Editor’s Introduction: Economic Justice

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If there is a dominant economic theme in the Christian literature about economics, it is probably the idea of stewardship. The metaphor, in which humans are envisioned as caretakers of God’s property, is both theologically and economically useful. My first instinct is to equate stewardship with economic efficiency. Good stewards will be sure to get the most possible good out of what God has given us. But that instinct is not quite right. The scriptural ideal of stewardship is probably not supposed to be equated with economic efficiency. Instead it appears that God’s main priority is that we make sure everyone around us is taken care of. Stewardship is closely tied to two ideas that we need to contend with as economists: righteousness and justice.

First, in my experience, there is a real difficulty with current Christian dialogue about economic justice. We do not have much of a consensus about what justice should mean, and the concept lends itself to some substantial ideological polarization. As I wrote in our last issue, most Christians will agree that economic justice will involve some obligation to the poor, but that seems to be where agreement ends. Even the term “economic justice” is more likely to be used by left-leaning Christians than those on the right, and has come to be associated with a series of concerns that particularly animate progressive Christians: poverty, inequality, and racism. Often, the connotation includes an assumption that justice requires considerable state action, including redistribution of some kind. There is strong academic work supporting this way of thinking, but it is a mistake to think that the left has a monopoly on thinking about economic justice. Conservatives, while less likely to use the term “economic justice,” still operate from a coherent account of justice. Their account is often just less concerned with inequality and less enthusiastic about state action.

The problem with this polarization, of course, is that the Christian literature about economic justice tends to follow very predictable ideological lines. Adjudicating this ideological divide, moreover, requires that we move beyond economics, because only some of our disagreements are rooted in the economics literature. To really understand the

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different conceptions of justice requires digging into biblical studies, theology, philosophy, and political theory. This is a tall order for any scholar, but it is noble work for a scholarly community, and we hope that *Faith & Economics* can play a small role in moving it along.

There is a second difficulty that arises in the application of a Christian account of economic justice, and that is that scripture seems to deny us some of the easy categories of thought that animate contemporary thinking. I was particularly challenged, recently, as I read Andrew Hartropp’s *God’s Good Economy: Doing Economic Justice in Today’s World* (2019), which I review in this issue. I have usually worked with the assumption that questions of justice were primarily about policy. Doing justice was a twofold task, I thought: we are called to make sure that the rules of economic life are properly designed to encourage human flourishing, and also we are called to make sure that those rules are enforced impartially and fairly. Hartropp, however, makes a strong case that, in the Bible, the call to justice is not just about policy and enforcement: it is also about relationship. In fact, he argues that if we separate the concept of justice from the concept of righteousness, we have missed much of the point of the biblical teaching. God calls us to do justice, meaning that justice/righteousness should animate our relationships with those around us. It is an obligation, but it is not perfectly mediated by the state, it is personal. It is worth noting that Hartropp does not argue that justice is not the job of the state as well—it certainly is—but only that Christians cannot assume that their job is done once they have voted for a particular politician and paid their taxes.

If justice and righteousness cannot be easily separated in scripture, there is an additional implication, I believe, though this is more speculative. It appears that Christians may have too easily imported, into economic thinking, a sharp distinction between justice and mercy, or between justice and charity. That is to say, I find it easy to assume that, when I am charitable, it is an act of mercy. By any account of justice, I assume, the money my wife and I earn is ours, but because we are called to love others, my family gives some of that money to organizations that help those who are in great need. If we did not give that money, no one could claim that they had been wronged in any way. Not engaging in charitable giving, in this view, is not an injustice. But I have come to think that this distinction is suspect. Our household’s moral obligation to share our wealth with those in need is, in Hartropp’s account, a matter
of justice. If it is a matter of justice, though, what is the appropriate kind of accountability if I decide to ignore the needs of others and spend only on my own needs and desires? This, I think, is a hard question, if only because there is not any well-functioning institution in modern society that can hold our family accountable for this in any way that matters. In contrast, John Anderson, in his contribution to this issue, argues for the importance of a clear distinction between justice and mercy (or compassion).

If we draw our inspiration from scripture, it seems clear that foremost among our economic priorities ought to be some kind of economic justice. In this issue we have invited four scholars to respond to the following prompt: *What does a Christian vision for economic justice require of United States policy regarding taxation and government spending?* Each scholar presented their ideas in an ACE-sponsored panel at the 2021 ASSA meetings, and we publish here written versions of their contributions. John Anderson leads off the symposium with an excellent overview of some biblical principles regarding taxation and debt, and then a helpful summary of recent trends in US taxation, spending, and government borrowing. Daniel Finn offers a warning to avoid four tempting “myths” regarding economic justice, helpfully pointing out some pitfalls in recent Christian thinking. Enoch Hill offers an economist’s reading of the Jubilee laws, thinking about how these rules limiting debt and servitude could be translated into our contemporary context. Finally, Christina McRorie picks up a theme very similar to the one I have pulled out of Hartropp’s work: that justice requires individual relationship, and that this means that the work of the state is only the start of our work to bring about a just economy.

This issue is rounded out by a collection of book reviews, including a couple related to the theme of the symposium. Each of the symposium contributions is a great starting place for a longer conversation, and you can watch for more on the *Faithful Economy* podcast, where we will release conversations with each scholar in the coming months. We will also have several other economic justice-themed conversations, including one on criminal justice reform.