placed with a new, even grander abstraction called “PKI” or “postmodern methodological theory.” I think we are likely to find that a wholesale rejection of the neoclassical richness Richardson documents is not called for; neoclassicism, for example, does admit considering many of the “value” questions associated with PKI, in a rigorous framework; neoclassicism does not universally assume that pecuniary considerations are all that matter. We are instead likely to get some “good stories” with neoclassicism, some other good stories with amended neoclassicism, and some others with other approaches. The Christian nature of our work would then come at the level of meta-methodology, deciding which partial explanation fits which circumstance, in a non-arbitrary framework. There is much work yet to be done to flesh out this approach, but if we pursue it we create the possibility of a distinctive research agenda.

...in being capable, competent, masterful, and learned in our discipline, we earn the opportunities to sign the gospel, change the substance of our discipline, and demonstrate a style that is compelling.

John Anderson on Richardson

Dave Richardson’s answer to the question posed in the title of this session is that professional economics is worth doing well for Christ’s sake. He emphasizes that point by reiterating that mere professional economics is worth doing for Christ’s sake. This is not simply an apologistic for the status quo in our profession. It is, instead, nothing less than a clarion call to Christian economists to be involved at the forefront of our discipline, doing economics. Dave’s 1987 paper together with his new additions in today’s paper provide clear and compelling reasons for Jesus’ disciples to devote themselves to the discipline of economics.

With a three-point outline and handy alliteration, Dave gives the reasons for being engaged in professional economics: sign, substance, and style. We find that the discipline of economics is a wonderful one within which to display the gospel. I like his word choice in saying we display the gospel for that is what we do. We demonstrate, exhibit, and unveil the truth of God in our work.

Why does Dave use the adjective professional in front of economics as he states that professional economics is worth doing for Christ’s sake? I believe that what he has in mind is that in being capable, competent, masterful, and learned in our discipline, we earn the opportunities to sign the gospel, change the substance of our discipline, and demonstrate a style that is compelling. This is an important issue and these are hard words. If we are satisfied with conducting our economics at a conversational level we have no hope of fulfilling Dave’s triad of reasons to be involved in the discipline. Our presence is unlikely to be noticed or observed. There may be those among us who sincerely believe that a good intermediate level understanding of economic theory is sufficient to equip one to be an economist—that economic theory is not particularly useful in doing economics. Dave rejects that view without being an apologist for any particular form of economic theory. His list of topics that Christian economists should find compelling is wonderfully rich, reaching across many fields within the profession and employing a wide variety of technical tools. He maintains, however, that without being masterful in our discipline we cannot effectively sign the gospel, change the substance of the discipline, or demonstrate a style that is compelling. That means, for example, learning our micro theory with an understanding of full duality, our macro theory with dynamics—our econometrics built on the foundation of probability theory and mathematical statistics, and our fields with their corresponding requisites as well. Anything short of this leaves us incapable of demonstrating that we love the Lord with our scholarly minds as well as with our emotions.
Dave also expresses the worry that too many of us in the Association of Christian Economists have sacrificed either the quantity or the quality of our skills as professional economists in order to acquire skills in philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the history and philosophy of science. We have, in Dave’s words “shift(ed) our attention from our professional calling to unskilled and unschooled introspection about our methods, our ethics, our controversies, and our intellectual history.” These are strong words that deserve further thought. Is Dave saying that it is improper to be involved in these areas of scholarly investigation? Absolutely not. He states clearly that some of us need to be so involved. In defense of those in our midst who are so involved, we argue that as Christians this is our natural comparative advantage? I think not. Some of us may have moved in this direction either due to the false notion that professional sanctification requires it, or in a more mundane way, in reaction to our discomfort with the technical orientation of our graduate school preparation. Neither reason is adequate. There are precious few in the profession with dual Ph.D. degrees in philosophy and economics, or in history and economics for example. Those who are not so trained are unlikely to make substantial contributions in synthesizing the two fields. Few of us are equipped and gifted to be synthesizers. Many of us may think of ourselves as synthesizers, however, and in the process perhaps “think more highly of ourselves than we ought.” It is important to recall, however, that the biblical metaphor for the church is that of a body. We are not all ears. We are not all eyes, feet or livers. There is not only room for, but a necessity of diversity in the body. The same holds for the Association of Christian Economists.

But isn’t Dave’s whole argument dissatisfying because it is disappointingly neoclassical (to use a phrase I have heard from the lips of some of my brothers in this group)? I think not. In fact, Dave makes no particular defense of neoclassical method per se. His argument is that we should not be satisfied with “living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence.” But with this phrase isn’t Dave lapsing into a kind of arrogant egotism that defines what he does as economics while what others do is defined as non-economics? Such a temptation must surely be resisted in order to speak with integrity. My reading of his paper, and subsequent re-readings of his paper, convince me that this is not the case. He does draw implicit boundaries within which he describes a rich array of topics which should be of interest to Christian economists. Nevertheless, he has drawn boundaries and at least implicitly defined the domain of economics. We may legitimately debate whether those boundaries are properly drawn, but we must not lapse into the quagmire that is inevitable when we define economics too broadly. By this I have in mind the kind of definition that views economics broadly as an evolving organic matrix of relationships and institutions. There are methodological distinctives that uniquely define the discipline of economics from that of the other social sciences that also have to do with many of the same actors and institutions.

For some in our fellowship, this is not enough. We believe that in order to think Christianly, we must think in distinctive ways. I agree with that proposition, but find that in the process I am not obliged to abandon the central core of economics. As an example, it is not only appropriate but biblical that we study incentive structures and their effects on human behavior. In the gospel of Luke alone we find more than forty promises of reward and threats of punishment connected with Jesus’ commands. As Harry Blamires has said

Christianity is the salt that gives a different flavor to everything you eat without altering its essential character, without eliminating any of its distinctiveness, indeed, on the contrary, forcing its true distinctiveness onto the palate.
In summary, I believe that we need to heed the account of Dave Richardson, acting as a modern day Caleb encouraging us to enter the promised land and find our satisfaction in the God who created us for his glory. In this regard, I am reminded of Eric Liddle’s response to his sister Jenny as she questioned his commitment to the ministry. You may recall that Eric Liddle was an Olympic runner and missionary to China in the early part of this century. He said “I know that God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” You and I as economists were made for a purpose, and we were also made good at economic reasoning. Let’s feel God’s pleasure in our work as economists. Dave Richardson’s plea this afternoon is that we economists, who have been “bought with a price,” find our satisfaction in being professional economists to the glory of God.

ENDNOTES

1 John 6:60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”

2 Rom 12:3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. [4] Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, [5] so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. [6] We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. [7] If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; [8] if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.


7 John Piper’s summary of the concept of Christian hedonism is that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” John Piper (1986), Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist, Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press.

8 1 Cor 6:19. ■