
VIEWPOINT

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The Christian Economist and the Church

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For some time I have been grouching about a number of the formal statements that church bodies have issued dealing with economic matters. I have specific complaints about such statements, but beyond my specific complaints is a gnawing sense that the church is not well served by these statements. This brief essay exposes some of my grumbling, but more importantly allows me to propose to the Church an alternative approach to offering ethical insight that I feel makes far more sense.

One complaint is that these statements typically are so general and sweeping as to contain little substantive usefulness. I understand the concern to aim the statements at broad ethical norms (community, participation, sustainability . . .) where theological truth seems clear rather than engage in specific socio-economic analysis or propound specific policy alternatives—which, after all, is the domain of specially trained social scientists and not theologians and ethicists. Yet the same norm may be approached through competing analytical orientations. Without further ethical refinement one does not know which analysis or policy best comports with the statement.

Similarly, I often find myself wondering whether the authors of the statement would be willing to propose a particular norm or implication of a norm if the trade-offs (often subtle and complex) were far more severe than the statement seems to realize. Without careful analysis we cannot know the likely trade-offs, and thus cannot know where our ethical obligation lies. And yet the statements by their nature do not provide the detailed analysis.

I believe I understand how such problematic statements come about. Church bodies gather infrequently and for a limited time—and realize that since economic issues are but one of several ethical concerns to which the church might speak, *this* is the one chance they will get to say something. Moreover, most of these bodies do not have substantial resources to put

into the preparation of the statements. (The various papal encyclicals and the recent statement on the U.S. economy by U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops are clear exceptions.) Consequently the statements try to be as inclusive as possible. I may respect the effort but the outcome generally frustrates me.

A second complaint is an extension of the first. I find the statements reflect the dominant influence of ethicists and theologians, and too little influence of economists. (Or might it be too little influence of “my brand” of economists?) I have raised this concern with several ethicists and theologians, flagging particularly my perception that they seem not to be all that concerned for the “feasibility” of ethical norms. The response I get far too often is that feasibility is not their bailiwick but ours: they want to lay bare the normative standards, and want us to make their attainment feasible.

I continue to demur, convinced that the ethical task should indeed be concerned with feasibility in the process of making us stretch to get beyond traditional and often sinful ways. I am quite aware of the bias in favor of the *status quo* in much of our analysis (consider especially the elegant tools of welfare economics). But I question as well the wisdom of placing before us norms that are not workable and generating a lot of needless and harmful guilt in the process.

To the extent church bodies must make statements about economic issues, I long for them to become far more aware of the complexity of socio-economic reality, such that the norms developed are seen as workable in some way. When this is the case, church members in the pews—to whom, after all, the statements officially are addressed—will be forced to grapple with the statements' implications rather than neglect them completely or wallow in an ill-defined pool of guilt—neither of which is beneficial to the larger Church.

But should church *bodies* be issuing such statements? I believe not. Church *members* should be about such work, but as “Kingdom bodies” and not church bodies. I need to explain—and this will lead me to propose an alternative approach to the important task of offering ethical (economic) guidance to the Church. Jesus filled much of his earthly ministry announcing the present reality of the Kingdom of God. The Lord, the King of creation, was in our midst calling men and women to recognize and honor that Kingship and to comport themselves accordingly; He founded his Church as a community of those who have done and should do precisely these things.

The Kingdom is indeed present in the lives of Christians who together comprise the Church (Christ’s Body) spread through all parts of the world. (Virtually all of these Church members also are members of church bodies: local congregations and generally larger denominational hierarchies.) But the Kingdom has yet to realize its ultimate completion. We pray, in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy Kingdom come.” We read:

“Thou hast made him for a little while lower than the angels; Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, and hast appointed him over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet.’ For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. *But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him* (Heb. 2:7, 8 NASB—italics added).

Within the Church (and the church) we confess the fullness of the Kingdom: in our lives, in the life of the church community, and in the wider structures of society. We believe that as our lives should be conformed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, so ideally should the conduct of international trade policy and the relationships between workers and managers. As sin perverts our own attempts to be faithful, so sin affects broader structures—and most likely in far more pervasive and entrenched ways, to the extent the individuals involved in these structures do not submit themselves in prayerful forgiveness before God and seek the leading of his Holy Spirit to live redeemed lives.

While we await the full expression of the Kingdom, we call those outside the Church to embrace Christ as their Savior and Lord (to enter the Kingdom). We reach out in compassion and in sacrificial acts of love to those within and outside the Church. We seek to model redeemed lives, families, and even broader structures (schools, hospitals, welfare agencies. . .)—offering some sense of how the fullness of the Kingdom might appear. We investigate the nature and

limits of reality—the natural potentials and limits as well as the sin-infected limits—and then use the results of such analysis, along with Scripture and church tradition, to testify to more effective ways of structuring social processes.

It is not my purpose here to address the likely impact or effectiveness of our efforts, be they to reach out in compassionate and sacrificial ways, to offer redeemed models, or to propose and seek reform of the social structures of society. To do so would enter the somewhat murky waters of how God intends to bring about the fullness of his Kingdom, and I simply am not up to that task. At the least I perceive such efforts as laying the foundation for a more willing response by non-Christians to the claims that Jesus Christ can forgive sins (Luke 5:17-26).

It is precisely the last-mentioned task above which church statements on economic issues are all about: investigating the nature and limits of reality—the natural potentials and limits as well as the sin-infected limits—and using such analysis, along with Scripture and church tradition, to testify to more effective ways of structuring social processes. I want Kingdom (or Church) bodies and not church bodies to be about this task—and in a particular way.

Local church bodies—congregations, parishes, and fellowships—primarily are and should be settings where fellow Christians come together for worship, for mutual instruction in the faith, and to express the very practical love for one another (foot-washing!) which Christ said would show to all men that we are his disciples (John 13, and especially vs. 34, 35). In the very process of doing these things we call those outside the Church to embrace Christ as their Savior and Lord. We also often use the church as a staging ground or financing source for wider proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, as well as for acts of compassion and sacrificial love in the broader society—which may include the establishment of various social structures such as schools and hospitals. So far so good. These tasks typically do not have quite as much potential to be divisive within the church body as do economic statements.

Potential divisiveness is the overriding issue for me when it comes to statements about economic matters. I do not want someone discouraged from entering the Kingdom because they perceive they must hold capitalistic or socialistic views to become a Christian or to worship in a particular church. Enough potential for divisiveness exists over the proper forms of worship or the allocation of the mission budget that we need not compound it by asking church members

to choose sides over the environmental effects of economic growth. We especially would not want to discourage people from coming to Christ because, for example, they do not believe the minimum wage should be raised.

To the extent the statements are issued by denominational bodies and not local congregational bodies (which generally is the case) the danger may be lessened, but not eliminated. Beyond this, I question the propriety of using the offerings of local church members to fund the preparation of statements that result in the complaints I note above. And in addition to my specific complaints with these statements, I harbor an ill-defined sense that church bodies—certainly the church bodies to which I belong—simply should not be about such things.

But I have argued that testifying to more effective ways of structuring social processes *is* Kingdom work. How then should we as Church members be about this important task? One way would be for individual Christians to do this testifying—and certainly there is a healthy offering of such views from the pens and PCs of ethicists, theologians and economists. As important as these contributions are, they are insufficient. The task is too important and too difficult to be handled by individuals. In the ever more specialized world of modern science (interpreted broadly to include the sciences of theology and ethical discernment) it is impossible for any one Christian to grasp the breadth of knowledge necessary for the task. We need the combined efforts of economists, ethicists, theologians, and often other social scientists.

My proposal is to convene teams of economists, ethicists, biblical scholars, theologians, sociologists, and others as necessary to work on narrowly defined topics: third world debt relief, medical insurance policy, industrial concentration policy, the effects (and implications) of freer international trade. To make the projects workable I would suggest teams of eight to twelve members. The teams would meet initially in summer workshops and papers would be presented by team members on various aspects of the problem, both analytical and ethical—very similar to what the NBER workshops do. The papers could then be submitted for publication in normal outlets.

Based upon the presentations and discussion in the workshops, selected members of the team would prepare a statement of suitable length (thirty to forty pages?) designed to offer teaching to the Church which lays bare the essential analytical realities and brings Christian ethical insight to bear to these

realities. The statement would be submitted to the remaining members of the team and serve as the basis for a subsequent meeting of the team to hammer out a final draft. The final statement would in no way compel agreement among all members of the team but would include dissenting footnotes and dissenting opinions.

The statement along with comments by team members then would be published as a pamphlet to be used in whatever way various Church members and church bodies would find useful. I could see such statements serving as the basis for Sunday School classes and study groups within local church bodies, as well as classroom material in secular and Christian colleges and universities. The overriding purpose, however, would be to offer teaching to the broader Church, drawing upon the best collected analytical and ethical insight we can muster.

As I conceive this undertaking, these narrowly circumscribed statements would move from analytical understanding (the nature of the problem) and broader ethical/theological precepts to developing the likely analytical implications of various policy responses to the problem. The majority sentiment of the team then would be indicated. Because dissenting footnotes and opinions would be noted, readers of the pamphlet would be apprised of the complexity of most of these problems and the difficulty of drawing uniformly clear implications. As a result Christian men and women would be provided more carefully crafted teaching than is available now.

All sorts of questions remain. Who selects team members and oversees the process? Who funds the workshops and publications? Would non-Christian specialists be invited to participate? I close by considering a few such questions. To indicate the workability and usefulness of the idea a workshop or two may have to be conducted and pamphlets turned out before a board of overseers could be formed. Perhaps the Association of Christian Economists could serve as the catalyst (though not the funding sponsor) by organizing the initial team(s). If the idea proves successful then a board of overseers could be formed which would be the ideal way of supervising the project while drawing upon various Christian traditions.

Some funding assistance for transportation, board and room would be necessary; I would expect team members to donate their time, as they do to other professional pursuits of this nature. I would hope a foundation or other donor would be interested in such a project. It seems likely that a publisher would

be willing to cover the publication expense as a commercial venture. Clearly there is no need for this to be U.S.-based, and team composition should reflect the best specialists from the chosen topic, wherever they are. Though team members would be Christians I could appreciate bringing to the workshops non-Christian specialists to assist the analysis.

I would hope the process could bridge traditional lines of Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. The issues to be considered are not the ones that historically have divided these traditions other than,

possibly, the authority of the Papacy and the handling of relevant encyclicals. I do not see this as a stumbling block, however.

Such is my proposal. Were all this to come about I could conceive of one or two teams and workshops busy each year (and summer). In this way the Church would be presented on an on-going basis with solid teaching, on immediate issues, which draws upon our best contemporary analytical and ethical understanding.