. In bumper sticker wisdom: “Tithe if you love Jesus! Anyone can honk.”

### **Living with comfortable guilt**

Still, we find many reasons to resist living with open hands. The authors of *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money* studied giving patterns and surveyed Christian

givers. They write that many American Christians experience “a kind of ‘comfortable guilt’—that is, living with an awareness and feeling of culpability for not giving money more generously, but maintaining that at a low enough level of discomfort that it was not too disturbing or motivating enough to actually increase giving. . . . Many Christians did not have clean consciences about money. But neither did they seem prepared to change their financial dealings in ways that would eliminate their modest levels of guilt.”<sup>5</sup> According to this survey, the gift doesn’t circulate as easily when what we have has multiplied. When we have received more, we are inclined to clutch it more tightly.

But before we conclude that Christians just need to give more, we must address the deeper question of what stories shape our

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identity and loyalty. We may need to ask whether we are able in our affluence to be jolted out of amnesia by what Brueggemann calls an “astonishing memory of generous sustenance”—a surprising memory that God has been generous to us. What stories can we tell and retell that will capture our imaginations and inspire us to live generously—to keep God’s gift to us moving?

### **Living out of astonishing memories of generous sustenance**

On a frosty September morning, in the middle of his shift a Winnipeg bus driver stopped his bus on Portage Avenue at Main Street. He proceeded to jump out and give his shoes to a man he had noticed walking barefoot that day and the day before. He

drove the rest of his shift in stocking feet. To his surprise the story went viral, picked up by media all over the world. Later that week, in an interview with a Winnipeg journalist, he recalled, “I couldn’t imagine him walking a mile without shoes. I couldn’t imagine how cold he was.” So when a light turned red and the opportunity presented itself, he acted.

Let’s share such stories of empathic imagination with one another, to stir ourselves out of the dozing that can overtake

when our assets multiply. Let's add these stories to the fund of narratives that shape our identity as people called to be open-handed by a God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Let's not wait for our low level of discomfort to increase as we observe the needs of others around us. Instead, let's choose to declare our primary loyalty to a God who gives generously and asks us to keep the gifts circulating.

Moses's words in Deuteronomy invite us today to let ourselves be shaken out of the stupor that can accompany affluence. Our compassionate imagination can be stirred when we remember and repeat stories that remind us that all we are and all we have comes from the hands of a generous God who invites us to be open-handed too. We can discover the joy of grateful living as we keep God's gifts circulating. Thanks be to God.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Generous Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> "Are the Rich Less Feeling? Research Suggests Wealth Reduces Compassion," CBC/Radio-Canada *The Current* interview with Paul Piff, October 16, 2013; link online to listen: <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2013/10/16/are-the-rich-less-feeling-research-suggests-wealth-reduces-compassion/>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Gift Must Always Move: An Interview with Ched Myers on Sabbath Economics," *Inward/Outward*, January 2002, 1–5; online link at <http://www.chedmyers.org/articles/sabbath-economics/gift-must-always-move-interview-ched-myers-sabbath-economics>. Myers is drawing on ideas articulated by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Christian Smith, Michael O. Emerson, and Patricia Snell, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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# Revelation's exposé of two cities

## Imperial Rome's reign of greed vs. New Jerusalem's reign of justice

Gordon Zerbe

**A**t the close of John's Revelation, we are presented with a tableau of two contrasting cities, unveiled as two rival political economies between which the readers must choose. The following chart is designed as a guide for exploration and reflection.

<b>"Babylon, the great (powerful) city, that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:5, 18)</b>	<b>"New Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God" (21:2; 21:2, 10 )</b>
preview texts: 14:8; 16:19  main text: 17:1–18; 18:1–19:5	preview texts: 3:12 (2:7, 26–28; 3:5, 21); 19:7–8  main text: 21:1–22:5; concluding ref.: 22:14–15, 17, 19
<b>formal introduction:</b> 17:1 "Come, I will show you. . . ."	<b>formal introduction:</b> 21:9 "Come, I will show you. . . ."
<b>origins</b> from the underworld, and from the "sea" (11:7; 13:1–4; 17:3)	<b>origins</b> from heaven, becoming a terrestrial reality (3:12; 21:2, 10) [cf. Matt. 6:10: "come on earth"]
<b>pictured and personified as luxuriously and seductively dressed prostitute</b> (17:3–5; 18:16) [a parody of the goddess Roma]	<b>pictured and personified as bride adorned for marriage</b> (19:7–8; 21:2)
<b>character and lifestyle</b> **images of luxurious excess, extreme arrogance, insatiable craving (18:7, 9, 14–15, 17, 19)	<b>character and lifestyle</b> **images of virtue and fidelity (19:8)
<b>wealth</b> **extravagant apparel; has "shiny" glitz and "brilliant" luxuries (17:3–5; 18:14, 16) **center of world trade in luxury goods (18:11–19)	<b>wealth</b> **described in terms of physical features of the city (21:11–21) <b>main street:</b> pure gold, transparent as glass (21:21)

<p><b>geopolitics and economy</b>  **pictured as oppressive, imperial capital city, with an extractive tributary economy based on military conquest, earth's destruction, economic exploitation, and inequitable trading relationships  **its global traders are the magnates of the earth  **marked by the slave trade  **operates by seduction, deception, and corruption  (11:18; 14:8; 17:1–6, 9, 15, 18:3, 7, 9, 11–19, 23–24; 19:2)</p>	<p><b>geopolitics and economy</b>  **pictured as God's alternative, international capital city, with an invitational, attractational tributary economy, with free access to its resources)  **the production of its river and tree of life focuses on the "healing of the nations"  **free access and unlimited, renewal supply of the necessities of pure water, food, medicine  (21:6, 12, 22–26; 22:1–2, 17)</p>
<p><b>residents</b> (18:2)  **those who declare allegiance to the imperial regime (13:4, 8)</p> <p>exclusions: 13:16–17</p>	<p><b>residents</b> (21:3; 22:3–5)  **servants of God and the Lamb are really "coregents" (22:4–5; cf. 1:6, 9; 2:10, 26–28; 3:20–21; 5:10; 20:4–6)  inclusions: 21:7, 27; 22:14; cf. 2:7–3:21  exclusions: 21:8, 27a; 22:3, 15, 19</p>
<p><b>doom, judgment</b>  (16:19; 17:3, 16–17; 18:1–24; cf. 11:15–18; 14:17–20; 16:4–16)  <b>darkness</b> (16:10; 18:14)</p>	<p><b>vindication</b>  (19:2 [cf. 6:9–11]; 22:7, 10, 12, 20)  <b>light</b> (21:11, 23, 24; 22:5; cf. 15:6; 19:8; 22:1, 16)</p>
<p><b>no more</b>  luxuries, sounds of culture (18:14, 22–23)  cf. satirical picture of weeping and wailing, for loss of wealth  18:9–19</p>	<p><b>no more</b>  sea; death, mourning, crying, pain; temple; sun or moon; shut gates; things accursed; night; need for sun or lamp; winter  (21:1, 4, 22, 23, 25; 22:2–3, 5)</p>
<p><b>call to the church: exodus</b>  (18:4)  "Come out. . ."  [What kind of exodus is this?]</p>	<p><b>call to the church: invitation to participate</b> (22:17; cf. 19:7–9; 21:17; 22:19–20)  "Come!"</p>

## On the dangers of greed and excess Mennonites in the Dutch Golden Age

Karl Koop

**I**n the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch economy could support extravagance. The Netherlands had become an economic superpower, and Mennonites were among those who benefited from early capitalism and an emerging global economy. To be sure, some people came to church dressed in humble clothing, but most Mennonites maintained an average standard of living, and a

**In the mid-seventeenth century, the Netherlands had become an economic superpower, and Mennonites were among those who benefited. How was this economic success to be assessed in theological terms?**

sizeable number could be counted among the Dutch elite, dominating the whale and herring fisheries, excelling in weaving and textile industries, and thriving in agriculture. Some would even succeed in the arena of shipbuilding and foreign trade.

Economic success of this magnitude was exhilarating, but how was it to be assessed in theological terms? In the past Mennonites had felt uneasy about material excesses. Their tradition had underlined the importance of discipleship, simplicity, and following Christ through suffering and even in martyrdom.

Now, in times of toleration and plenty, these theological virtues were seemingly being set aside. This was at least one of the points that Thieleman J. van Braght (1625–64) tried to bring across in his *Martyrs Mirror* of 1660, which was intended to prick the consciences of the wealthy.<sup>1</sup> Other Mennonite leaders, such as Hans de Ries (1553–1638) and Galenus Abrahamsz (1622–1706), joined in this prophetic critique, with Galenus suggesting that the devil had found a new devious scheme for leading Mennonites astray: he had brought their persecution to an end and had succeeded in interesting them in material things.<sup>2</sup> In December of 1651, the Amsterdam preacher Jacob Cornelisz felt compelled to preach three sermons on excessive ostentation that he

observed in Mennonite houses, celebrations, and clothing, which he perceived to be in direct conflict with simplicity, a core virtue of Mennonite faith.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most sustained critic of emerging Dutch Mennonite capitalism was the Waterlander Mennonite preacher from De Rijp and Zaandam, Pieter Pietersz (1574–1651). For a time Pietersz was a carpenter and builder of windmills, but eventually he became known for his devotional books, tracts, and sermons, especially his popular work *Way to the City of Peace*.<sup>4</sup> Another significant essay—this one addressing economic matters and the temptation of avarice—was his *Mirror of Greed* (*Spiegel der Gierigheydt*), first published in 1638. The *Mirror* was included in the author’s “complete works,” his *Opera*, published in 1651 and printed in several subsequent editions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was translated and published in the German language. Christian Neff and Nanne van der Zijpp note that Pietersz’s works were not only eagerly read by Mennonites and non-Mennonites in the Netherlands, but they were also popular among Mennonites living

**When Pieter Pietersz took aim at the economic evils in his day, his apprehension about the dangers of superabundance resonated with Christian tradition broadly and with his own tradition in particular.**

in the Palatinate, Prussia, southern Russia, and North America. Especially the Kleine Gemeinde, a break-away group that had formed a separate community of churches in Russia and had settled in Manitoba in the 1870s, was fond of Pietersz’s writings.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Economic views among early Anabaptists**

When Pieter Pietersz took aim at the economic evils in his day, he was not introducing something new. His apprehension about the dangers of superabundance resonated with Christian tradition broadly and with his own

tradition in particular. Sixteenth-century Anabaptist views on economics underlined sufficiency in life, not surplus. The earliest Anabaptist economic pattern attempted to put into practice the apostolic examples as described in Acts 2, 4, and 5, although there was no consensus among Anabaptists about whether the sharing of possessions should be voluntary or legislated.<sup>6</sup> The Hutterites in Moravia and the Münsterites of northern Europe

preferred to legislate the practice of community of goods, while the Swiss and Dutch Anabaptists that prevailed over time preferred the practice of voluntary sharing and mutual aid. Menno Simons observed that since Christians were members of one body through their baptism and through participation in the breaking of bread, it was expected that Christians would care for one another.<sup>7</sup> True evangelical faith could not lie dormant but would

**In their faith statement the Swiss Brethren in Hesse, while allowing for owning private property, stressed caring for the poor, avoiding “useless merchant enterprises,” and keeping away from the practice of usury.**

inevitably manifest itself in works of love, within the Christian community and beyond, by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, sheltering the destitute, and “becoming all things to all men.”<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of Anabaptists followed this line of thinking. True Christianity avoids the accumulation of capital and demonstrates concern for those in need regardless of whether they are in the church or outside it.<sup>9</sup>

When times improved and when there were more opportunities to acquire wealth, Anabaptists continued to be generally suspicious of trade and commerce. The Swiss and South German branch of the movement tended to believe that Christians should only participate in agricultural work and in the crafting of household goods. Menno Simons also preferred agrarian work but admitted that it is possible for Christians to be merchants. Nevertheless he wrote to warn people in commerce, lest they be overcome by avarice.<sup>10</sup> And, along with virtually all other Christians of the time, Catholic and Protestant, he rejected the practice of charging interest on loans. Such practice was understood as usury—a form of theft.<sup>11</sup>

These views on capital and commerce would re-emerge in subsequent years in Anabaptist confessional statements. Anabaptists near Cologne, for example, were explicitly critical of greedy preachers who craved high salaries.<sup>12</sup> In their faith statement the Swiss Brethren in Hesse, while allowing for the possibility that Christians could own private property, nevertheless stressed the importance of caring for the poor, avoiding “useless merchant enterprises,” and keeping away from the practice of usury.<sup>13</sup> The practice of usury and the attitude of greed were also condemned



in future confessions of faith including the Concept of Cologne of 1591<sup>14</sup> and the Thirty-Three Articles of 1617.<sup>15</sup> And some of these themes would re-emerge in future confessional statements such as the Dordrecht Confession of 1632 and the Prussian Confession of 1660.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, we can observe a fairly consistent position among first-, second-, and third-generation Anabaptists. They assumed that regenerated Christians, born from above, who take seriously the teachings of Christ and have separated themselves from the world to become members of the true body of Christ, will pursue honest work, avoid the practice of usury, and demonstrate works of love—including providing for those in need. Wealth was not condemned outright, but Anabaptists believed that sufficiency, not surplus, is the goal of honest work. Christians might hold material possessions, but ultimately these belong to God and should be shared with others.

When we move forward to the seventeenth century, to the Dutch Golden Age, we observe Pieter Pietersz in his *Mirror of Greed* articulating similar views.

### **An assault on greed**

In several of his writings, Pietersz used the didactic device of dialogue to bring his ideas across. The conversation partners in the *Mirror* are Gerhard, a greedy man who sought only wealth and worldly honours, and Friedrich, a pious Christian brother whose primary aim was to seek “the kingdom of God and its righteousness.” By the end of the conversation Gerhard sees the errors of his ways and experiences a conversion that realigns his economic priorities in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament.

In his preface, Pieter Pietersz stated that his primary objective was to bring to readers’ attention the destructive root of greed so they can avoid divine condemnation. Given that he had been a builder of windmills, Pietersz would likely have had access to surplus capital, yet he resisted developing a theology that justified or legitimized the accumulation of wealth. He noted that money is not inherently evil and suggested that acquiring much is not the same as being in the state of greed. However, he insisted that being tied to wealth, so that one is unable to part with it, should be viewed as sin. The basis of Pietersz’s argument was the New

Testament, especially the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul.<sup>17</sup>

A significant dimension of the *Mirror* is a series of counter-arguments against those who might try to make a case for accumulating capital. For instance, Pietersz considered the common-sense realist position and noted that while it may be a natural human inclination to cling to temporal goods, Christianity is first and foremost about seeking the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Citizens of heaven should seek the heavenly, not the earthly. One cannot serve two masters by simultaneously desiring both the riches of the world and the riches of heaven. In the spirit of the Anabaptist tradition, Pietersz argued that true knowledge of Christ amounts to acknowledging God's promises, embracing Christ's teaching, and taking his ethical directives seriously.<sup>18</sup>

Pietersz also countered the view that Christianity is first and foremost about the interior life. He noted that the ethical impera-

**Wealth was not condemned outright, but Anabaptists believed that sufficiency, not surplus, is the goal of honest work. Ultimately material possessions belong to God and should be shared.**

tives and commands of Christ encompass the whole of life and must be followed literally. It would do no good for a Christian to follow just the inward impulse that concentrates solely on the well-being of the soul. True Christianity should involve attending to all areas of life. It is important to resist the temptation of spiritualizing the ethical directives of scripture. These could not remain a part of the interior life without manifesting themselves in outward, tangible ways. The commands of Christ as they are outlined in

the New Testament are to be followed literally, even when the rest of society is unwilling to do so.

Pietersz also considered practical issues, such as the importance of managing one's own household and investments, and the question of leaving a sizeable inheritance to one's descendants. He seemed to be aware of the wider social consequences that arise when parents do not adequately plan for the well-being of the next generation. He was cognizant of the fact that children left in poverty might well become welfare recipients and a burden to society. He concluded, nevertheless, that showering wealth on

children would inevitably produce negative consequences and would ultimately bring some form of evil on them. Pietersz insisted that rather than leaving wealth to posterity, Christians must think in the first place of the hungry and the naked. Echoing the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, Pietersz noted that when they feed the hungry and clothe the naked, Christians also do these things unto Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Pietersz acknowledged that the accumulation of capital was a central preoccupation of society. He noted that all efforts and all calculation appeared to be focussed on the accumulation of wealth, as people invested in the money markets with the hope of making yearly gains. He also observed that people everywhere seemed to be willing to take great risks and expend enormous amounts of mental energy in order to achieve their economic goals. He noted that the world's interest in accumulating capital was so intense in his day that it seemed possible that one could chase a person through fire merely in order to get a handful of money.<sup>20</sup> Pietersz reminded his readers, however, that true Christians are to share radically different objectives. They should deny themselves the things the world desires, with an acute awareness that their ultimate destiny is the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup>

The desire to store up treasures on earth is a great temptation that would lead to folly. As Pietersz noted from the sayings of Jesus, "It is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God" (see Matt. 19:24).<sup>22</sup> Of course the road of self-denial that leads to the heavenly Jerusalem would not be easy either, but Pietersz insisted that Christians could trust God to empower his true followers to follow through in giving up their attachment to possessions. In fact, for those who have experienced a change in heart, the Christian life is a matter not of giving in to divine coercion but rather of experiencing the genuine joy, consolation, and comfort that flow from inner conviction.<sup>23</sup> It is a natural response to the work and blessings of God within the individual.

In a Calvinist worldview, wealth was often seen as a sign of God's blessings. The patriarchs of ancient Israel were showered with material abundance as a reward for their faithfulness to the divine covenant. Pietersz acknowledged that the scriptures included people who were wealthy and were blessed by God; the

patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were all blessed with abundant material possessions. Yet he did not link material wealth with covenantal faithfulness. Blessings that came from God, he noted, were spiritual. In his view it would be delusional to associate wealth with blessing, even though many Christians were being misled by this kind of reasoning. The rich congratulated themselves in this way, but they were simply disguising their greed.<sup>24</sup> Wealth may have been present among the patriarchs, but Pietersz saw them as part of the old dispensation, governed by Mosaic law, which Jesus had put to an end. The end of the law

**For those who have experienced a change in heart, the Christian life is a matter not of giving in to divine coercion but rather of experiencing the genuine joy, consolation, and comfort that flow from inner conviction.**

was Christ, and the new community was the church. In the present age the people of God experienced not wealth and power but suffering and death.<sup>25</sup> There could be no marriage between the Christian and the mainstream. In contrast to Calvinist views and those of the republic, Pietersz's position held that the Christian life should have a decidedly countercultural character.

According to Pietersz, this is the essence of true Christianity: believers become one bread and one body. As fat and thin kernels of grain are brought together with water and then

baked through fire, without distinction, so also true Christendom consists in the unity of Christians formed to become one bread. That being the case, it is no longer possible for rich Christians and poor Christians to live alongside one another, where social and economic discrepancies and injustices are blatantly obvious. When such situations arise, true followers of Christ will change their ways, deny themselves of their material possessions, and prepare themselves to carry the cross of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Such countercultural positioning did not mean that Christians would be entirely removed from the affairs of this world. Pietersz recognized that even true Christians would participate in commercial endeavours, such as fisheries and mercantile industries.<sup>27</sup> Nowhere, however, did he suggest that riches gained through commerce might be a sign of blessing or an outcome of a positive covenantal relationship with God. Christians might receive wealth through their economic endeavours, but this state of affairs

does not give license to bask in the riches and comforts of life. On the contrary, acquiring surplus becomes the occasion for helping the other. For an employer, it means an opportunity to pay workers fair wages.<sup>28</sup> For a parent it means trusting that God would take care of the next generation, who, in turn, would avoid unnecessary luxuries, expensive clothing, and excess in food and drink. Even wedding ceremonies would be simplified.<sup>29</sup> As pilgrims in this world, Christians are mere guests; their ultimate destiny is the heavenly Jerusalem, the kingdom of heaven.

### **An invitation to believers today?**

What influence did Pieter Pietersz's *Mirror of Greed* have on those around him? We know that during the Dutch Golden Age, wealthy Mennonites took care of the poor in their midst and that

**The *Mirror of Greed* is a centuries-old document that comes to most of us from a foreign land and in a language that does not communicate easily in our contemporary setting. Nevertheless, the *Mirror* may still have something to say to us.**

they also concerned themselves with their Swiss Anabaptist counterparts who were experiencing political and economic hardship. Whether the Dutch concern for social and economic justice was a direct result of Pietersz's work is unclear. Moreover, the question of the extent to which Pietersz's exhortations may have shaped and influenced readers in places such as Prussia or southern Russia, or even North America in the last two centuries, is not well established and would benefit from further historical investigation.

The *Mirror of Greed* is a centuries-old document that comes to most of us from a foreign land and in a language that does not communicate easily in our contemporary setting. Pietersz's exegetical work seems wooden and uncompromising; his rhetorical style brings a level of discomfort. Nevertheless, the *Mirror* may still have something to say to believers. What benefits might derive from a willingness on the part of those of us who enjoy prosperity in North America in the twenty-first century to engage with Pietersz's warnings about accumulation, to question our assimilation into a cultural and economic mainstream characterized by greed and excess? How might it profit us to contemplate his invitation to a deeper integration of inner and outer life, of the spiritual and the material

dimensions of discipleship, of ourselves and our fellow believers, of ourselves and our neighbors who are in need?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, *Introduction to Mennonite History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Susan Sprunger, “Rich Mennonites, Poor Mennonites: Economics and Theology in the Amsterdam Waterlander Congregation during the Dutch Golden Age” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1993), 82.

<sup>4</sup> For an English translation, see “The Way to the City of Peace,” in *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 231–83.

<sup>5</sup> See Christian Neff and Nanne van der Zijpp, “Pietersz, Pieter (1574–1651),” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1959), 175; online at [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pietersz,\\_Pieter\\_\(1574-1651\)&oldid=96046](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pietersz,_Pieter_(1574-1651)&oldid=96046).

<sup>6</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 227.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Verduin, trans., and J. C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA, and Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1956, 1984), 307, 1034.

<sup>9</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 247.

<sup>10</sup> Sprunger, “Rich Mennonites, Poor Mennonites, 46–47.

<sup>11</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 248.

<sup>12</sup> See article 4 of the Kempen Confession, 1545, in *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 100–105.

<sup>13</sup> See articles 32–35 in the Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse, 1578, in *ibid.*, 84–89.

<sup>14</sup> See “Concept of Cologne” in *ibid.*, 121–22.

<sup>15</sup> See article 24 in “Thirty-Three Articles,” in *ibid.*, 235.

<sup>16</sup> See article 9 of “Dordrecht Confession,” in *ibid.*, 300–302, and article 6 of the Prussian Confession in *ibid.*, 318–19.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Peters, “Spiegel der Gierigkeit,” in *Ausgewählten Schriften* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonitischen Verlagshandlung, 1901), 125–28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–33, 145–47.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

## About the author

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## For further reading on economics in Anabaptist-Mennonite history

James Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), argues that early Swiss documents were already suggesting the practice of having all things in common, and that this emphasis emerged especially from the peasants; he admits that no consensus developed among Swiss Anabaptists about how this ideal might be practiced. The confessional tradition of Swiss Mennonites confirms this emphasis. The Congregational Order of 1526 (years before the Hutterites came on the scene) states in its article 5 that “none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund . . .” In the 1578 Swiss confessional statement there are explicit articles on private property, the poor, work, usury, and food (articles 32–36). See Karl Koop, *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 22, 84–89.

Three essays on “historical case studies” on mutual aid can be found in *Building Communities of Compassion: Mennonite Mutual Aid in Theory and Practice* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998): “Changing Patterns of Mutual Aid in Ontario, 1864–1994,” by E. Reginald Good; “Mutual Aid among the Swiss Brethren, 1550–1750,” by John D. Roth; “Mutual Aid among Dutch Waterlander Mennonites, 1605–1668,” by Mary S. Sprunger. The volume also includes a select bibliography on Mennonite mutual aid. The 2009 issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (vol. 27) includes many presentations originally delivered at the conference sponsored by the chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, October 9–10, 2008, on the theme “Mennonites and Money: Wealth and Poverty in the Past and Present.” In addition to the article by Karl Koop adapted in this issue of *Vision*, the issue includes the following essays: “Wealth and Poverty in the Mennonite Experience: Dilemmas and Opportunities,” by James Urry; “Why the Rich Got Mennonite: Church Membership, Status and Wealth in Golden Age Amsterdam,” by Mary S. Sprunger; “Between Frugality and Civility: Dutch Mennonites and Their Taste for the ‘World of Art’ in the Eighteenth Century,” by Yme Kuiper and Harm Nijboer; “Wealth and Power in the Vistula River Mennonite Community, 1772–1914,” by Mark Jantzen; “Johann Cornies, Money-Lending, and Modernization in the Molochna Mennonite Settlement, 1820s–1840s,” by John Staples; “‘We Are Aware of Our Contradictions’: Russländer Mennonite Narratives of Loss and the Reconstruction of Peoplehood, 1914–1923,” by Reina C. Neufeldt; “Church and Business in Paraguay: An Ecclesiological Paradigm and a Business Company,” by Werner Franz; “Rich Mennonites in an Age of Mammon: Is a Messianic Political Economy Possible?” by Travis Kroeker.

## Business as venue for Christian ministry

### Lessons from Mennonite Economic Development Associates

Wally Kroeker

**D**ecember 2013 marked the sixtieth birthday of Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA). Such a sobering milestone is a time to review lessons learned and tease out areas where this upstart organization may have taught a few things to the larger Mennonite communion. How is the church, or the world, better off because of MEDA?

The early MEDA archives hold photos of white-faced (maybe sunburned) Mennonite men riding on the backs of pickups,

**The “seamless garment” of faith has been central to Mennonite Economic Development Associates; the redressing of economic injustice is seen as a natural extension of biblical identity.**

trudging through jungles, and sitting under trees eating watermelon with indigenous Paraguayans. Back home in California, Ohio, and Manitoba, these same men were seldom seen in public without a suit and tie; they were men who employed hundreds, maybe thousands, of people and did business worth millions of dollars.

It was the early 1950s. Mennonite refugees from Russia and Germany had been dislocated following the Second World War, and several thousand had ended up in Paraguay.

Other church organizations had provided them with food and clothing, but they needed more than temporary housekeeping. Those who had left trades behind needed working capital to set up businesses to serve the Mennonite colonies. The South American banks weren't much help, offering short-term loans at excessively high interest of 15 to 25 percent.

North American Mennonites wanted to help, but there was no structured way to do so. Mennonite Central Committee did not feel equipped to meet capital needs, but its executive secretary, Orié Miller, himself a businessman, came up with an idea. He invited a number of well-heeled Mennonite businessfolk to visit



Paraguay at their own expense to take a look. They quickly caught his vision, and on December 10, 1953, a group of them gathered in Chicago to start MEDA.

Membership did not come cheap. The founders pledged \$5,000 each; regular members could join for \$1,050. Personal involvement was important. Board members were assigned to sponsor certain projects and visit periodically. The founders had no assurance their investment would ever be repaid, and most Mennonites back home doubted it would be. “The money they advanced was venture capital which they had to be prepared to lose, and frequently did,” wrote J. Winfield Fretz in his history of MEDA’s first twenty-five years.

While MEDA emerged in direct response to a particular kind of need, it also scratched another itch. The kind of people who were attracted to the new organization were already contributing to other agencies, but mainly with cash. Here was a new avenue for deeper involvement, a way to contribute from the depths of their being. Here was a way to share the skills they used Monday through Friday—managerial talent, entrepreneurship, and investment savvy.

The new organization got off to a fortuitous start. Call it beginner’s luck, or shrewd planning, but the first MEDA project turned out to be a huge success with lasting impact.

It didn’t take long for the northern visitors to find this project. It stared them in the face as they saw the native Paraguayan cattle gazing out at them from the local pastures. These bush cattle produced only a quart of milk a day. Surely they could do better. Good quality stock was imported and some serious cross-breeding took place. After a few birth cycles, the cows were producing four or five gallons a day. The initial partnership with the Paraguayan farmers was called the Sarona Dairy. The name, rife with hope, came from the biblical term *Sharon*, a bountiful pasture celebrated in 1 Chronicles and Isaiah.

From the start, MEDA’s intention was for partnerships to be temporary. As soon as an enterprise was on its feet, the investors were eager to move on.

This first project helped transform the local economy. Family farms were strengthened. Jobs were created. Many livelihoods were enhanced. Today, the Mennonite colonies dominate

Paraguay's dairy industry, furnishing two-thirds of the country's entire supply of dairy products.

The second MEDA enterprise was a tannery to process leather. The small tannery already existed but was underfunded. MEDA stepped in with capital for a building and better equipment.

A cattle operation and a tannery led quite logically to MEDA's third project, the Fortuna Shoe Factory. Using leather from the tannery, the factory started making men's work shoes, then branched into dress footwear, shoes for women and children, and cowboy chaps. By the late 1970s Fortuna was producing more than 600 pairs of shoes a month, employing four to six workers.

And so it went. Several projects were dramatic successes. A few were dismal failures.

The need for MEDA's type of assistance was immense, and invitations came from all over the globe. MEDA was soon working in Africa and elsewhere. By the time its first quarter century drew to a close, MEDA had undertaken 422 projects globally, of which 87 percent were considered successful.

Amid the turbulent 1960s, meanwhile, Mennonite businessfolk back home were becoming sensitized to a conflictual gap between

**People attracted to MEDA saw in it a way to share not just cash but the skills they used Monday through Friday—managerial talent, entrepreneurship, and investment savvy.**

business and the church. In 1969 a group of ninety Mennonite businesspeople and educators formed Church, Industry and Business Associates (CIBA), later renamed Mennonite Industry and Business Associates (MIBA). Its purpose was to encourage Christian ethics and stimulate a consistent witness in business.

Mennonites, it seems, cannot form an organization without also holding a conference. Both MIBA and MEDA held regular meetings, and one day someone looked

around and realized that a lot of the same people were coming to both meetings. In fact, nearly all the members of MEDA were also part of MIBA. Why not merge again, someone wondered. So in 1981 the organizations united, keeping the name MEDA because of its tax-exempt history in Canada and the United States.

The new hybrid organization aimed (1) to help businesspeople see their work as a form of ministry, and thereby integrate their faith with their business, and (2) to use the skills and resources of

businesspeople to provide business solutions to poverty. Over the years the “seamless garment” of faith has been central to MEDA; the redressing of economic injustice is seen as a natural extension of biblical identity.

So, where are we today? In 2013 MEDA worked with 223 partners in 49 countries, had an annual budget of \$41 million, and employed 318 staff worldwide. Its total client reach, including

**MEDA unapologetically used business principles as central to its global mission. It endured criticism as it sought to teach clients to keep careful records of expenses and income, to separate operating and capital costs, and to meet regular repayment dates.**

people served by microfinance institutions in which it is involved, extended to 42 million families. (The full scope of MEDA’s work can be seen on its website [www.meda.org](http://www.meda.org).)

What MEDA lessons have stood out over the years? Insiders may themselves not agree on what those might be, but here is one stab at it.

### **1. The rigor of business has something to offer.**

Despite criticism from some quarters, MEDA unapologetically used business principles as central to its global mission.

Tanzania, for example, was not exactly ripe for a business-oriented model when MEDA went there in 1965. For one thing, the country’s economy was rooted in Ujamaa, a traditional form of agricultural socialism. Moreover, Tanzanian Christians were suspicious of the business model, thinking it inevitably led to worldliness. (This view was fortified when one successful MEDA project partner used his increased earnings to acquire an additional wife instead of supporting the church more generously.)

MEDA persisted, but learned some painful lessons as it sought to create business solutions to poverty. It wasn’t always easy to insist that loans be made on the basis of sound principles rather than family connections. MEDA endured criticism as it sought to teach clients to keep careful records of expenses and income, to separate operating and capital costs, and to meet regular repayment dates. Too often, borrowers thought North American money did not have to be repaid. MEDA had to practice some tough love—“If you don’t repay, we can’t lend to your neighbors.”

Nowadays such principles of accountability are well accepted by development practitioners.

## **2. Good intentions aren't enough.**

MEDA learned—and then modeled—how to translate good intentions into programs that actually work. One of its own hard lessons was a thousand-acre rice plantation developed in Uruguay in the early 1960s. Some members opposed the idea, since no one in MEDA knew anything about rice farming. As it turned out, crossing the border into Uruguay did not automatically produce an increase in knowledge. MEDA plunged ahead, importing a dragline, turbine pumps, and diesel engines for irrigation. The project was beset by problems, from equipment breakdowns to erratic markets. Only one good crop was harvested in eleven years. One MEDA leader commented that the rice project nearly

**MEDA's founders grasped a fundamental insight into human poverty—that simple financial services can hold the key to unleashing entrepreneurship and productivity.**

“did us in.” MEDA learned an important missiological lesson: if you can't do it at home, you probably won't be able to do it overseas, no matter how good your intentions.

Another good intention that easily goes off the rails is charity, such as sending shiploads of used clothing or surplus goods to developing countries. More often than not, these freebies undercut the local market and end up doing more harm than good. MEDA learned, for example, to brace for a rash of loan delinquencies from local textile producers whenever a shipload of used clothing arrived in port. As poor Haitians grabbed up cheap T-shirts, local tailors were idle.

Over the years MEDA sought to teach North Americans that good intentions alone aren't enough to make a dent in poverty.

## **3. You can bank on people in poverty.**

MEDA's founders grasped a fundamental insight into human poverty—that simple financial services can hold the key to unleashing entrepreneurship and productivity.

In the early 1960s MEDA dabbled with small loans to help Mennonite immigrants clear bushland, build fences, and start small farming enterprises. Erie Sauder, founder of the famous

Sauder woodwork companies in Ohio, extended this feature to Paraguay's indigenous people so they could establish small woodwork and repair shops.

MEDA's emerging concept of credit began to solidify in Colombia in the early 1970s under Roger Friesen. MEDA's strategic involvement with microcredit predated Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus by a few years, but it would not be until the mid-1980s in Haiti that microcredit would gain traction in MEDA.

Providing affordable credit grew into a brand niche. MEDA became a world leader in financial services, proving that people in poverty are bankable and can be relied on to repay loans, even if they lack conventional metrics like collateral or credit history. Today this trust has been extended to "branchless banking," savings, and microinsurance.

#### **4. Trade trumps aid.**

MEDA learned—and tried to teach—that if you want to help people in poverty, you should invest in them and with them. Over the years it became a global leader in demonstrating the power of private equity investment in emerging markets. As the early Paraguay partners repaid their investment, MEDA created a pool of capital to reinvest elsewhere. That pioneer act of sharing risk with people in poverty was decades ahead of today's impact investment industry. Thanks to that early vision, many more in the private equity markets today know how the power of investors can be harnessed to improve the financial performance of companies in emerging markets while delivering positive social and environmental outcomes.

When others could not see beyond donated aid as the way to address global poverty, MEDA showed that long-term solutions demand growth in production and trade, and that private individuals can play a vital role by investing their own capital. It pushed the investment envelope, devising new instruments for investment, finding creative new ways to harness entrepreneurial skills and resources to help others reach their God-given potential.

The prophet wrote, "The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. . . . He was appalled that there was no one to intervene" (Isa. 59:15, 16; NIV). MEDA did intervene. By investing.

## 5. Business can be a calling.

Part of the genius of MEDA (one applicable to many other professions) is to understand our work and spiritual lives as a whole piece of cloth. We bring our humble gifts—our talents, our business expertise, our innovative spirits—and we say, “Let’s see how this—our treasure in jars of clay—can help others in need. How can we shine the light of our work, animated by our faith, into the dark places?”

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After all, the first page of the Bible starts off with God at work. Only on page two do people show up, and then as made in the image of God to also work and be God’s junior partners in sustaining creation.

As MEDA matured, members sought to more deliberately honor God in daily toil, serving as “ministers of commerce” who would be active agents of Christian discipleship.

It can be argued that MEDA changed the understanding of business (and work generally) as a legitimate venue for Christian ministry. When it comes to spirituality in the workplace, much of the Christian world has had a moat around its castle. With the help of

MEDA, countless Christians in business have seen that ministry is not confined to Sunday but covers the whole work week. It’s as if MEDA struck a tuning fork and then pressed it against the soul of business, and the vibration keeps resonating over the generations.

MEDA did so by providing resources and networking opportunities (conventions, seminars, *The Marketplace* magazine) to help bring faith and workplace closer together. Have these resources made a difference? Anecdotally we hear about companies that have broadened their “values footprint” and consciously seek out the “God moments” in their workplace.

One assembly line worker told a MEDA staffer what she liked about working for a company owned by MEDA members. “No one yells at me here,” she said. A small thing? Not if you’re used to being abused.

## **6. Witness includes creating economic shalom.**

We at MEDA like to think we have helped expand the definition of Christian witness. While we do not proselytize, we bear witness by creating economic shalom. The possibilities for an expanded witness and noticeable “peace dividend” are remarkable, given that economic inequality is at the root of so much global strife.

We have been agents of peace by bringing financial strength and hope to small operators in global hotspots bereft of hope, such as Yemen and Libya. In Afghanistan, Egypt, and Morocco we work with a burgeoning population of youth who are restless and unemployed, by boosting financial literacy and job training so they will see other options than being recruited by extremist groups.

Another area is women’s empowerment. For years MEDA worked in Pakistan to help homebound women improve their marketing of embroidered fabrics. Because their culture and traditions confined them to their homes, they couldn’t go to market and see for themselves what customers want. MEDA developed creative ways to bring the market to them through a network of intermediary sales agents who link them to the market so they can update their production and get better prices. Many of these women, some in areas that still practice “honour killings,” have been routinely mistreated and abused, but when they improve their economic stake they get more respect and better treatment. A little assistance, strategically applied, helps them coax out inherent skills, and ends up becoming a trim tab on the rudder of change by enriching human rights.

Our organization has turned sixty, but we do not feel long in the tooth. Actually, we feel more vibrant than ever as MEDA enters its next decade. As the psalmist writes of the cedars of Lebanon, “In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap” (Ps. 92:14).

### **About the author**

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# Pentecost, jubilee, and nation building

Kim Tan

**U**ndoubtedly the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost was a pivotal event in the story of salvation. Pentecostals have helped us understand this day in terms of the giving of gifts of the Spirit, and rightly so—as evident in Peter’s Pentecost sermon, in which he quotes the prophet Joel (“I will pour out my Spirit . . .”) to explain the “drunken” behaviour of the early disciples (Acts 2:17–18). But I would argue that a better way of understanding Pentecost is as a celebration of the giving of the law.

## A new nation, a distinctive way of life

In Jewish tradition Pentecost celebrated the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The law formed the basis for the existence of Israel

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as a people dedicated to serving God. For Christians, too, Pentecost is about the formation of a new nation. At Sinai, the new nation was formed out of twelve discordant tribes of perhaps a million people who had been slaves in Egypt. At Pentecost, a new nation—a royal priesthood—was formed around twelve disciples. At Sinai it was the law that was to shape their common life. At Pentecost it was the giving of the law of the Spirit. Both events were accompanied by supernatural manifestations and resulted in new and distinctive lifestyles. God’s strategy to make himself known was to call a people and form

them into a nation who would be different from the other nations. This nation would have a distinct character in every aspect of their lives.

So what were the distinctives of this new nation? How were they to live with their God and one another? In *worship* there was



to be no more human sacrifice, no ornate temples, no sexual orgies, no idols. In *government* God was king. The organization was theocracy, not monarchy. Laws were based on justice and mercy. In *social relationships* the law guided interactions between

**Even in economic life, God wanted Israel to be different from the other nations. Overnight the people all became landowners. From slavery to land ownership—that’s quite a journey.**

parents and children, members of the opposite sex, neighbors, slaves, foreigners. In *healthcare* definitions of clean and unclean foods were articulated, and regulations on hand washing and quarantine were given.

Even in the mundane area of *economic life*, God wanted Israel to be different from the other nations. For a start, each family would be allotted its own land in perpetuity, and the land was to be farmed to provide income.

Overnight all the people became landowners.

They had asset-based capital with which to create wealth and to care for their families and their communities. This was revolutionary. They had left behind in Egypt a feudal system in which all land was owned by kings and the nobility, a system in which they were slaves. From slavery to land ownership—that’s quite a journey. This legislation laid the foundation for ownership of private property, the basis for what we could call a “free market economy,” in which trade and the exchange of goods and services can take place.

But God was not idealistic enough to believe that everything would work out well for everyone all the time. There would be droughts, pests that ruined crops, accidents and deaths of key family members—and inevitably, overconsumption. In time some people would fall into debt and would be forced to sell their land and migrate into towns to look for work. In anticipation of this outcome, God instituted laws that protected the poor from perpetual exploitation. There were laws on lending: “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them” (Exod. 22:25; NRSV; see also Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 23:19). And there were laws on harvesting and gleaning: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard;

you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:9–10; see also Deut. 24:19–22). Festivals were occasions when the poor could get meat and cakes from the temple offerings. No wonder the people loved their festivals and celebrated them joyously.

### **Three programs to promote a just society**

The most comprehensive legislation revealing God’s desire that this new nation live as a just society was spelled out in three programs:

**Tithing year.** Every three years (according to Deut. 26:12), God required the people to bring a tenth of their possessions to the town center and to invite the widows, orphans, foreigners, and Levites to take what they needed. Imagine Christian churches practicing such a tithe every three years!

**Sabbath year.** Every seventh year, God required the nation to do three things: proclaim a yearlong holiday for the land, animals, and servants (Just say no to exploitation!); cancel all debts (because God has cancelled our debts against him), and release all slaves (because God has set us free).

**Jubilee year.** Every fifty years, the jubilee is the culmination of these programs, which is why it was called the sabbath of sabbaths. In the fiftieth year, God required the nation to do the three things that were required during the sabbath year—give a year’s holiday to the land, animals, and servants; cancel all debts; and release all slaves. In addition, God required that the lands that had been sold during the previous forty-nine years be returned to their original owners. Try to wrap your head around that provision: Good news for the poor! Bad news for “those who join house to house and add field to field” (Isa. 5:8). Houses in cities may however be bought and held in perpetuity (Lev. 25:30).

The jubilee was a reset button designed to prevent the kind of situation in which the rich get richer and richer and the poor get poorer and poorer.

What the jubilee affirmed were the following principles:

1. God wants his people to own property so they can provide for themselves and their communities. Capital is needed in order to create wealth. Poverty results from an absence of capital, either asset-based or intellectual.

2. God wants his people to rediscover family. On the Day of Atonement, when the ram's horn would be blown to signal the beginning of the jubilee, a mass migration would have happened across the land as people returned to their family homes. The result would be the reuniting of family members who had been dispersed and lost touch with one another.
3. God wants his people to rediscover shalom. What do families do when they are reunited after a long absence? They have meals together and they tell stories and laugh and cry together as they sit under their vines and fig trees.

To understand the incredible impact of these three programs, consider this fifty-year grid:

1	11	21 tithe+sabbath	31	41
2	12 tithe	22	32	42 tithe+sabbath
3 tithe	13	23	33 tithe	43
4	14 sabbath	24 tithe	34	44
5	15 tithe	25	35 sabbath	45 tithe
6 tithe	16	26	36 tithe	46
7 sabbath	17	27 tithe	37	47
8	18 tithe	28 sabbath	38	48 tithe
9 tithe	19	29	39 tithe	49 sabbath
10	20	30 tithe	40	50 jubilee

In a fifty-year period, the three-year program would have been practiced sixteen times, the sabbath-year program seven times, and the fiftieth-year program once. But notice the triple whammy. Year 48 would have been a tithing year; year 49, a sabbath year; and year 50, the jubilee year. Add to these program the festivals; weekly shabbat; laws on lending, gleaning, and harvesting; responsibilities of the extended family, clan, and tribe—and what you have is a social safety net that is in part statutory (mandated by God's laws) and in part voluntary (a matter of families caring for each other).

## What kind of a crazy God is this?

We need to remember that all these laws were given at Sinai before the nation entered the land of promise. Had I been one of the slaves, I would have asked, what kind of a crazy God have we left Egypt to follow? The answer would have been: a God who loves righteousness and justice and wants to see social holiness as a distinguishing mark of this new nation.

God made an incredibly bold promise to the nation: if they obeyed these commandments, there would be no one in need among them (Deut. 15:4). Alongside this promise was a threat. If the nation did not obey these laws, God would proclaim on them a sabbath the likes of which they could not imagine (Deut. 15).

## A distant vision, a prophetic hope

But for a few isolated attempts (Jeremiah, Nehemiah), there is no evidence that any of the three programs was ever practiced, and the promise that there would be no poor among them was never fulfilled. In the book of Ruth, Boaz is an example of someone who practiced the laws on gleaning as well as kinship. Jeremiah's prophecy suggests that it was because the nation did not observe

**The jubilee became a distant vision, a hope carried by the prophets for a time when the messiah would come and bring in a kingdom of justice, righteousness, and social holiness, when all Israel would enjoy shalom.**

the sabbath year that they were taken away into captivity by the Babylonians (Jer. 17). If the people did not voluntarily give rest to the land and the animals, God would do so by removing the people from the land into exile. A salutary lesson for us all.

The jubilee became a distant vision, a hope carried by the prophets for a time when the messiah would come and bring in a kingdom of justice, righteousness, and social holiness, when all Israel would be able to enjoy shalom beneath their vines and fig trees (Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10). It was Isaiah in

particular who dreamt about this fulfillment: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, . . . to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor"—that is, the jubilee year (Isa. 61:1–2).

## **Messianic reinterpretation**

Centuries later these words would be read by the carpenter from Nazareth as a mandate for his ministry. “Today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing,” he told an astonished audience after announcing the platform for his ministry with these words from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18–19). Here Yeshua was in effect saying that the jubilee program is by no means dead. God is still interested in a people characterized by social holiness, and Yeshua and his disciples were the agents chosen to bring this new reality into being.

The practical outworking of returning land may not have been possible anymore, because the vast majority of the people were landless descendants of those who had returned from exile. Nevertheless jubilee was still relevant, because its principles are eternal and need to be expressed in new ways for a new generation. Yeshua was bringing in the long-awaited kingdom, and it looked very much like jubilee revamped.

He reinterpreted the jubilee radically, making it an everyday event, a way of life rather than an event that comes around only every fifty years. He reinterpreted it to suit a nation living as taxed subjects of Roman imperialism in which the vast majority were poor, dispossessed, and landless. Furthermore the jubilee mandate was to be internalized to include spiritual liberation as well as freedom from slavery, “rest for your souls” as well as physical shabbat. His practice of the common purse with his disciples was a new expression of family in which everything was held in common—meals, material possessions. This is a microcosm of the new way of living out jubilee.

The ministry of Yeshua and the church have therefore to be viewed from the perspective of jubilee. After all, if the jubilee mandate was good enough for Yeshua’s ministry, shouldn’t it be good enough for ours? His was a holistic mission, unlike our modern missions that so often seek to make converts and not disciples.

## **Jubilee in the early church**

Pentecost with its supernatural manifestations—a mighty rushing wind, tongues of fire, people speaking in tongues—provoked questions that led to Peter’s proclamation of the gospel. These

people are not drunk. They have been filled with the Spirit. This was what Joel had prophesied would happen.

Most evangelicals would endorse the centrality of Peter's proclamation, while charismatic Christians might emphasize the supernatural signs that accompanied the sermon. But for me, the greatest miracle at Pentecost was not the supernatural manifesta-

**For me, the greatest miracle at Pentecost was not the supernatural manifestations. It was the sight of new believers selling their assets and sharing their goods and daily meals with strangers.**

tions. It was the sight of new believers selling their assets and sharing their goods and daily meals with strangers who had become their newfound family members. What stands out for me is this creation of a new community that, astonishingly, cuts across all existing racial, economic, and social lines. This economic sharing is truly miraculous.

And it takes us back to the jubilee and Sinai. These early chapters of Acts tell the story of the birth of a new nation, a people of God newly formed around the twelve dis-

ciples. God was giving his Spirit—this time to write his laws in human hearts, not on a tablet of stones. The coming of the Spirit led to a spontaneous new expression of jubilee. Granted, the twelve disciples had had some experience of this economic sharing during their three years with Yeshua. Even so, they displayed a Spirit-led spontaneity as they coped with explosive growth in numbers of new family members, many of whom were poor. This new nation lived out jubilee in a fresh way for a new generation in an urban setting. This new supernaturally generous community had a wow factor that attracted thousands who joined them.

The early church grasped the comprehensive nature of the gospel as their new faith affected every aspect of their lives, including what was in their pockets. Theirs was a whole-life discipleship, not the dualistic faith of modern Christians.

Jubilee was a radical socioeconomic program that would have resulted in social holiness for the nation. It was an imaginative, humanitarian program involving a year's holiday to discourage exploitation of the land, animals, and slaves. It also included a requirement to forgive debts, release slaves, and return to their original owners all properties bought during the previous forty-

nine years. Along with wealth creation, the law provided a blueprint for wealth distribution in order to create and maintain a just society.

We observe that all the jubilee principles were also evident in the new community described in the early chapters of Acts:

**Compassionate capitalism.** Despite attempts to describe the economics of the early church as communist or socialist, the reality was that it was a form of compassionate capitalism. Believers still owned private property—a central tenet of the original jubilee provision. They opened up their private houses each day to share meals. The story of Barnabas—in contrast to that of Ananias and Sapphira—showed that the properties belonged to them and their giving was voluntary rather than coerced (Acts 4:36–37; compare Acts 5:1–11).

**Nontraditional family.** The church at Pentecost discovered a new meaning of family. All those born of the Spirit calling God their father belonged to the same family irrespective of race, social status, or gender. And as new brothers and sisters they cared for one another spiritually, emotionally, materially, and economically.

**Rediscovery of shalom.** There was forgiveness and healing—physical, emotional, spiritual. There were restored relationships. Their material needs were being met. “Great grace was upon them all.” We see a new community formed, made up of restored people, sharing their lives, welcoming strangers with confidence into their midst, feeding the widows, and generally being at peace, having favor with God and others. In a word, they rediscovered shalom.

### **Only by the Spirit’s power**

As we have noted, jubilee failed in the Old Testament. It was never carried out by the nation of Israel. Why? I believe it is because it was just too radical. It could not be carried out with mere human effort, because of our addiction to materialism. The jubilee promise that there would be no needy ones among them (Deut. 15:4) was finally fulfilled at Pentecost through the power of the Spirit: “There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). Only through the coming of the Spirit was it possible for people to love one another in this radical way. The true sign that

a person is full of the Spirit is extravagant generosity. Likewise, a Spirit-filled church will overflow with expressions of generosity toward its “family,” community, and beyond.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has written,

*It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community. He committed the entire work of salvation to that community. It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought—and is seeking—to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second.<sup>1</sup>*

And I would add that our Lord left behind a community so that the world might see what kind of a kingdom he inaugurated and ultimately what kind of king he is.

Again I ask, if Yeshua used the jubilee mandate as his mission, should we not follow the master? If this is our calling, how do we express jubilee through the church for our generation, which longs to be wowed by something real and radical?

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 20.

## **About the author**

Kim Tan is the founder Chairman of SpringHill Management Ltd. (UK), a fund management company in biotech and social venture capital investments. He is cofounder of Transformational Business Network, a charity with social transformational businesses in developing countries. For a fuller treatment of his views on and experience with biblical principles of jubilee, see Kim Tan, *The Jubilee Gospel: The Jubilee, Spirit and the Church* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Media, 2008).



## Book review

Henry Rempel

*Fighting Poverty through Enterprise: The Case for Social Venture Capital*, by Brian Griffiths and Kim Tan. London: Transformational Business Network, 2007. Available online at <http://www.tbnetwork.org/resources/books-articles/fighting-poverty-through-enterprise-book/>.

**B**rian Griffiths and Kim Tan are intent on reducing poverty so pervasive in Africa and South Asia. *Fighting Poverty through Enterprise* argues that the means to this end is to redirect foreign assistance to small and medium enterprises by investing in social venture capital. This redirecting of assistance includes replacing charity with investment.

Key to this proposed strategy is good government: sound macroeconomic policies, transparency, and an effective legal system. With these elements in place in the recipient country, it is also essential to (1) encourage corporations and the wealthy to redirect their charitable donations to investing in a social venture capital fund; (2) encourage donor governments to increase the portion of their foreign assistance dedicated to funding enterprise, including promotion of more business-friendly policies in recipient countries; and (3) encourage high-income countries to reduce trade barriers that now affect adversely exports from low-income countries.

To make the case for this strategic change in how foreign assistance is delivered, the authors contend that current forms of aid should end. Their critique of foreign aid is a summary of various studies that set out to prove that aid has failed to reduce poverty. But typically the goals of such aid include advancing military objectives, creating markets for donor country exports, “buying” access to resources located in recipient countries, and “purchasing” votes to be used in international forums. When aid is

evaluated in terms of whether it has met these goals, it often proves to have been quite successful.

To their credit, the authors recognise the serious effects of subsidies within high-income countries as a barrier to free as well as fair trade. They also note the benefits of debt cancellation in alleviating poverty. The authors are concerned that multilateral and bilateral aid must go to governments. Many of these are deemed to be corrupt, with the result that aid is misused. The authors conveniently overlook the fact that a bribe must be paid in order for it to be received. Why is only the recipient and not the payer seen as a culprit? Should the good governance necessary for a sound social venture capital strategy be realized, aid generally would become more effective as well.

The authors view microcredit and microenterprise development in a favourable light. These initiatives reach out to families caught in poverty and provide a source of income that reduces somewhat the poverty within their households. The authors note correctly that jobs created beyond that household tend to be limited, and only a low proportion of such microenterprises ever mature into growing formal enterprises.

There are some exceptions. When the nongovernmental organizations involved make training an integral part of access to credit, the likelihood of microenterprise project success increases. Also important are training in how to build a market and basic bookkeeping to facilitate financial planning. In addition, product improvement and better inventory control reduce significantly the likelihood of enterprise failure. These factors in turn reduce accumulation of bad debts for the project. For Griffiths and Tan, interest rates up to 50 percent are acceptable. An efficient delivery mechanism for training and credit, combined with a low incidence of bad debts, should enable a sustainable microcredit initiative at interest rates between 15 percent and 20 percent.

At the end of chapter 2 the authors introduce International Finance Facility for Immunisation as an example of good aid. Success, they contend, is linked to the aid going to a registered charity (rather than to the government) and to transparency. This project to immunize children against diseases such as measles, tetanus, and yellow fever is basically a replication of an initiative decades ago to limit the spread of rinderpest among livestock in

East Africa. An expatriate veterinarian was given syringes and vaccine and was provided with transport service. He moved from village to village inoculating cattle. Such an intervention typically involves one brief action, and local participation is facilitated through negotiations with a chief or another village leader. In my judgment, these—more than private rather than government delivery and greater transparency—are the key factors for program success.

Poverty alleviation, in contrast, requires longer-term interventions, and buy-in by the people involved is necessary for program success and sustainability. The key is to move beyond working with clients or involving stakeholders to building partnerships with program participants.

The social venture capital funds Griffiths and Tan envision work with customers rather than with the “victims” the authors associate with charity initiatives. In their case studies, local businesses and subcontractors are still referred to as clients and stakeholders. Is it an advance to think in terms of customers rather than partners?

In summary, it has been demonstrated that economic growth is a necessary but not sufficient condition for poverty reduction. Also, small and medium enterprises have a proven track record as a means to economic growth. Extending such employment and economic growth to reduce poverty generally requires complementary activities such as good governance, schooling, potable water, primary health care, and family planning.

*Fighting Poverty through Enterprise* makes a compelling case for social venture capital as a good building block to promote development. The book’s efforts to demonstrate that aid diverted from poverty alleviation programs to social venture capital will reduce poverty more effectively are not as convincing.

### **About the author**

Henry Rempel is professor emeritus in the Department of Economics, the University of Manitoba. In addition to teaching economic development, he has led more than twenty missions abroad to evaluate projects for various agencies. He is author of *A High Price for Abundant Living: The Story of Capitalism* (Herald Press, 2003).

## Review article

Gordon Matties

*Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, by William T. Cavanaugh. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

*The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Post-Modern World*, by Daniel M. Bell Jr. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

**T**here is no more urgent matter in our time than the economy. At least that's what politicians the world over would have us believe. In a sense they are right, even though their solutions are often wrong, misguided, misdirected, or short-sighted. William Cavanaugh and Daniel Bell offer us not only ways to think clearly

**William Cavanaugh and Daniel Bell offer us not only ways to think clearly about the economic challenges we face but also theological and practical wisdom for orienting ourselves rightly and making wise choices.**

about the economic challenges we face (both globally and personally) but also theological and practical wisdom for orienting ourselves rightly and making wise choices about how to live.

The word *desire* in both book titles suggests an underlying theme that might be paraphrased this way: we become what we worship. Neither author puts it exactly that way. Still, both present us with careful reflection on how our desires, or loves, are formed, how our practices shape and are shaped by our desires, and how desiring/loving God has

the capacity to change everything. In that respect, both books offer us practical theologies of the economic life and serve as guides for spiritual formation. Both books are grounded in Christian practices of discipleship, and both assume that an alternative economy, a "kingdom" way of ordering the world, is the proper Christian vocation.

Cavanaugh begins his book with a series of assumptions and questions that have occupied Western Christians for centuries. He assumes, as many Christians have done, that how we handle our money and how we relate to God have something to do with each other. After all, Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24). Although we have understood him to be saying it’s either one or the other, most often we assume the essential givenness of our current economic realities. Rather than challenging economic assumptions, we most often ask how we ought to orient or adapt ourselves to our economic realities. The option of choosing for God and against wealth, or mammon (as the KJV has it), has given way to negotiating between the two.

Cavanaugh does us a service by identifying the main topics that have traditionally shaped those negotiations: the free market, consumerism, globalization, and scarcity. Each chapter offers an interpretation of one of those topics, and provides rich analysis and practical suggestions drawn from the Christian theological tradition. Cavanaugh aims to offer readers “a view of everyday economic life.” The book, he hopes, will be “a contribution to a kind of theological microeconomics.”

However, Cavanaugh does not present a standard “Christian view” of economics. He assumes the validity of the big questions without presenting a singular answer. As one might expect, he examines some of the “pathologies of desire” in our current economic climate. And he affirms that “the dynamics of desire in Christ can both form and be formed by alternative economic practices” (viii). In doing so he offers a theological reimagining of both consuming and desiring. He focuses each chapter on a set of binaries. (1) Exploring the free market, he suggests both *negative freedom and positive freedom*. (2) Offering an analysis of consumerism, he suggests both *detachment and attachment*. (3) Articulating the challenges of globalization, he offers insight into how we imagine alternative practices that embrace both *the global and the local*. (4) Reflecting on the underlying myth of our economic practices, he juxtaposes both *scarcity and abundance* in order to imagine alternative Christian practices.

Daniel Bell’s book was published in the series *The Church and Postmodern Culture*. Bell’s aim is to offer a thorough cultural analysis and critique of contemporary capitalism and to present a

vision of an alternative economy of desire. Editor James K. A. Smith notes in his foreword that Bell's book "should encourage a paradigm shift in how we stage conversations between Christian faith and economics" (11). The book draws on the insights of French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. They provide Bell with lenses through which to focus attention on the nature of human desire and the capitalist economy. The book is difficult, delightful, and essential reading for anyone interested in fresh, profound, and critical thinking about the economic life. I say *economic life* because this book is not simply about economics. Bell's aim is to show how "the church's life is part of a divine economy of desire—one that redeems desire from the postmodern capitalist economy that would distort desire in ways that hinder humanity's communion with God, one another, and the rest of creation" (19). Bell changes the conversation from its traditional focus on "capitalism versus socialism to capitalism versus the divine economy made present by Christ and witnessed to by the church."

Because he changes the paradigm of the conversation that way, Bell is also able to move beyond convictions and beliefs about

**Like Cavanaugh, Bell draws on the resources of the Christian tradition to illustrate that "the way it is is *not* the way it always has to be because it is not the way it has always been."**

economics, markets, and consumerism; beyond competing theories about capitalism per se; and even beyond a singular or normative answer or blueprint for the authentic economic life. Like Cavanaugh, Bell draws on the resources of the Christian tradition, including Augustine, Aquinas, and medieval monastics and mendicants, to illustrate that "the way it is is *not* the way it always has to be because it is not the way it has always been" (25). And like Cavanaugh, Bell's aim is "to

provoke further reflection on the difference Christ makes to the economic life of those called as disciples of Christ" (28). Although Bell doesn't offer "a blueprint for the world," he assumes that discipleship "is about the ordering of our desires so that we desire the good that is God and the role that economies play in that ordering" (28). Bell is even interested in economics as a mode of witness or evangelism. The Christian community, living "in accord with God's economy," lives differently in that it is

“informed by a desire schooled in virtues such as charity, justice, and generosity.” Therefore, “we hope others will see how we order our pots and pans, how we deal with material goods, and so turn and join us on our way in giving thanks to God in heaven, who is the giver of every good gift.” In other words, this book is an “inquiry into the economic form of faithful discipleship” (29).

The book is organized in three sections. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the challenging thought of Deleuze and Foucault in order to mine their insights on the nature of desire and its formation. In doing so, Bell makes explicit the connection between discipleship and economics. Chapters 3 and 4 present a thoroughgoing critique of capitalism, not to uncover whether it “works” but to ask what kind of work it does. How does it shape human desire and human relationships with God, others, and creation? The critique

**These books challenge prevailing assumptions and practices (and Christian convictions) and also offer fresh, dangerous, and hopeful insight into how we live our vocation as participants in God’s love, generosity, and justice.**

centers on how capitalism deforms human desire and warps relationships. Chapters 5–7 take the lessons learned from the philosophers in order to imagine how the church as an alternative community becomes a place “where desire is healed by participation in the divine economy of God’s eternal generosity” (29).

Be warned. Bell’s critique is scathing. Bell does not, however, make the mistake of assuming economy in itself is evil. “The divine economy,” he writes, “does not condemn production, consumption, private property, profit taking, contracts, the division of labor, or markets in themselves” (172). But economy, severed from its rightful end in the restorative justice of God, is damaging and idolatrous. The divine economy, by contrast, challenges “a market that is untethered from virtue, from the common good, from the universal destination of all things” (176). The divine economy is rooted in “God’s abundance,” which “takes form in the disciplines that heal our desire so that it moves in accord with its true end, so that we desire what and how we should desire” (180).

It would be difficult to find better books than these by Cavanaugh and Bell that both challenge prevailing assumptions

and practices (and Christian convictions) and also offer fresh, dangerous, and hopeful insight into how we live our vocation as participants in God's love, generosity, and justice. No doubt readers will find ways of arguing with both authors. After all, they challenge our most sacred practices: the beliefs and rituals of capitalist economics. But they also offer an alternative vision grounded in the redemption of desire, the sharing of God's abundance, and the risk of letting go for the sake of the most vulnerable among us.

### **About the author**

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## Economics and money

### Print and electronic resources for the church

Arlyn Friesen Epp

**L***iving Justice: A Gospel Response to Poverty*, edited by Karri Munn-Venn and Adam Snook (Ottawa, ON: Citizens for Public Justice, 2011). How is the Christian faith community to live out the justice mandate to love the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and to seek just relations within society? Through reflections, questions, activities, and prayers, this resource provides insight into the situation of poverty in Canada, the challenges and opportunities we face as a society, and actions that Christians can take. Also see their succeeding volume, *Living Ecological Justice*.

*Trading Rights Cards and Teacher's Guide*, by Sheilagh McGlynn et al. (Toronto, ON: Kairos, 2009). A unique youth curriculum that aims to raise awareness about the connections between international trade and human rights and help students understand the role they play in the global economy. Each card focuses on an everyday product, company, or human rights defender, and draws a link between our daily lives and human rights struggles around the world.

*How the Church Fails Businesspeople (and What Can Be Done about It)*, by John C. Knapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). Why do many Christians struggle to relate their faith to their daily work? This book argues that the church's ambiguous teachings about vocation, money, and business have long contributed to Christians' uncertainty about discipleship in the workplace. Drawing on his own expertise in business ethics and numerous interviews with Christians in diverse occupations, Knapp offers a theological framework for Christian life in the world of business.

*Building an Ethical Economy: Theology and the Marketplace* (DVD series), by Rowan Williams, Sir Partha Dasgupta, Kathryn Tanner, and Bernard Ntahoturi (New York, NY: Trinity Institute,

2010). Does theology have a role in shaping a new economy—one that works toward the biblical ideal of sufficiency for all and is resistant to exploitation? In this lecture series, leading theologians and economists talk about the relationship between economics and Christian faith. Speakers address topics of capitalism, wealth, and future responsibility.

***Why Business Matters to God (and What Still Needs to Be Fixed)***, by Jeff Van Duzer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010). Van Duzer integrates biblical studies with the disciplines of business and economics. Looking beyond the place of ethical principles and the character of the individual, Van Duzer displays a vision of business that contributes to the very purposes of God.

***God's Economy: Redefining the Health and Wealth Gospel***, by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). Wilson-Hartgrove draws from Jesus's teachings on money, exploring five tactics for living in God's economy of abundance. Then he demonstrates how people have practiced these tactics in the past, as well as what these principles can do for you, your family, and your church today. Also listen to Wilson-Hartgrove's related public lecture at St. Benedict's Table, Winnipeg, in 2009; podcast available for download at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2221](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2221).

***Preaching and Stewardship: Proclaiming God's Invitation to Grow***, by Craig Alan Satterlee (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011). A nuts-and-bolts handbook for preaching on stewardship, raising issues preachers need to consider when preparing stewardship sermons and offering advice on how to address them.

***Money Enough: Everyday Practices for Living Faithfully in the Global Economy***, edited by Douglas A. Hicks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010). Walking the line between rejecting the marketplace and accepting its excesses, this book shows how to develop practices that help us survive in hard times and reach out to others.

***Money and Faith: The Search for Enough***, edited by Michael Schut (Denver: Morehouse Education Resources, 2008). On a personal level, this book opens up issues of scarcity and abun-

dance, idolatry and freedom. On a societal level, it invites exploration of greater equity and sustainability. On both levels, it empowers individuals and groups to apply their faith's values in practical ways while taking pastoral and prophetic stances. Includes an extensive study guide.

***Free: Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most***, by Mark Scandrette (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013). Packed with helpful exercises for getting a handle on your money story, and designed for healing and generative money conversations with friends, *Free* gives you a path to financial freedom and spiritual flourishing.

***The Cost of Community: Jesus, St. Francis and Life in the Kingdom***, by Jamie Arpin-Ricci (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). St. Francis of Assisi challenged the church and empire of his day by ordering his life around the gospel—giving up his power, wealth, and privileges; claiming the poor and powerful alike as his brothers and sisters; and loving Islamic neighbors even as his church and state waged war on them. Centuries later, Jamie Arpin-Ricci and his friends and neighbours in the new monastic community of Little Flowers in urban Winnipeg have likewise heard Jesus's message and ordered their lives around it. This book is Jamie's field report, giving surprising insights about what life together in the spirit of Jesus's teachings offers us, and what it demands of us.

***Your Treasure, Your Heart: Women and the Stewardship of Money***, by Patricia Burdette (Scottsdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2008). This thirteen-session Bible study guide is designed for women's gatherings, Sunday school classes, or individual reading and inspiration.

Everence (in the United States: [www.everence.com](http://www.everence.com)) and Mennonite Foundation (in Canada: <http://www.mennofoundation.ca>) offer personal and congregational resources on budgeting, estate planning, stewardship, first-fruits giving, and more. Here are a few examples:

***Giving Your First Fruits: Money, Faith and Worship***, by Edwin Friesen (Mennonite Foundation of Canada, 2013). This series of short stories/essays deals with “financial discipleship.” Available for download at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2114](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2114).

***Lifestyle Choices: An Exercise in Timbits® Economics***, by Darren Pries-Klassen (Mennonite Foundation of Canada, 2013). This group exercise for youth/young adult settings explores the relationship between money, choice, and power. Available for download at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2220](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2220).

***From Grateful to Generous: Stewardship Sermons and Discussion Questions***, by John H. Neufeld and Elsie Rempel (Mennonite Foundation of Canada, 2007). These six sermons and accompanying study guide address topics of money, assets, and greed. Available for download at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1840](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1840).

***Year-Round Congregational Stewardship*** (Lancaster, PA: Everence, 2009). This resource provides a comprehensive stewardship strategy for congregations. Available for download at [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2222](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2222).

***But It's Only a Story: Why Jesus Told Stories about Money and Why We Should Too***, by Beryl M. Jantzi (Lancaster, PA: Everence). This four-session curriculum is designed to help people talk about money, greed, generosity, stewardship.

### **About the author**

Arlyn Friesen Epp is director of Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Within Canada, resources from the centre (including the items listed above) can be borrowed; items for sale or free download are available to all. Check <http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca> for more information.