

## The Nature of Biblical Economic Principle, and Its Critics

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**Abstract:** *Recent evangelical theology has come to the view that the key to legitimate application of normative biblical teaching to the present involves “principlizing.” Selected Christian economists have practiced the methodology over the last twenty years, but, nowadays, its practice has virtually died out in economics. The Introduction explains what is meant by biblical economic principle, outlines its justification, and surveys theologians and economists who have applied the method to economic matters. Section 1 details how two sets of Christian economists, Hay (1989), and Tiemstra et al. (1990) employed the technique. The case is proposed in section 2 that most Christian economists nowadays do not use the method, for reasons suggested in section 3. If the above evangelical theology proposition is compelling, more debate is required to assess the nature and use of biblical economic principle. JEL classification: A10, A12, A13, Z12. Key words: biblical principle, Christian economists, theologians, methodology*

Deriving and applying economic and social principles from the Bible has characterized selected Protestant endeavors over twenty years to relate normative biblical teaching to current issues. The methodology has been claimed within theology to constitute the only reliable means of relating Christian thought to socio-economic matters. This Introduction explains what is meant by biblical economic principle, outlines its justification, and canvasses theologians and social scientists who advocate searching for principles. Section one is a description of how the methodology has been practiced by two sets of Christian economists in the last two decades. The reason for demonstrating the procedure is that while theologians claim it to have theological legitimacy, Christian economists in the main have not utilized the method. Usually, they have

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adopted alternative approaches to relate biblical and Christian thought to contemporary issues. Reviews of their work in section two demonstrate this contention. Reasons are proposed in section three why this is the case, including criticism leveled at the principle methodology by Christian economists and theologians.

What are biblical economic principles, as their proponents see it? They are absolute, fundamental, normative ethical truths relating to economic matters forming a trajectory or theme throughout the bible, from which codes of right conduct can be established. Acceptable synonyms for principle would be precept, norm, premise, direction, maxim, guideline and standard. An example of a biblical economic principle, as one of its Christian economist users expresses it, is that “God abhors concentration of wealth and power when it is used to take advantage of others.” However, as Wood points out, much more analysis is required to make the principle operational, such as assessing how and when taking “advantage of others” occurs (Wood, 1991, p. 172). Human interpretation is an integral part of identifying and operationalizing principles.

Nevertheless, principles are taken to emanate from God, guiding humankind’s relations with Himself, and within humanity. They apply to all humankind, for “the proclamation of God’s standards for all mankind is part of God’s scheme of salvation;” “all human affairs are now subject to the rule of Christ” (Hay, 1989, p. 60). God’s sovereignty is not to be restricted and biblical principles are taken to apply to the world, not just to the body of believers. Christians have a vital role in this task, for they should model the relevance of biblical principle to humankind. The theological bases of these contentions are not reviewed here, but Hay seeks to “derive a set of principles for economic life which are universal in their application” (1989, p. 16).

The nature, content and description of biblical principles is the emphasis in this paper. This still leaves open how they are derived from the Bible, how they are to be applied, and used in explanation, that are not explored here. Further, no claim is made that principlizing is a better or richer methodology compared with alternative modes of relating biblical thought to contemporary economic matters. No assertion arises here that principlizing produces more insight and guidance, or represents an improvement over alternatives. Principlizing has its own distinct qualities, and is “a particular method of applying Christian social ethics to economic problems” (Hay, 1989, p. 308).

An advantage of identifying principles is that the whole Bible need not be explored each time an economic issue presents itself. Assuming

principles can be deduced successfully, “they could be applied to complex contemporary issues over and over again without the need to laboriously restate their full rationale” (Copp, 2011, p. 4). Since principles recur through vastly different epochs in the Bible (so its protagonists claim), a reasonable presumption is that God triune intends them to apply to whatever culture exists in the world at the time, including our own. Nevertheless, they have to be interpreted from ancient texts, and applied to new situations. This need not present insuperable problems. Indeed, “the variety of historical situations which somewhat shape the moral teaching of the Bible is a great advantage: the wealth of specifications and instantiations of particular ethical themes makes it easier to identify the underlying principles and how they might be applied in different contexts” (Biggar and Hay, 1994, p. 63).

The motivation and justification of this paper for investigating principlizing is that it has extensive advocacy in theology, developing out of a particular theological tradition. Evangelical theology dates from the sixteenth century, referring to certain Catholic writers who wished to emphasize biblical beliefs more thoroughly than did the existing medieval church. Nowadays, the term has a transdenominational character, constituting an ecumenical movement, continuing to stress the authority and sufficiency of scripture, but not holding to any particular theory of the church. It is to be distinguished from fundamentalism, for evangelicalism accepts the idea of biblical criticism, given the diversity of literary forms in scripture (McGrath, 1994, pp. 110-113). According to Bray (1996, pp. 461-462), conservative evangelicalism—committed to scripture—“was set to become the largest single branch of Protestantism by the end of the twentieth century.” Throughout history, evangelicals have stressed spreading the good news of the Bible, “whether to those with only a nominal attachment to Christianity or to those who had never heard of the Christian gospel” (Noll, 2010, p. 21). That evangelicalism derives this task from scripture assists in formulating the proposition that timeless, ethical truths can be extracted from the biblical text. Nevertheless, all the sources quoted below accept that intervening hermeneutical reflection between the text and isolation of a principle is required.

The justification is consolidated because, according to some evangelical theologians, the principle formula is the optimal evangelical method of biblical interpretation and application. Thus, Klein *et al.* hold that “recent evangelical analysis has come to a consensus that the key to legitimate application [in any area] involves what many writers call ‘principlizing’” (2004, p. 483). Marshall expresses it that scripture instantiates “general

principles of universal validity by expressing them in specific ways that may be tied to particular situations or cultural expressions” (2004, p. 34). Duvall and Hays maintain that “many texts in the Bible are specific, concrete, revelatory expressions of broader, universal realities or theological principles” (2005, p. 21). Virkler and Ayayo express this as the “attempt to discover in a narrative [i.e., a text] the spiritual, moral, or theological principles that have relevance for the contemporary believer” (2007, p. 194). They are supported by Kaiser and Silva who note that principlizing had been practiced as early as 1950 in evangelical theology. To them, principles are “timeless abiding truths [from the Bible] with special focus on the application of those truths” (2007, pp. 91, 92).

Related to economic matters, the principlizing methodology was early advocated by theologians, Chewning (1989, p. 265; original emphasis), and Kaiser (1989). They maintained the necessity of discovering “God’s universal *biblical principles* ... as we move away from the time and features of the agrarian and theocratic society in which the original Scriptures were given.” Later theologians utilized the approach, such as Mott and Sider (1999, pp. 17, 18), who held that the biblical framework should be applied “paradigmatically, allowing the biblical worldview, principles, and norms to provide the normative framework for shaping economic life today.” Similarly, theologian Rae (2009, p. 330) advocates “seeking from Scripture general principles or norms that govern economic life and can be applied to different economic arrangements.” Even some institutional churches practice the approach, such as the Dutch Reformed in South Africa, that according to de Gruchy (2005, p. 69; cited in Burrige, 2007, pp. 370-371), bases all its pronouncements on statements of biblical principle. Together, these sources hold that “biblical faith offers a powerful paradigm for solving” socio-economic problems (Sider, 2007, p. 60). Paradigm is taken to mean a pattern or set of interconnected principles embodied in a coherent whole, as with normative biblical teaching relating to a particular issue, or even to the biblical/Christian worldview itself. Principle and paradigm are taken here to form part of the principlizing methodology.

Other Protestant theologians utilizing the technique related to socio-economic issues include Wright (2004, p. 71; original emphasis), arguing that the constituent principles of a biblical paradigm or matrix can be identified, as long as we “see how all those principles hang together as a coherent worldview.” Thus, “paradigm *includes* the isolation and articulation of principles, but is not reducible to them alone.” The principles need to be related to the overarching issue of how they fit into the broader body of scripture or its worldview. Another way of formulating this is Schneider’s

that “unified pictures” emerge from the Bible, from which “a ‘biblical vision’ on any given topic” can be sought. The question pertaining to the gospels is “how do its fundamental principles carry over into our advanced economic age?” (2002, pp. 8, 140). Less self-conscious theologian users of the approach accept the occurrence of “biblical principle” derived from “direct, concrete teaching from Scripture” (Bolt, 2004, pp. 482, 483). The principle methodology appears to have an accepted contemporary theological legitimacy in the enterprise of discerning biblical relevance to economic questions.

Protestant social scientists have followed up these ideas of theologians, deducing “principles for the governance of economic life that may be derived from the biblical materials,” while recognizing their tentative, incomplete, and potentially revisable nature (Hay, 1989, p. 70), and then relating them to the real world. Claar and Klay (2007, p. 21) go so far as to assert that “it is hard to think of any Christian principle or value that is irrelevant to economic activity.” So common are these principles held to be in the bible that Tiemstra *et al.* (1990, p. 92) suggest that “of enumerating biblical principles for economic activity there is no end.” So much so, that Chewning brought together thirteen contributors in 1991 discussing the relation of biblical principle to a range of economic policy issues. Social science proponents of the principle approach include Mason (1987, 1993, 1996), Hay (1989), Tiemstra *et al.* (1990), Chewning (1989, 1991) and the contributors therein, such as Wood and Wilkinson, Beed and Beed (2006), Rae (2009), and Hill and Rae (2010). They use biblical analysis to explore economic matters, an area relatively neglected in theological ethics. There is irony here, for at least one theologian has declared that “economic issues lie at the very heart of the biblical ethic” (Pregeant, 2008, p. 356). The case of this Introduction is that justification for trying to unravel biblical principles is a worthwhile enterprise because so many theologians and social scientists advocate it.

Protestants have not been the only proponents of principlizing. The approach has been advocated in a somewhat different manner from Protestant undertakings within Catholic circles. The advice of the President of the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences, Marcelo Sorondo, is pertinent to this exploration. He wants to “demonstrate that the Gospel and the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church... contains those essentials principles... which no economy, if it wants to be a good economy, can forget” (2003, p. 7). Again, he directs this statement to the world. One difference between Protestant and Catholic approaches is that the Catholic usually makes only indirect use of scripture, relying instead on the Catholic

social thought tradition (papal encyclicals, bishops' statements, Catholic theologians, natural law etc) that became increasingly codified from the end of the nineteenth century.

### **1 The Nature of Biblical Economic Principle**

Before the 1990s, a few economists had used the principlizing approach in a limited manner, such as Griffiths (1984) and Mason (1987), deriving their principles from the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament. Theologians like Wright (2004) and Kaiser (2009a) have provided theological justification for Christian acceptance of the essence of the Mosaic Law. Arguments can be constructed from this theologizing to demonstrate the continuum in economic and other principles from the Mosaic Law to the prophets and to Jesus, but these are not canvassed here. However, not all Christians are comfortable with confining the derivation of biblical economic principles just to the Old Testament. Since Jesus is the focus to which Christians progress in the Bible, it seems reasonable to attach more importance to Jesus' teachings than to the Mosaic Law (or, at the least, give them equal weight). This is the more so, as for Christians, Jesus is the sole authoritative interpreter of the Mosaic Law.

Two Christian economist groups who followed Griffiths and Mason in practicing the principlizing system in relation to the Bible as a whole are reviewed, Hay (1989) and Tiemstra *et al.* (1990). They were forerunners in utilizing the approach, and it might have been anticipated that, having laid the groundwork, their methodology would be developed, and the procedure become more popular. This does not seem to have happened, as section two suggests, for possible reasons canvassed in section three.

Hay (1989) is a critique of secular economics, relating a Christian viewpoint to a range of economic issues. The derivation of biblical principles occupies one chapter, established in a prior context of five biblical doctrines: of creation, the fall and judgment, the covenant with Noah, the people of Israel, and the people of God (the church). Views of critics of the principle procedure are examined in Hay, and a postscript offers valuable insights into the difficulties between deriving and relating the principles to contemporary issues. Nevertheless, Hay is "looking for the universal principles of God's dealings with man (1989, p. 13).

Tiemstra *et al.* (1990) is the work of three economists, a theologian and a mathematician. They assess recent economic trends, assert a disequilibrium in the economic theory of the time, and critique the scientific claims of economics. Instead, they claim a methodology is needed "that allows

biblical norms and insights to inform our understanding of social behavior” (Tiemstra *et al.*, 1990, p. 57). As they note, whatever scripture says about economics “is embedded in the larger issues of human response to God,” so that “economics is never the focus of the Bible. Right knowledge of God is the center of biblical teaching” (1990, p. 92). But this does not preclude the Bible addressing economic matters, for “the Bible writers deal with economic life on almost every page” (p. 84). At the same time, principles may become steadily more comprehensible throughout the Bible. The idea of progressive revelation underlines Tiemstra *et al.*’s approach to formulating principles. Their criterion is one of “comparing scripture with scripture,” but it all looks forward to Jesus as the focus of God’s revelation.

Hay and Tiemstra *et al.* go about deducing biblical economic principles by proceeding through the Bible, isolating normative texts that might suggest some general trajectory or theme recurring time and again. Hay does this in the context of the five aspects of the biblical message above. Tiemstra *et al.* initially outline the background of the agrarian worlds of the Old and then the New Testaments. Against these contexts, both sets of writers develop their economic principles with close dependence on relevant biblical texts. They rely on both the Old and New Testament, with the advantage that for the Mosaic Law, God provided the Israelites with well-codified laws for economic activity. Hay expresses this orientation that “the Old Testament may well be more useful than the New Testament in providing examples of second-best applications to a people who are less well motivated to obey” (p. 70).

One emphasis in the biblical economic principles discerned by Hay and Tiemstra *et al.* is to those concerning work. Both maintain a biblical economic principle to be that paid work and employment should be available for those who seek it. Hay puts it for his principle four that “man has a right and an obligation to work” (1989, p. 73). Work is a way of exercising stewardship, meaning human responsibility in relation to God’s creation for the exercise of abilities God entrusts to people (principle 5, and p. 71). While work is a creative process given to humans by God, “only careful analysis can show when” work is consistent with God’s image (Tiemstra *et al.*, 1990, p. 110). Indeed, any work “that dulls the image of God within... is forbidden. Only careful analysis can show when this is true” (p. 110). Tiemstra *et al.* draw these deductions by examining texts in such as Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Leviticus, Acts, and Thessalonians. Aside from the second sentence above, none of Hay’s and Tiemstra *et al.*’s principles above features in secular analyses of work. Both sets of writers

deduce a favorable attitude to wealth creation in the Bible, provided it is marked by principles such as the above. That is, “wealth is a sign of God’s blessing,” but “only when it symbolizes dependence upon God and is used to minister to the needs of the poor” (p. 95). Again, these propositions are not contained within secular economics.

There is a fair degree of common ground in Hay’s and Tiemstra *et al.*’s derivation and expression of biblical principles concerning work. Theologizing about work has become more popular since they wrote. The works of Volf (1991), Cosden (2004, 2006), Jensen (2006), and Stevens (2006) come to mind, as does the Faith at Work project (Miller, 2007), the Theology of Work exercise from Boston (<http://wiki.theologyofwork.org>), the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* (in the United States), and the *Faith in Business Quarterly* (in the United Kingdom). However, it is probably fair to say that the incidence of expression of normative biblical principles governing work has not been uppermost in these authors and enterprises.

Hay’s and Tiemstra *et al.*’s principles differ from each other. Whether this is a weakness of the principlizing procedure is discussed subsequently. Consider the following example. One principle Tiemstra *et al.* formulate is that extreme differences in levels of wealth between people should not exist. They derive this from explaining teachings in Amos, Jesus’ parables of the rich fool, and the rich man and Lazarus, and the teaching of James. Their conclusion is that where “we find wealth in the hands of a few only, there biblical principles have been rejected.” Where “many people are kept from ownership (wealth and means of production)... biblical principles are not being followed” (Tiemstra *et al.*, 1990, pp. 97, 109). Another way of putting this is God triune advocating a reduction in inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Extreme disparities in this distribution are to be mitigated (a principle also put by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 encyclical).

Nowhere does God specify what “a few,” “many people,” or “extreme disparities” mean. Instead, God triune provides story after story, law after law in the Old Testament, and the same emphasis in Jesus’ teaching, illustrating the requirement for the well-off to assist the poor materially that would help reduce inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Just considering the people of pre-monarchical Israel, there is an “almost embarrassing amount of economic guidance” in the Mosaic Law (Tiemstra *et al.*, 1990, p. 92). The relevant Law texts, for instance, aim for more than charity, alms-giving and philanthropy to mitigate the prevalence of poverty. They require employment for the disadvantaged. All this guidance was intended

systemically to have developed “a relatively egalitarian society” (Lunn, 2002, p. 15). These claims do not depend on regarding the accumulation of wealth as a zero-sum game in the Mosaic Law, or on identifying the nature and magnitude of inequality as the only measure of the poor.

Hay, on the other hand, in his own list of biblical principles, uses a more indirect approach to express an equality-related principle. Rather than using equality as a term, the nearest Hay comes to specifying equality matters is in his principle seven, that “every person has a right to share in God’s provision for mankind for their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. These needs are to be met primarily by productive work.” Hay explains that “every person needs a minimum standard in food, clothing and shelter to maintain human existence and dignity.” Distributional issues come to the fore in his principle eight, that “the rich have an obligation to help the poor who cannot provide for themselves by work.” Indeed, people have “no *right* to consume more of the product than is essential to provide for their own basic needs” (1989, pp. 75, 76; original emphasis). The requirement is for “basic” or “minimum” needs to be met, needs that can only be defined in relation to the society of the time. How does this relate to Tiemstra *et al.*’s principle above? A situation where basic needs are met for everybody may be more difficult to achieve where ownership of wealth and the means of production are in the hands of a few than where they are spread around. A wide distribution of wealth and means of production may be necessary to enable basic needs to be met. Admittedly, Hay later stresses “that the biblical criteria are addressed to the question of redressing inequality,” but not to absolute equality (p. 217). However, the point here is that Tiemstra *et al.* and Hay do not express the equality-related principle identically.

Principles that can be expected from biblical analysis are usually expressed at a level of general applicability and may overlap. For instance, one principle is that human work should be done with one’s own property (as per Wilkinson, 1991, p. 66), akin to the expression by Pope John Paul II (1981, n. 14). This principle can then be applied more specifically, leading into the policy implication that work organization should be oriented to self-employment, partnerships, worker cooperatives, and the like (Beed and Beed, 2005a). While more detailed policy guidance is thereby deduced, the principle is still able to support a variety of approaches. That is, it leaves open what sort of self-owned work organization is to be encouraged in a specific situation. Different situations will favor different organizational forms. Nonetheless, principles are normative, that is, they specify what a just order would look like. While principles might seem to be inescapably

general, the specificity with which they have been isolated (for instance, by the contributors in Chewning, 1991) shows that they can be related to a range of economic phenomena. Normative principles can also be utilized to construct what are sometimes termed positive propositions, such as explanations for existing phenomena, like causes of unemployment or poverty. The paper is not concerned with this matter, aside from brief reference in section three.

One conclusion from Hay and Tiemstra *et al.*'s efforts to develop biblical economic principles is that human interpretation, assisted by God triune, is required for the process. Intervening reflection cannot be avoided. Every step needs human involvement: Of identifying the principle, unraveling its meaning, and determining how it should be applied. Each step has to be done in cooperation with God triune. This seems a perfectly right and proper task for God to give to human beings. We are to use the gifts God gives us, including our minds, to work out the derivation and application of principles. However, human relationship with God is never perfect, being marred by the fallen nature of humankind. Therefore, different readers will not interpret the Bible identically, they will derive and specify principles differently from each other. They are unlikely to end up with duplicate lists of principles, and this outcome emerges in the two authors above. This difference arises because God triune does not express his normative intentions in the Bible via principles, an observation some critics hold to be a weakness of principlizing (e.g., Copp, 2011, p. 4). Nor do seekers of principles assume that everything in the Bible can be reduced to principles. Instead, principles have to be deduced from biblical narrative, that might include commands from God, law statements, historical description, stories, parables, poems and proverbs. At first sight, this dependence on interpreting the Bible might seem a weakness of principlizing. However, when economic principles between authors are examined, they have a fair degree of overlap between them. They relate reasonably well, but not perfectly, as in the two cases above. The claim could also be argued, but is not here, of reasonable comparability between Protestant and Catholic attempts to develop gospel-based principles.

Principles may become more clear-cut as the bible progresses, consistent with the idea of progressive revelation, but their underlying nature does not change. In the treatments of principlizers, no question arises that principles can usurp what God and Jesus want for humankind. God triune reveals what they require through a rich variety of means in scripture. The parables, for instance, are arresting stories aiming to relate specific messages to people. Each parable is far more profound than any principle

derivable from it. But if the moral of the parable is to be related to other situations, the essence, meaning and principles contained in it have to be unearthed. Although a story cannot be related to another situation, its moral or didactic principles can.

The whole Bible is important to discerning principles, but it is probably possible for an author to interpret only a selection of biblical teaching in one article or book. One way of unraveling principles is to assume an order of importance of normative texts, or a “hierarchy of narrative.” In this regard, Fee and Stuart emphasize the need to “distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it” (2003, pp. 91, 81). God and Jesus’ explicit instruction in the Old and New Testaments might be regarded as of first importance. Then might come the prophets and apostles, revealing God and Jesus’ instruction transmitted via these human beings recorded in the bible. The psalms, proverbs and sundry other, like Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, might come into third place.

Another conclusion from Hay and Tiemstra *et al.* is that principles are first established in relation to the historico-cultural context of the times when they emerged. They acknowledge that “biblical revelation is set out in an historical context which is remote from our own” (Hay, 1989, p. 12). Nevertheless, principles are developed by the authors and applied in other contexts, but this does not detract from their underlying truth. This tendency is reflected in the work of others sympathetic to the principle approach. Theologians, Forrester (2001) and Bauckham (2002) derived themes or trajectories from the bible proposing its normative egalitarian direction. Their exercises related intrinsically to the socio-historico-cultural environments of the times when the texts were developed. Bauckham (2002, pp. 119-123), for instance, interprets relevant Old Testament texts in light of the history of the peoples of Israel. Concerns that these forms of exegesis constitute reductionism or eisegesis carry little weight. This is because Forrester’s and Bauckham’s conclusions are derived from a range of Old and New Testament texts, the cumulation of which, in their view, points in the direction of a normative egalitarian direction. Unlike the worry expressed by some critics of the principle approach, such as Barr (1973, p. 141), neither Forrester or Bauckham try “to drag texts out of their ancient setting and make them applicable to the modern world.” They were not trying “to ‘apply’ ancient documents to modern situations” (Hanson and Oakman, 2008, p. 151).

The work of Hay and Tiemstra *et al.* reflect their individual principles, yet “fit together with others to form a consistent whole.” In this way, the

“framework seeks to relate the elements of the biblical revelation in such a way that the weight and significance attached to each element can be more readily understood in the context of the whole” (Hay, 1989, pp. 69, 309). At the same time, their principles could be developed and made more specific and rigorous. One exercise would be to investigate how their lists relate to each other, if for no other reason than Hay specifies eight principles, and Tiemstra *et al.*, sixteen. Concepts such as stewardship, work, the poor, the rich, and basic needs could be defined more precisely, both as they might have been regarded in biblical times, and how they might be identified and apply today. Hay and Tiemstra *et al.* probably hoped that their pioneering work would be pursued. This expectation does not seem to have eventuated. Even those who refer to biblical economic principles today are more likely to use the original versions. Thus, Claar and Klay (2007, pp. 22-23) explicitly use only slightly modified expressions of Hay’s principles.

## **2 Alternative Approaches to Ascertaining Biblical Relevance to Contemporary Economic Issues**

If the key to legitimate application of biblical thought to contemporary economic issues requires principlizing, as the theologians above assert, how widespread is it in economics? Not very, for most Christian economists in the last few decades have not consciously practiced the method. Indeed, they “often ignore the scriptural witness, even in their normative analysis” (Yuengert, 2009, pp. 32-33). Where biblical input *has* been sought, Christian economists have relied more on broad-brush illustrations or pictures that endeavor to capture the normative nature of God’s intentions in a particular arena. They also rely on secondary statements of the Christian faith, such as by particular theologians. The illustrations are so broad-brush, however, that precision may not be achieved in trying to relate them to contemporary issues, outcomes can be left open-ended. That is, it is not always clear how and what the Bible or the Christian faith uniquely contributes to these analyses of economic issues that can end up looking like secular interpretations, a point similar to Webb’s (2006). Four examples of this process are outlined following, realizing that a few cases prove little.

One path-breaking attempt to develop a Christian perspective on economics was the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics (1990), initially stemming from a round-table of 36 economists and others in Oxford in 1987. Taking 3 years to pull together, the final declaration was

made in 1990, under the auspices of over 100 economists and theologians, comprising 65 sections (some quite short) devoted to economic issues (Schlossberg *et al.*, 1994). Again, the analysis depended heavily on the Old Testament. Only halfway through the sixty-five propositions is there a quote from Jesus (in section 31), the only one that occurs. Topics are treated briefly, and sometimes it is difficult to know how closely they relate to biblical viewpoints. For instance, the causes of poverty (sections 35-6) contains no biblical reference, but make a number of generalized assertions about causes that would be acceptable to secular interpretation. No sense emerges of what might be God and Jesus' explanations in the Bible for why poverty exists, for which a theological tradition exists. For instance, one of God's causes might arguably be social sin, the degree to which the society and the people in it ignore and reject God himself, and engage in behavior reflecting this distance. With this degree of remove from the biblical text, no platform (or principle) is provided enabling Christian economists to pursue causes of poverty today in terms of how the bible regards them. The task has been left to theologians (e.g., Hoppe, 2004).

This conclusion holds for other matters in the Declaration. Section 36 affirms "the need to analyse and explain the conditions that promote the creation of wealth, as well as those that determine the distribution of wealth." No biblical specificity is examined for how wealth should be created, or how wealth distribution should be handled. Section 38 on justice and poverty takes up part of the latter issue, advocating that the basic needs of all people should be met. However, it does not explore how these might be attained within a creation of wealth or work context, so favored in scripture.

Brian Griffiths is a prominent British Christian economist, with a high public profile. He was one of the earliest (1984) to search for biblical economic principles, even though he did not codify them. He has continued this orientation, contending that in scripture "certain absolute standards are set out clearly, and held to be universally valid," that in the Mosaic Law are "embodied principles of lasting significance" having "relevance for us even today" (2003, pp. 161, 163). Although Griffiths does not specify further how absolute scriptural standards or "moral reference points" (p. 167) might be deduced, a number are raised. They include the right to private ownership, and freedom to do business and generate wealth, but little clarity arises (unlike Hay and Tiemstra *et al.*) that property rights and business might be constrained in the biblical view by responsibilities to other people, other species and the environment. "Economic freedom"

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is also something “valuable in itself” (p. 178), but, again, no scriptural constraints are attached to it, as with “fairness” and “justice” as aims for “free markets.” Only the church is specified “as a community in which extremes of wealth and poverty have no place” (p. 165), not that this requirement should be pursued in the world at large. This last point might be contrasted with Hauerwas who sees the church as a model for the world, that “the task of the church [is] to pioneer those institutions and practices that the wider society has not learned as forms of justice” (1977, p. 142). The overall impression from Griffiths is that God’s “moral reference points,” as above, could just as well be derived from secular (e.g., Neoclassical) thought, are somewhat vague, and perhaps even capable of self-contradictory interpretation. This judgment might be too harsh, but it does underline that biblical principles need to be expressed with as much precision as possible.

Another way of relating biblical belief to economic questions is Ritenour (2010). This is a massive work masterfully demonstrating an Austrian perspective toward the foundations of economic theory and practice. Ritenour also aimed to show how this perspective is compatible with a Christian viewpoint. This part of the exercise is not so compelling because only a few pages are devoted to establishing biblical foundations of economics. Indeed, Ritenour does not think it necessary to propose many characteristics of God relevant to the subject of economics (p. 10). Those he does suggest are breathtakingly wide-ranging. They include “that God thinks” (p. 10), and is rational and omniscient. It follows from these that because God has created humans “in his image with the ability to know and perceive truth,” “the truths of economics” are to be believed, for like God, “we act with a purpose” (p. 13). Different schools of economics might argue over how the “truths” of economics are to be established, or what they are. They might dispute what are the purposes with which humans so act. Christians might even hold that the truths of God’s design for the world eclipse those of economics. In any case, little discussion of the bible occurs throughout Ritenour’s chapters. With some exceptions, it is unclear how the economics’ topics covered relate to biblical thinking.

A final example is articles published in *Faith & Economics* over the last five years (Nos. 47-57). Forty-one papers in total are featured, including a collective Viewpoint (No. 52) counted as one paper, and four Symposia (49, 50, 52, 56), counting the individual contributors separately. In the forty-one papers, little reference is made to biblical texts, with only five papers engaging in detailed interpretation of texts relevant to their subject matter. Three of these papers then relate their interpretations to contemporary

economic issues, the others letting it stand at the interpretation of the biblical texts themselves. In the cases, little hermeneutical assistance is sought to interpret texts. The balance of the articles includes analyses of secular topics not necessarily within an explicitly Christian framework, evaluations of the work of faith-based organizations, of writings/statements by theologians, popes, churches, church organizations and economists, and applying economic concepts to religious/church matters. The Bible is little cited in these articles.

All that can be claimed from the above is that many Christian economists do not use the principlizing method. This does not mean their analyses are inferior to those of principlizers. As noted, no assertion is made in this paper that principlizing produces a fuller, richer account in relating Christian belief to contemporary economic matters. All it produces is a different account. However, if the evangelical theologians (and the Catholic, Sorondo) are correct, it might be expected that principlizing would have greater currency than it does. The next section suggests reasons why this is not so.

### **3 Difficulties in the Way of Principlizing**

#### *Barriers from Within Economics*

The principlizing strategy has been criticized on a number of fronts, including from within economics. First, it has been suggested that the derivation and application of biblical principles adds little value to secular economic analysis. Although Webb's aim was not to appraise principlizing, he looked at four Christian analyses of unemployment, concluding that they "contain no new insights on the causes of unemployment nor do they offer alternatives to traditional macroeconomic policies" (2006, p. 54). This is similar to Smith's judgment on the principle method, that it is not "a terribly progressive research program in terms of policy fruitfulness" (1993, p. 175). This paper is concerned with the nature not the use of biblical principle for theorizing or policy, but it is worth examining Webb's analysis to see how his critique relates to specifying the content of principles.

Only two of Webb's authors made use of principlizing. Birnie (1996) included a section on "biblical principles on work and unemployment," but most of it concerns the advantages of wealth creation as a means of curbing unemployment. No codified list of biblical principles emerges. Even so, contra Webb, Birnie does cite biblical texts illustrating features of work not occurring in secular economics. For example, he points to "bad

work” as a source of dislocation in the labor market, and to the necessity of wealth creation for the glory of God, not for the sole benefit of humankind (1996, pp. 13, 15). Wilkinson (1991) is the other example, the only one of the four to present a codified list of (sixteen) biblical principles relevant to employment. These are statements on how he sees God’s preferences for work organization.

The remaining two of Webb’s authors (Finn and Vickers) did not apply biblical principles to their analysis, with their conclusions looking like “soft” liberal versions of secular economics. Despite Finn devoting two chapters to theological themes relevant to his topic (trade rather than employment), Webb puts it that “Finn’s theoretical and empirical arguments are thoroughly mainstream and are in no sense distinctively Christian” (2006, p. 49). Of the four Christian examples, only one (Wilkinson) provides a systematic examination of biblical texts that might relate to how work should be performed with God, which not to infer that his is the only valid Christian view among the four authors. Further, as with so many Christian expositions of work (Wilkinson aside), emphasis is placed on the Old Testament.

Webb’s interest was to look at Christian explanations for unemployment, not biblical economic principles as such. The value of biblical principles providing explanations of unemployment cannot be resolved from the four cases above. This is because where the authors mentioned principles, they were mainly concerned with specifying their content rather than using them for explanatory purposes. To develop a Christian explanation for unemployment, something further is necessary in manipulating the principles, that none of Webb’s four authors performed. A brief mention might be made of how this could be done, although not the focus of this paper. The process of moving from the normative principles to positive explanation would be to argue that unemployment exists because some or all of the sixteen biblical economic principles are not followed in the modern world. Causative links would have to be established for such connections. This is an initial stage in proposing explanation that Birnie and Wilkinson mooted but did not pursue. A further step would be to explain *why* the principles are not followed. This sort of analysis leads to different theorizing from the secular (as shown in Beed and Beed, 2005b).

The difference arises because many of the biblical principles above do not feature in secular descriptions or explanations of unemployment, or of any other economic phenomenon. An example is Wilkinson’s principle nine, that “increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few is not in accord with God’s plans.” An assessment would be necessary

why this bears on unemployment. To make things more complicated, the various schools of economics possess no consensus on the causes of unemployment. As well, there are overriding biblical principles excluded from secular causation, such as humankind being accountable to God, and the concept of sin. Of course, there *are* biblical principles parallel to secular ones, such as productive work being the most effective way out of poverty. However, the biblical principles were propounded three millennia ago, and secular thought cannot take credit for them. The pervasive influence of biblical ideas into Western secular thought cannot be underestimated.

Using biblical economic principle does not produce value-added analysis to secular economic theorizing. Like much biblically-based analysis, it more likely produces incommensurable results. This is because so many of the principles its exponents reveal deal with man's relations with God that have no place in secular analysis. An example is Wilkinson's principle six (1991, p. 67) that man "is accountable to God, a steward for God, for the possessions entrusted to him." Further explanation is necessary to establish what this means, but the accountability devolves on man's total relationship with God, not just on purely economic grounds.

The incommensurable outcomes in relating Christian thought to economic phenomena have been noted elsewhere. From examining biblical teaching, as distinct from principles, Yuengert (2009, p. 33) holds that "Christian theology on consumption calls into question the assumptions that more is better (non-satiation) and that the preferences which drive consumption fully reflect the consumer's true interests (revealed wellbeing)." Yuengert's solution for economists to develop a full account of consumer behavior and wellbeing is that they need to "become philosophical when addressing normative issues" (p. 53), to which could be added "theological." Again, Wilson (2011, p. 26) holds that "the practical biblical concept of the human soul... provides a valuable alternative framework for understanding the causes and solutions to most human suffering in the world." This is a thoroughly divergent explanatory framework from the secular. At the macro level, the debate between Smith and Richardson (2010) shows the incommensurable frameworks and terminologies theologians and economists use to describe and explain comparable phenomena.

A second criticism of principlizing from within economics is that the biblical principles so deduced "lack the twin desirable properties of uniqueness and exclusion." Non-exclusion means that principles can "be consistent with most economic policy, even those that contradict each other" (Smith, 1993, p. 175). The way to deal with exclusion is to make principles more specific by thoroughgoing hermeneutical search of

the bible. As noted above, this has not characterized efforts by economic principlizers to date. (They concentrate on the Old Testament, and engage in “plain reading” interpretation). Their principles also are usually “drafted as short, high level abstract statements, typically in absolute terms with no exceptions” (Copp, 2011, p. 5) So, if “care for the poor” were deduced as a biblical principle, this is insufficiently specific and too imprecise. Both the Mosaic Law and Jesus provide more exact instruction concerning exactly *how* the poor are to be cared for, although these admonitions still have to be translated into modern life. Williams (1996, p. 34) puts it that “the more specific the principles can be kept, consistent with their cross-cultural applicability, the more of the Bible’s particularity will be retained.” If principles still retain a certain degree of abstraction after this process, this is because they are an “uncovering of what is already there in the mind of God,” not a construction of the human mind (Hay, 1989, p. 69).

Non-uniqueness, meaning that principles “tend not to be distinctively Christian in character” (Smith, 1993, p. 175), can also be countered by rigorous hermeneutical biblical analysis. There may well be parallels between biblical principles, those of other religions (e.g., Islam), Greek philosophy, and secular thought systems, including all existing schools of economics. Given that most of the Bible precedes all these, it is very likely that biblical thought has influenced them so far as ethical imperatives are concerned.

Although the criticism has been raised that biblical principles may conflict (Copp, 2011, pp. 6-7), no critic has actually given examples from the works of economic principlizers themselves. A help in reducing this risk requires deducing principles with maximum specificity. This also counters the criticism that principles are too abstract, vague and imprecise. Conflict is more likely to arise in the application of principles, given the fallenness of humankind, and trade-offs may be required in application. This is quite different from claiming that the biblical principles themselves may conflict (Hay, 1989, p. 77).

A final critic of principlizing from within economics is the late Paul Heyne. Although 26 of his papers were collected in Brennan and Waterman (2008), comment is made here on just one of Heyne’s articles not in the compilation, that is a pointed critique of principlizing (1994). In that paper, Heyne did not believe there is a distinctive set of Christian principles “that can effectively guide Christian economists in putting their discipline to work” (1994, p. 9). Part of Heyne’s case rests on his critique of Mason (1993), but Heyne’s criticisms do not conform well to orthodox Christian belief. If Mason has correctly interpreted the Torah that family and local

community are to be the welfare-providing institutions, there is every biblical reason that these entities should be the welfare-providers today, in so far as Jesus upholds the essence of the Mosaic Law. The normative messages of the Old (and New) Testament live on, which is not to say “that the laws of the Pentateuch are binding upon Christians” (Heyne, 1994, p. 11). Heyne claims that because this same welfare orientation exists in the United States today, the Pentateuchical strategy carries no weight. This is to ignore the strength of God’s designs over the last 3,000 years. All the contemporary secular state has done is to borrow from the biblical insight, now claiming it as its own.

Heyne suggests that the attempt to formulate and apply biblical economic principles “pollutes the process of public discussion” because “the United States is *not* a Christian society (Heyne, 1994, p. 1). This is like claiming that Jesus’ teaching polluted the beliefs of first century Palestine because it was not a Christian society. Therefore, Jesus should not have engaged in his teaching. Since Jesus was endeavoring to persuade people to his viewpoint, he had every right and imperative to so teach, addressing himself to “the people,” “the crowds” and “the poor,” not just to “fellow members of the household of faith,” as Heyne puts it (1994, p. 11). This example could be multiplied throughout the Bible. The prophets were likewise polluting the beliefs of the inhabitants of monarchical Israel, in trying to get people to return to the behavior of the Torah.

Another possible barrier against Christian economists exploring the principlizing system is that most probably work in secular institutions, in which there is no sympathy for relating biblical belief to economic issues. Of course, this problem relates to any potential method of biblical/theological interpretation/application, not just to the principlizing. Even among those Christian economists who work in Christian colleges and universities, all are not given free rein to explore methods relating biblical thinking to economic issues. Christian universities exist in which no courses exist (or would be permitted to develop) exploring the relation between biblical thought (and Christian thought generally) and economic matters. These universities want to become “real” universities, meaning in effect, to copy secular standards from which Christian input is excluded.

#### *Barriers from Within Theology*

If there is a skeptical attitude toward principlizing in economics, those wanting to employ the method might think of turning to contemporary theology for guidance on how to derive and use principles. In this expectation, they would be disappointed. Theology makes little use

of principlizing, notwithstanding the favorable comments earlier by theologians. Few theology books or journals (some exceptions aside) actually exegete biblical texts (excluding biblical commentaries from this assertion), showing their relevance today. Nor do they pursue related or subsequent texts to develop principles or themes throughout the bible. Where texts are cited (in specialized journals like the *Biblical Theology Bulletin* or the *Tyndale Bulletin*), it is usually the interpretation of a particular text, or of a historico-cultural background theme of the time of the text, that is the focus of the whole article. Little picture emerges of any subsequent or previous texts that might jell into a coherent whole, helping to develop a trajectory occurring throughout the bible from which a principle could be discerned. Theology books, and journals to a lesser extent, also place high emphasis on assessing the work of earlier theologians, but little biblical analysis occurs in these earlier works either. Neither is going back to the nineteenth century helpful, for theology then was dominated by natural theology in which the bible was little used. Unfortunately, not a great deal of assistance in biblical interpretation can be gained from the current Catholic tradition with its reliance on Catholic social thought.

The net result of this situation is that biblical socio-economic principles are not well represented in theology books and journals. Since principles do not emerge, there is little emphasis within theology of relating normative biblical teaching to contemporary socio-economic issues (perhaps excepting liberation theology and its offshoots). One is left with the impression from reading theology that biblical or Christian thought has little bearing on these matters. Hay observed “a marked reluctance actually to apply theological insights in any substantial manner” to economic questions (1989, p. 8). Even evangelical journals, such as the *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society*, demonstrate this quality. Other theology journals, like *Political Theology*, *Transformation*, and the *Evangelical Review of Society and Politics* partly make up the gap.

As a sub-set of theology, it might have been expected that both Christian theological, and Christian business, ethics would be interested in the derivation and application of biblical economic principles. However, like theology, this does not seem to have occurred. Thus, the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, and *Studies in Christian Ethics* rarely contain analyses of biblical texts to arrive at the ethical position proposed by the author. However, exceptions do occur, especially among those who favor principlizing, such as Kaiser (2009b). Another exception to the initial generalization is ethicist, Scott Rae, who does promote the principlizing method (2009; Hill and Rae, 2010), but his use of the technique does not

proceed further than Hay's and Tiemstra *et al.*'s pioneering work (the latter Rae does not mention). Surprisingly, Rae's major work on business ethics (2004, with Wong) is one of his few books that does not specify biblical economic principles.

#### *Barriers in Scriptural Interpretation*

If theology is of little help in establishing principles, to what can potential principlizers (or, indeed, anyone wanting to relate biblical teaching to current socio-economic issues) turn? Invariably, they make (and have to make) their own interpretations of scripture. Being non-expert, this allows the accusation to be leveled that they carry to their interpretations their own set of prejudices, value-judgments and theoretical perspectives. They might be charged that their results are colored by bias, right- or left-wing. A related problem arises. The usual approach among socio-economic principlizers is to cite biblical texts holding their meaning as self-evident, that the scriptures interpret themselves. In a general sense, texts do explain themselves, and it can be assumed that God triune wants the bible to be readily comprehended by lay readers. However, the theological criticism of this "self-interpretation," or "plain text" reading is that it is biblical literalism, simplistic and ingenuous. Thus, the charge has been leveled that evangelical ethics in the past has interpreted "Jesus' words... in a naïve or uncritical manner" (Burridge, 2007, p. 11). Therefore, in the matter of extricating absolute principles, something more intellectually sophisticated is needed. An approach that dampens both hermeneutical bias, and naivety in text explanation, is to supplement one's own interpretations with the interpretations of biblical exegetes (as advocated by Fee and Stuart, 2003, p. 267). Since up to twenty books interpreting and commenting on each book of the bible have been published from the 1970s, it is worth going through each one to establish a consensual meaning of a text in question. Just quoting one or two biblical exegetes, or none (as some potential principlizers are prone to do) will not necessarily render the authentic meaning of a text.

In this preferred exercise, statements made by God and Jesus in the Old and New Testaments that might be interpreted as consistently pointing toward some overarching norm or precept are worth looking at first. A further analytical step can be taken. This would be to consider texts that appear to contradict the normative principle in question. A third step would be to assess how the range of biblical exegetes has interpreted the texts under scrutiny to see if consensus emerges. If this is the case, a comparison can be made whether this consensus is consistent with the "plain sense"

reading of the texts in the first step above. If the three modes of analysis *are* consistent, fair warrant emerges that a normative biblical principle can be deduced from them. This formula can accept that biblical exegetes come to their analysis with differing theological backgrounds and with different conceptions of the symbolic worlds through which reality is interpreted, but the consensus might be held to reduce these priors. Even so, whatever the explanation of anything, priors cannot be eliminated. Nor need the principle approach import concepts from outside the biblical texts. Thus, if certain liberation theologians have used Marxist precepts (such as dependency theory) to bolster their case, principle users can make *their* cases directly from the bible.

Another effect of the relative sparsity in theology relating its subject matter to contemporary socio-economic matters is that the task of doing this is often left to people untrained in theology. Most Christian economists (say, members of the American and British Associations of Christian Economists) probably do not have theology training. One effect of this disjunction is that their self-interpretation, direct, “at face value,” or “plain sense” interpretations of scripture are not well-regarded by theologians (an irony being that theologians themselves practice “plain sense” interpretation). The only possible way of countering this charge is the procedure above. Look at as many biblical exegetes as practicable—a formidable task, given the number of books on each book of the bible. However, this does not overcome criticism, for doing this is secondary hermeneutics. Theologians, therefore, would not allow such method into theology journals. (More generally, few non-theologians appear in theology journals). Socio-economic principlizers are stymied on this front. It seems a *fait accompli* that they have to confine their analyses either to writing their own books, and publishing in non-theological journals to whom the method is acceptable (journals never cited in theology).

One strain of biblical interpretation and theology, social scientific criticism or context analysis, has been explicitly unsympathetic to deriving trans-cultural principles. In this thinking, the principle approach that views biblical precepts as relevant beyond their time and place is “a kind of reductionism, namely, seeing the text merely as a depository of timeless, revealed theological ideas and ethical instructions” (de Silva, 2004, p. 128, citing Elliott, 1993, p. 90). Social-scientific criticism has focused most of its attention to explaining how the concepts it discerns (such as shame and honor) occur in the social world of Jesus’ time, and the meaning they had then. The implication is that economic concepts in the bible are embedded in the cultures in which they were manifest, and therefore of little use

in relating to or understanding modern life. Accordingly, social science practitioners provide little analysis of how their conclusions relate to today. An anomaly arises here, because they would like their conclusions to be relevant currently. Thus, Elliott (1995, p. 105) is enthusiastic that social scientific criticism “has put us in a better position for considering and assessing the relevance of the biblical writings and their context to today’s scene.” If there is “a perceived pertinence of biblical ideas concerning wealth or poverty, war or peace, revolt against or surrender to today’s economic, social and political ‘powers to be,’” as Elliott puts it, little evidence exists that this emanates from social science practitioners. Their analysis and deductions are firmly confined to the time of Jesus. The historical-critical tradition of biblical interpretation exhibits similar tendencies.

Principlizers hold that the socio-economic contexts of biblical times were insufficiently different from today’s to vitiate their current applicability. As Hay put it, the Christian tradition, presuming the authority of scripture, does not accept the criticism that biblical interpretation “is always read in a particular social context,” and that the context controls the interpretation of scripture, the formulation of principles and their application to reality (1989, p. 312). Attention can well be drawn to the vast difference between the social context of biblical times and those today, especially cultures in developed societies. Van Voorst (2005, pp. 39-40), for instance, lists eleven differences between the social world of Jesus’ time and of contemporary mainstream North America. However, lists of substantial differences could also be proposed between developed societies themselves today, and between less developed societies, as well as between developed and less developed societies. That these differences occur does not mean that normative principles uncovered by biblical exegesis are inapplicable today to all societies. The notion that social differences between Jesus’ time and ours are too dissimilar for Jesus’ normative teaching to carry forward, would mean that the biblical mandate applied only to Jesus’ day and not to our own. This idea contradicts orthodox Judeo-Christian thought.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Hay (1989, p. 310) put it concerning principles that “it is our expectation that they will be revised, refined, added to and even deleted as they are discussed and evaluated by others.” This has not happened. The situation now stands in stark contrast to a greater practice of principlizing. Christian economists who nowadays seek to principlize, and like Hay and Tiemstra

*et al.*, present a list of economic principles from their biblical analysis to apply to contemporary matters, may be regarded with skepticism, seen as “proof-texting” wildly, and likely ignored. This is because principlizing nowadays is barely practiced by Christian economists, and therefore holds little currency. To most, the methodology may seem at least unfamiliar, unfashionable, and barely recognizable. To date, the models of Hay, Tiemstra *et al.*, Chewning, and Mason are the best examples of economic principlizing. Hay’s helpful responses to criticisms of the method, and to difficulties in its use, have additional value. Others have proposed similar ventures in “biblical social values,” of which theologians, Pilch and Malina (1998) list over one hundred. However, they engage only in “plain text” interpretation, cite few economics-related social values, and relate few of their values to contemporary life.

The procedures discussed here only assist to establish the true nature of biblical principles, for every human intellectual endeavor is marred by sin. Each Christian economist is unlikely to derive the same set of principles, for the hermeneutical task, as in secular social science, is not an objective, value-free exercise. Interpreters bring to the bible their own set of spectacles through which they view reality and the text. This is no different from every mode of secular interpretation, economics included. However, if principles are to become more specific in relation to the biblical text, more debate has to occur between proponents (and opponents) of the methodology. If principlizing is as important in assessing biblical relevance as the theologians cited earlier hold, “there should be a much more rigorous debate over the true nature of biblical social principles than the consensus identified shows there has been to date” (Copp, 2011, p. 8). The problem can be reduced by pursuing intellectual (and any) work with God triune, meaning holding work to God in prayer, and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide the outcome (Williams, 1996, pp. 34-35).

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