

Soundings

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God's economics

by John McKinnon

"The topic of economics is exceedingly difficult to talk about in most First World churches, more taboo than politics or even sex. Yet no aspect of our individual lives and corporate lives is more determinative of our welfare. And few subjects are more frequently addressed in our scriptures."¹

Economics is like a game of musical chairs. There are not enough chairs in the world for everyone to have as many as they would like. But rather than play music and race to the nearest chair, we have an auction, and those with the most money can buy their chairs while those without are left standing.

Assuming that Earth's resources are scarce (not enough to satisfy everyone's wants, as opposed to everyone's needs) and that there are competing uses for them, economics is essentially about determining who gets what. The dominant economic system in the world today claims the best way to allocate these scarce resources is through the market – supply and demand. That is, whoever pays the most gets the goods. Hence the situation where the rich world spends more on ocean cruises than it would cost to provide safe water to the one billion people going without.

Can this be right? Is there a Biblical alternative? Is there such a thing as God's economics? In fact, the Bible has plenty to say on these two fundamental points. As Christians, we need to know the Scriptures, and speak and live prophetically – challenging the dominant but ungodly ruling paradigms of this world.

So, first, is there not enough to go around? Walter Brueggemann reminds us that God created a world that was ordered, abundant, fruitful and very good, good enough to provide for its inhabitants.² Passages such as Psalm 104 celebrate God's abundant provision. As Brueggemann says, "the psalm makes clear that we don't need to worry. God is utterly, utterly reliable. The fruitfulness of the world is guaranteed."

Where did this notion of scarcity come from? Our greediness leads us to always want more and we fear that we will never have enough. In the desert God provided manna for the Israelites to eat. There was enough for everyone. When they followed the myth of scarcity and tried to hoard the manna, it turned sour and rotted. They did not need to continually struggle to get more. God would provide.

Jesus continues the battle against the myth of scarcity. In Matthew 6:24-34 he states that we cannot serve God and money. We cannot spend our lives striving to get more; to "have enough". And we don't need to: "Do not worry..." he says. "Look at the birds..." (Matthew 6:25, 26).

Luke precedes his version of the same discourse with the story of the Rich Fool; the hoarder who never has enough, who lives his life according to the myth of scarcity (Luke 12:13-21). God calls the man a fool. Twice in Mark's gospel we read of Jesus feeding crowds with a few loaves and fish (Mark 6:30-44, Mark 8:1-13), demonstrating through the miraculous multiplication of food, the principle that God has provided enough for all.

Paul understood this as well. When discussing his collection for the believers in Jerusalem he highlights God's economics: Though Jesus was rich, Paul says, "yet for your sakes he became poor, that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). The aim of Paul's collection was that "the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Paul is quoting from Exodus, from the story of the manna. He understood that God has provided enough; we just need to share.

So, according to the Bible, the world's resources are not scarce, they are enough (in fact, the United Nations agrees³). But how do we determine who gets what? For many, the laws of supply and demand have found divine approval in a privatized Christianity of individualism and personal freedom. However, God calls us to be a community, a people, a society who collectively live out the values of his Kingdom. Do the original people of God, the Israelites, have anything to teach us on this?

Old Testament scholar Christopher J.H. Wright emphasises that while we are not to imitate Israel's laws, neither are we to ignore them. They act as a model for us, an example of God's timeless principles of love and justice.⁴ Therefore the Sabbath rest, debt cancellation and slave emancipation are relevant biblical principles for Christians. The Jubilee restoration of land is relevant to us.

The Old Testament law recognized that full equality was impracticable. There are many reasons why some people become poor and others rich. These include natural causes (drought, floods), accidents and human sinfulness (greed, oppression and laziness). However, God ensured that the subsequent inequalities are neither permanent nor exacerbated over time. The Jubilee was not about charity but about restoring to families the ability to provide for themselves again.

In Deuteronomy 15, Moses writes that there should be no poor among the Israelites. There is plenty to go around. However, he acknowledges that things will go wrong ("there will always be poor in the land"). In these cases they are to be "openhanded towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land." Generosity and Jubilee restoration limited inequality and prevented exploitation.

Ownership of land in Israel was never absolute. It was owned by God for the benefit of the people. Its purpose was not profit maximization; but community wellbeing. Similarly, security on loans could not be enforced if people were left without adequate shelter or clothing. In God's economy, people come first. Assets, whether land or finances, exist to provide livelihoods for all, not to create wealth, indifferent to inequality or suffering.

Modern applications of these principles may require some creative thinking, but the principles of restoring opportunity and sharing resources are at the heart of God's economics and are as applicable today as in the ancient world. If we abandon the myth of scarcity and start to live in the truth of God's abundance, then we need not fear generosity and redistribution. God has shown us an economic alternative. Do we have the faith, courage and creativity to live prophetically as God's people in a corrupt world?

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References

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4. Christopher J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1983).

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