As the chair of a joint department of Economics & Community Development, a researcher for the Chalmers Center for Economic Development, and a board member of a Christian community development organization that seeks to address issues of poverty through education, character development, job training, and the promotion of entrepreneurship, I was excited to see the release of *Seeking the City* from theologian Chad Brand and Bible teacher and preacher Tom Pratt. While there is no shortage of books on the market that fit within this genre, there have been significant gaps in the sources available. In particular, more resources providing a historical analysis of Christianity and economic perspectives are needed. While meeting this need will require a monumental effort, Brand and Pratt’s work can help fill this void.

The three-part organizational structure of this book is one of its great strengths. In Part One the authors provide a foundational overview of what the Bible says about the issues of wealth, poverty and money. Part Two is a survey of two thousand years of Christian and secular thinking on the topic. Only then in Part Three do the authors endeavor to shape our thinking about the issues of our day in light of these biblical, theological, and historical perspectives. This is a welcome contrast to the numerous books on this topic that have emerged seemingly oblivious to any historical context. It is also refreshing to see a book that addresses the writings of church history while directly seeking to apply their wisdom to contemporary issues.

Part One of the book spends a little over two hundred pages looking at what the Bible says about poverty, wealth, and economics. Brand and Pratt provide a clear and thorough survey of Scripture by outlining the metanarrative of Scripture in one chapter before proceeding through chapters covering narrative literature, the law, wisdom literature, the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, the first-century church and the book of Revelation. Separating each genre into a separate chapter allows them to provide the necessary exegetical analysis for each portion of Scripture.

I find the real strength of the work to be in Part Two. The number of
resources utilized in the book is impressive, and the authors often weave together Scripture, intellectual history, and historical and technological developments masterfully into a complex narrative. They begin by looking at the early church as it developed in the social, political, and economic context of the Roman Empire. This is followed by a brief overview of the thinking of the early Church Fathers, the Scholastics, and the Protestant Reformers. A bit of a turn is made as the narrative broadens to include the new sphere of more secular thinking on economics. Introductions to economists such as Adam Smith are made in this process. A chapter on the mercantile economy is followed by a shift of the emphasis from Western Europe to the United States. For someone accustomed to reading in the history of economic thought, the shift of emphasis to the United States may be a little surprising, since most would not see the center of economic thought shifting to the U.S. at this time. Given that the book is addressing the contemporary American context, however, it is quite appropriate.

Even the most knowledgeable reader is likely to learn new things, find new resources, and gain unique insights in Part Two of the book. I particularly appreciate that the authors introduced the reader to many of the early American Christian responses to the development of American capitalism and the development of economic theory (found in Chapter 17). This provides an important bridge to many of the early developments of economics, and to Christian action addressing poverty in the 20th and 21st centuries. Introductions like these appear in each chapter.

Part Three of the book addresses how Christians ought to approach economic issues facing the United States today. The opening chapter starts with quotes from Margaret Thatcher and Dinesh D’Souza, expressing the fundamental ideals of the American experiment as they see them. Subsequent chapters consider the complexity of seeing the economic roots of many contemporary problems, offer a statement on the morality of market economics, chart a discussion of Schumpeter’s notion of creative destruction, and enumerate guidelines for appropriate action.

A flaw with this final section may be that the authors set the stage too thoroughly, or show their cards too early, in the prior sections. After completing the first two parts of the book, the reader is already familiar with the arguments for many of the conclusions in the final section. While this is what an author hopes to accomplish in developing a case through exegesis and historical analysis, with over two hundred pages
in this final section it is at times difficult as a reader to stay motivated to proceed through the chapters with the outcomes so clearly foreseen. These chapters also seem more desultory, as they lack the natural order that biblical exegesis and historical narrative provide.

While Brand and Pratt have succeeded at filling the tremendous need for a comprehensive look at the development of Christian moral thinking in the economic sphere, there are certain aspects of this work that merit criticism. First, the authors are often dismissive of topics that many people would likely find important. Second, the authors use language that misses certain emphases in their sources, to an extent that risks misrepresenting them. Finally, in their effort to provide a needed corrective to “people apologizing for being successful in business and life” (p. 13), the authors bypass some of the weightier matters of Scripture. We can consider each of these problems in turn.

By being quickly dismissive of numerous issues, the authors likely alienate readers who might otherwise benefit from reading the book. For example, the authors reject any notion that there is a growing income gap in the United States (pp. 670–672). Considering Charles Murray’s Coming Apart might provide more insight than denying the issue altogether. Another case in point is that climate change is explicitly rejected as junk science, with little consideration of any potential scientific merit (Chapter 26). Also in this vein, Brand and Pratt seem to disregard the possibility of injustice or exploitation. For example, they affirm that “sweat shops” and “child labor” are a way out of poverty, not a consequence of globalization. Were it not for these opportunities, the ‘victims’ would simply die of starvation and/or disease or be selling themselves on the streets for sexual favors and risking death from AIDS or other such dangers of life on the street. (p. 734)

This is certainly an oversimplification that is disrespectful to those who study this topic, as well as many of the people living in developing nations.

The second area of concern is with regard to the use of language that may be misleading. I will provide two examples, neither of which suggests that the authors’ perspectives on these issues are invalid, but rather that they may misrepresent the sources they rely on. First, in describing John Calvin’s interpretation of the Eighth Commandment in his Institutes, the authors state
There are three kinds of theft, in Calvin’s view. Some thefts occur by violence, others by fraudulent deceit, and still others by legal means. Theft by legal means occurs when our property is taken from us by the government or by the courts and given to someone else through no fault of ourselves, but simply for the purpose of redistribution at the government’s whim. (p. 332)

While Calvin does speak against theft that takes place under a “semblance of justice,” claiming for Calvin the direct extension of this to redistributive taxes is not as logically warranted as the authors imply. If this were Calvin’s intent, it would make sense to find it mentioned in book four of the Institutes, where both taxation and the role of the civil authority are directly addressed. In this section we see mention neither in favor of nor opposed to redistributory taxation. The concerns there are with ensuring that those in authority see the taxes collected as belonging to the whole people and not their private chests, that the funds be carefully managed, and that they not “harass the poor people with them without cause” (Institutes 4.20.13).

Calvin refers to theft by “legal means” in the following passage:

...we know that all the arts by which we obtain possession of the goods and money of our neighbours, for sincere affection substituting an eagerness to deceive or injure them in any way, are to be regarded as thefts. Though they may be obtained by an action at law, a different decision is given by God. He sees the long train of deception by which the man of craft begins to lay nets for his more simple neighbour ... [italics added] (Institutes 2.8.45)

Calvin’s identification of theft by “legal means” does not seem to refer to the government using its legal authority to tax as the form of theft, but rather that goods obtained by means permitted by law may still be considered theft. The legal structure at any given time may be an insufficient arbiter for the Christian in knowing what is or is not theft.

As a final example, the section summarizing the contributions of Adam Smith contains no real errors, but does provide a narrow view with misplaced emphasis. The section summarizing Smith’s ideas is titled “Natural Liberty.” The use of quotation marks is notable and is employed by the authors every time the phrase is used. According to the authors, in The Wealth of Nations (2003), “Smith’s basic ideology can be easily
summed up, even though his tome was nearly a thousand pages long. He believed in free trade, the division of labor, and the development of industrial technology. Throughout the book, Smith advocated the principle of ‘natural liberty’” (p. 424). While Smith was firmly entrenched in the Scottish Enlightenment and would certainly have advocated a concept of natural liberty, this statement leads one to believe that this is the central focus of Smith’s work. Furthermore, by using quotation marks, the authors appear to be quoting a line that Smith used frequently. In fact, Brand and Pratt use it more times in the approximately half-dozen pages describing Smith’s ideas than the number of paragraphs in which Smith uses the term (5) in his nearly one thousand pages of text in *The Wealth of Nations* (2003).

A final criticism of the book is that the authors seem to put far more effort into making the case that government or collective action should not be used to address issues of poverty than they put into emphasizing what Christians ought to be doing. Statements about the latter are present, but they often seem to get lost among the statements about the former. For example, discussion of the Year of Jubilee is given one paragraph, and discussion of the “laws for tithing, charitable giving and allowances (gleaning laws), forgiveness of debts to fellow Israelites, interest-free loans, and compassionate indentured servant laws” is given a single sentence (p. 98). This is immediately followed by a three-page section entitled “What is Not Taught.” This seems to suggest that we are at risk of taking these biblical directives too seriously in implementation, not of passively dismissing them.

Similarly, when addressing the early Church’s sharing of possessions in Acts 4:32, the authors seem more interested in countering the notion that this “entailed some form of Christian socialism” than encouraging the reader to be moved to action. They cite Calvin’s *Commentaries (Acts)* to diffuse the notion of “Christian socialism” saying that, “For him (Calvin), discord in the church was ‘remedied not by an equalization of wealth, but by a spirit of unity,’ and that when goods were sold, the proceeds were not equally divided but given to each as he had genuine need” (p. 333). Calvin does point out that the sharing in *Acts* likely did not involve a complete leveling of material status, but just citing this is a narrow misrepresentation of the emphasis that Calvin wants to make, and the passion with which he makes it, when he says:
And now we must needs have more than iron bowels, seeing that we are no more moved with the reading of this history. The faithful did at that day give abundantly even of that which was their own, but we are not only content at this day wickedly to suppress that which we have in our hands, but do also rob others. They did and faithfully bring forth their own; we invent a thousand subtle shifts to draw all things unto us by hook or by crook. They laid it down at the apostles’ feet, we fear not with sacrilegious boldness to convert that to our own use which was offered to God. They sold in times past their possessions, there reigneth at this day an insatiable desire to buy. Love made that common to the poor and needy which was proper to every man. (Calvin’s Commentaries, Acts, vol. 18)

Calvin clearly does not seem to be explaining away the behavior of the early church as Brand and Pratt implicitly or inadvertently suggest. Instead, he uses the passage to indict his generation for its greed. Rather than using this selection of Calvin to shed light on greed in our culture, the authors simply move on. Later they spend four pages of the book discussing the notions of materialism and consumerism in ways that seem to be aimed at disarming us to the concepts, rather than helping us to see the linkage between them and greed (pp. 786–789). In fact, the concept of greed is scarcely mentioned in the book. The words greed and selfishness are conspicuously absent from the book’s exhaustive 25-page index. This is troubling in a book that spends 900 pages describing a biblical perspective on money and its applications to culture today.

In conclusion, Seeking the City is a thorough piece and is a worthy read. It fills a major void existing in the literature. I do fear that those who are most likely to read it are those who would most benefit by being challenged by alternative perspectives, while those who most need to read it will be turned off by some of the elements I have discussed. The length of the book is a significant barrier as well. For the same number of pages, someone could read Craig Blomberg’s Neither Poverty nor Riches (253 pages), Halteman and Noell’s Reckoning with Markets (240 pages), and Corbett and Fikkert’s When Helping Hurts (288 pages), and still have 100 pages left for any number of other valuable sources. It is hard to compete with an opportunity cost such as that.
References


