

vide this accountability to one another. As Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

Specific to our profession, given the grind of the early academic life, we should remind each other that our hope is not of this world, and our truest identity is not that of tenured professor, but beloved children of the King.



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## **Incarnation and Mission in Economics**

### **1 Economics as Mission**

**Y***ou people* need to understand, this is *missionary* work.” As best I can remember, these words are a direct quotation from a social worker who personally experienced homelessness and whose life work is to help vulnerable people move out of homelessness. With some justification, she was not happy with a white, male, over-educated academic from the Midwest who wanted to talk about how to design a randomized control trial studying her life’s work.

Ultimately, I think she is right. What she does is a mission, a calling from God. Every day, she revisits a trap from which she escaped. She follows the example of Christ to go where she has no obligation to go. Implied in her statement is also something challenging to me; it implies that what I do, what economists do, what “you people” do, is entirely separated from mission into a different category. Over a long conversation with her that mostly involved listening, I think we made some progress. We as economists are in a better place than she thought we were. But she’s also more than a little right. We economists, and Christian economists in particular, have some distance to travel toward taking her incarnational approach and living our economics as mission.

### **2 Christian Economists Should Be on an Incarnational Mission**

Christ’s picture of perfection, the Kingdom of God, is an upside-down kingdom different from the kingdom of this world. In this kingdom, the

last are first (Matthew 20:16), workers are paid the same despite different contributions (Matthew 20:1–16), the smallest seed grows into the tallest tree (Matthew 13:31–32), and small children best understand the deepest truths (Matthew 18:1–5). Of course, the epitome of God’s upside-down Kingdom is the heart of the Biblical story. The Son of God does not come conquering with a sword (John 18:36). He enters the world as a baby, born to a common family in a forgotten corner of the world’s greatest empire. He lives, teaches, heals, and dies. He finally turns upside the one thing everyone believes you cannot change; he comes back to life. Christ’s Kingdom is clearly odd and different.

If Christ’s kingdom is different, we should be different. As Paul says in Philippians 2:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We should take that same approach: following Christ through incarnation, self-sacrifice, and then, only then, true success. It seems like we are supposed to be on mission.

So Christian economists should be different, participating in incarnation and mission. It is easy to contrast the Kingdom of God with the worst parts of the world of the academy: status obsession, strategic manipulation of people, sexism, and personal value attached to lines on a CV. Contrasting God’s Kingdom with those options does not require much of an essay, though living out that different way is challenging. As Chesterton (1910) says, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.” In any case, plenty of non-Christian economists would agree with that critique, but even the best form economics as practiced in a secular versus Christian manner differ. The ideal of economics exalts scientific pursuit of knowledge, a modernist idea of progress, a preference for positive over norma-

tive statements, and a priority on results relevant to powerful people who guide government and business. None of these features are necessarily bad; they give economics its particular viewpoint and, in many ways, provide the foundation for its usefulness. They are qualitatively different, though, from the focus of the Kingdom of God.

In my experience, I have found the example of God's alternative Kingdom outside of academia in the life of the local church. When I was in graduate school, I was fortunate to stumble upon and attend the Church of the Saviour, a collection of tiny ecumenical churches that had decided that Jesus meant what he said. They set up shop in neighborhoods where God was already at work but where there were also lots of poverty, drugs, and crime. They lived for decades in the same place, committing in small groups to lives of intense prayer, accountability, and mission together. They gave themselves, along with their time and wealth, to help people find jobs, housing, and God. I met Gordon Cosby, the founder of the church, once. In one of the most powerful pictures of God's long-run, humble, incarnational mission, he was living his final days in a small apartment above a residential medical facility for homeless folks he helped build. This is but one example. I have been fortunate to continually meet people on mission: feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and visiting the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–46).

### 3 Stumbling onto Economics as Mission

My first attempt at “economics as mission” was not particularly successful. I entered graduate school convinced that God was calling me to work on international development with the US government or an international organization. These organizations refer to international travel as going “on mission.” I “went on mission” on a trans-Atlantic business class flight and stayed in the nicest hotels in the capital city of a sub-Saharan African country. Somehow, “on mission” had a different meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately for me, portions of the mainstream economics profession were becoming more incarnational, though they would not call it that. Economists were running around Western Kenya giving people school supplies (Glewwe et al., 2004), bed nets (Cohen & Dupas, 2010) and de-worming pills (Miguel & Kremer, 2004). My eventual dissertation advisor was spending much of his life figuring out how to get mini-buses

to crash less often (Habyarimana & Jack, 2011). This new cadre of development economists were getting out of their offices and hotel conference rooms, spending time with regular people, and giving up the ivory tower conveniences to get dirty, at least for short periods of time. I learned that these *randomistas* were the intellectual descendants of fieldwork specialists in development economics. I distinctly remember hearing a story of Jean Dreze spending a sabbatical year failing to make a living as a subsistence farmer. This approach seemed a lot more like incarnation, a lot more like mission. Most of its adherents were not Christians and probably would not want to be included in the same sentence as missionaries, but I walked down that path, trusting it was God's mission.

Finding mentors and peers attracted to this same mission was fundamental for me. A watershed moment for me was discovering a book published after an Association of Christian Economists (ACE) conference discussing how Christian academics and Christian practitioners might collaborate in fighting poverty (Dean et al., 2005). Until then, I had no idea any other Christians were walking on this same path. At the time, merely knowing these people existed was encouraging. Since then, I have been blessed to meet most of the people who wrote chapters for that book. Some interactions occurred organically through the job market, working at a Reformed college and a Catholic university, and meeting colleagues at similar institutions. The most important piece of this puzzle, though, was probably a workshop on the Economics of Global Poverty, supported by ACE and Calvin College and led by Chris Barrett from Cornell. It introduced me to a peer group of other young Christian economists who had stumbled on the same calling about economics, faith, and poverty. There were other people trying to do the same thing! And there was a set of mentors who, out there all along, had been trying to do economics as mission for many years and wanted to share their support and guidance. Support from these peers and mentors made all the difference in moving along the path I am on.

#### **4 Moving beyond Stumbling**

I would be excited to see an incarnational form of economics come together more fully. First, we Christians have some work to do to catch up and become leaders in this type of economics. My first academic examples were not Christians, and in some ways the anti-intellectual bent of

the evangelical church I call home (Noll, 1995) has led it to sit behind the curve in thinking about cooperation with the academy. Encouraging examples do exist. Teaching-focused faculty at Christian colleges often exemplify an ideal of integrating faith and serving others better than those of us focused on research. Christians were involved with the beginning of the randomized control trial movement (e.g., Glewwe et al., 2004), and recent work (e.g., Wydick et al., 2013) has explicitly brought attention to Christian organizations doing anti-poverty work. My own employer, the Lab for Economic Opportunities at the University of Notre Dame, measures the impact of domestic anti-poverty interventions and began as a partnership with Catholic Charities but, case in point, has only existed since 2012. Perhaps it is just my own blindness, but examples from research outside the study of poverty seem even less common. Many people will need to work many years to make these exceptions a clear characteristic of Christians doing economics.

Perhaps more ambitiously, I wonder what the institutional framework is for training the next generation of Christian economists who can succeed in a very challenging academic environment and ground their pursuit of economics in faith. I wonder how they will find each other when they start out scattered across many undergraduate schools. I am tremendously grateful that I had the opportunity at the end of graduate school to participate in ACE's one-time experiment with the Economics of Global Poverty Workshop. I wonder how many more people could have this experience. In the field of ecology, the Au Sable Institute in Michigan has managed to institutionalize something similar, bringing together scattered Christian professors and students each summer at field sites where they integrate high quality, technical, scientific training with faith. I wonder if an analogous structure could survive and thrive in economics. I wonder whether this would help us have a better understanding and practice of mission.

### **Endnotes**

- 1 There are better and worse ways to navigate the aid bureaucracy. Many people, Christians and otherwise, do good work in that context. I was fortunate to meet some people who could do it better than me.

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