God’s Good Economy: Doing Economic Justice in Today’s World

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Economic justice is at the heart of God’s plan for the world, and individual Christians should aim to act justly in their everyday economic lives. This is the message of Andrew Hartropp’s most recent book, in which he dives into scripture to elucidate a lively account of economic justice, and then writes frankly about how Christians can live more justly in their consumption habits, their work lives, and beyond. Hartropp is an ordained minister, a theologian, an economist, and a long-time scholar of economic justice. If anyone is qualified to offer a helpful guide to the most thorny political and economic questions, it is him. This book does not, however, choose to delve deeply into the big debates that have animated economic thinking over the last century. The goal is something a bit different, and the result is wonderful in some respects and disappointing in some others.

First, the heart of the book is an account of biblical economic justice as something that Christians should be doing. The emphasis throughout is the way in which Christians can live into the righteousness and justice that God calls us to. This shifts the emphasis in the book well outside the norm for books about justice that you might find on most academic bookshelves. Most accounts of justice are dedicated to one of two themes: (1) how we should understand the concept of justice, or (2) what policies or laws we should enact to make the world more just. Hartropp, instead, spends more time asking: What kind of relationships between people would exemplify the kind of righteousness that God calls us to? You will not find more than a passing reference to debates about consequentialist or deontological ethics here, and it is not until the last chapter that Hartropp even approaches the issue of inequality or the government’s role in the economy. That uncommon focus pushes the reader to think about righteousness living more than political fighting.

The book does not entirely neglect the question of how we should understand economic justice, however. In the first chapter Hartropp gives a short summary of a biblical account. He contends that justice is rooted in God’s character, and that the Bible offers a clear account of how Christians can strive to live justly. In Hartropp’s reading, biblical
economic justice emphasizes (1) how we treat each other, (2) caring for the poor and needy, (3) relationships, and (4) flourishing communities. He comes back to these themes throughout the book, reminding us that Christian action in economic life should be animated by a desire for justice, and that a just way of life gives everyone a chance to participate and flourish.

Hartropp does not wade into the scholarly literature on this, but one of the interesting things about his approach is that it breaks down the distinction between justice and charity. That is, in this framework, charity is one of the ways in which we do justice. This approach strikes me as both deeply Christian and also conceptually helpful. Many Christians have held that property rights are good but they are not absolute, and that they come with duties to care for those in need. Thinking of charity in opposition to justice puts the emphasis on the giver, and their heroic virtue; thinking of charity as a fulfillment of justice puts the emphasis back on the needs of the receiver and the flourishing of people that God calls us to pursue.

After this framework is introduced, Hartropp offers three chapters about how people can live out God’s call to justice and righteousness in their lives. He starts with a chapter about consumers, followed by a chapter on justice in the workplace and a chapter on the church. In each of these chapters, Hartropp speaks effectively to a layperson who might want good advice about how to live into their Christian faith day to day. He asks that we pay some attention to the products we buy and the way they are produced, noting that consumers, collectively at least, have a lot of power to shape the larger economy. Beyond careful consumer choices, however, Hartropp offers straightforward advice: do not waste money, give generously and, with both spending and charity, channel your money toward organizations that help out the poor and needy.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer practical advice about how to think about justice in the workplace and church. Hartropp encourages us to think about how individuals can care for those who are needy within our organizations (co-workers, co-parishioners) by investing in people so that they can thrive, and also to think about the ways in which our work and our churches can help those outside the institution (community members, customers). In each case, he offers sound principles to motivate Christian action. In the work chapter, he offers a sound theology of work, noting that our labor can build up the world, resisting the effects of the fall. In
the church chapter, he focuses on how churches can effectively work to help those in poverty.

In Part 2 of the book, Hartropp shifts his focus a little wider, asking questions about how justice can be done in wider social institutions. Even here, though, his focus is still on individual relationships and Christian action, and less on debates about policy, law, or economic systems. Chapter 5 focuses on firms and corporations. In this chapter he resists a reductionist conception of the firm as only a project of shareholder value maximization, instead focusing on relationships within the firm. Christian justice, he maintains, should entail careful thought about wages, labor market flexibility and job security, and executive compensation. He does not argue for government regulation of business in this chapter but he does think that there are some Christian norms that should motivate the structure of a firm.

Chapter 6 focuses particularly on the world of banking and finance. Here Hartropp delves into the harm that can be caused by the aggressive lending of high-cost loans to high-risk households. Reaching back to his account of economic justice, he argues that both borrowers and lenders have obligations: borrowers should borrow carefully, and lenders should only lend when they really expect borrowers to be able to repay. He notes that credit and debt play an important function in the economy, but that debt can accumulate, resulting in long-term exclusion for debtors. He also chastises some parts of the financial services industry for financial practices motivated by damaging greed rather than the provision of a real service.

It is only in the final chapter that Hartropp gently approaches the topics that usually motivate strident arguments about economic justice today: inequality, redistribution, and regulation. Even here, though, while he expresses some concern about inequality and some elements of globalization, he does not offer a strong position in these debates. He wants to remind readers that while those with power are called to pursue and uphold biblical norms of justice, the “responsibility for doing economic justice rests on the shoulders of everybody in each country—it cannot be simply passed on to the state” (p. 150). As to the proper role of the government, Hartropp is ambivalent. He offers a positive role for the government in the regulation of the economy and to address externalities, but he can envision just societies with small or large governments. The key elements of a just government role, he argues, follow a biblical
standard: (1) uphold laws consistent with biblical justice, (2) focus on support and inclusion of the poor and needy, and (3) counter oppression that results from concentrated power (p. 163).

There is a lot to appreciate about Hartropp's book, and there are some elements of what he has done here that will greatly influence my thinking. The most valuable achievement, I think, is that he has written a book that is very well suited for use by groups of lay people in the church. The style of the book is eminently readable, and rather than operating at the level of abstract principles, Hartropp writes like a pastor, diving in scripture repeatedly to make his argument. I could confidently offer this book to a church study group, even if the participants had no training in either religion or economics. The even-handed care with which Hartropp approaches hot political questions, moreover, will ensure that the book will make readers think carefully about these issues without turning off those readers coming from a different ideological position. This also makes the book almost ideally suited for use in an undergraduate economics course, if an instructor wanted to pair some approachable Christian thinking with a more standard textbook.

Even more importantly, perhaps, Hartropp indirectly challenges two common errors that people frequently make when thinking about economic justice. The first error is to believe that a law-abiding Christian need not worry about economic justice. The second error is to believe that economic justice is only relevant to who we vote for, or the policies that we enact, but that our personal behavior is, again, irrelevant. For people making either of or both these mistakes, Hartropp's book is a broadside of examples and thoughtful analysis about how justice should be thought of as righteousness, expressed through our own relationships with people in our communities. There is real work for all of us to do even if we have no role in a powerful government or corporation.

No book should be judged for not doing something the author never intended to do, and so I hesitate to critique this excellent book on such grounds. It should be said, however, that scholars looking for an accessible introduction to biblical economic justice will not find it here. While Hartropp does an admirable job exploring this one account of justice, he does not explore any competing visions, even to dismiss or compare them to his own. That is, the reader will have to look elsewhere to find out where this account lands in the considerable literature on the topic.
Moreover, because Hartropp takes a very cautious, even-handed approach, even though he spends much of the book discussing how we can live justly in our daily lives, this account of justice is not that demanding. There are no calls for extreme generosity or radical solidarity, no encouragement to take to the streets in protest or build an alternative community. More unusually, perhaps, for this literature, there are no broad condemnations of government action or of free markets. That is, if you are looking for a scholarly provocation, this is not your book. On balance, I think that is a testament to the author. In contrast with a literature heavy on theory and ideology, Hartropp has written a book with a great pastoral sensitivity and practical guidance for Christian living.