

Practicing the King's Economy: Honoring Jesus in How We Work, Earn, Spend, Save, and Give

Michael Rhodes & Robby Holt with Brian Fikkert. 2018. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. ISBN 978-0801075742. \$19.99 (paperback).

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Practicing the King's Economy is a book that may become this generation's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. It challenges readers to evaluate and change much of their economic lives, while providing hope about what might be accomplished. The authors are Michael Rhodes, the director of community transformation at the Memphis Center for Urban Theological Studies, and Robby Holt, a pastor who also is a theological dean at the Chattanooga Institute for Faith and Work. Assisting them with this project was well-known Christian economist Brian Fikkert, who founded the Chalmers Center for Economic Development and is the coauthor of *When Helping Hurts*.

They geared this book not for academic economists but for the church and Christians in general. It looks primarily at micro-level behavior of individuals, communities, businesses and churches—not broader economic policy. And it will certainly make readers uncomfortable, which is no doubt part of the authors' intentions. Fikkert shares in the preface that for years, Rhodes and Holt had been confronting him with “the truth that the kingdom of God is radical in nature and that most of us—myself included—are living highly nonradicalized lives, particularly in the space of economics” (p. 31).

The book's six sets of paired chapters each focus on a “key” to understanding and “practicing the King's economy.” The first chapter of each pair lays out the biblical basis for a “key” (worship, community, work, equity, creation care, rest); the chapter that follows adds related stories and practices. For example, Chapter 1 explores how economic life and worship are intertwined, while Chapter 2 tells of several practices of “cross-shaped giving,” discusses Ron Sider's idea of a graduated tithe, and suggests that we allow others to know about our financial situation as a way to promote accountability in generosity.

Practices are the heart of the book. “We won't engage in . . . arguments about the best economic system, even though they are extremely important discussions,” the authors write. “Instead, we'll focus on formative practices God's people can perform together within their

communities” (p. 48). Living out biblical economic practices is a necessary precursor to making economic policy, in their view; they maintain that we “can’t really work to change the world until we’ve become changed people” (p. 49), and that by “being formed as faithful economic disciples through ‘exercising’ for the economy of our King, we become people more capable of improving the systems and nations of our world” (p. 49).

They begin with a wonderfully written explanation of the Gospel and God’s Kingdom: the authors describe the importance of God’s creation, the implications of the fall, and the significance of redemption through Christ for individuals and for the entire creation. They also suggest that aspects of our faithful work today may be seen in the new heavens and new earth upon our Lord’s return. This creation-fall-redemption-consummation framework was familiar and pleasant-sounding music to this Reformed Christian’s ears.

The consistent theme throughout is that the reality of God’s Kingdom requires transformation of our economic lives, because “King Jesus . . . has his own unique economic policies, his own economic program” (p. 40). The authors suggest that textbook definitions of economics sound like a “materialist, humanist manifesto” (p. 40), and that Jesus would define (and teach) economics quite differently.

To help readers “enter into the world of God’s economy” (p. 42), the book focuses first on how worship and our economic lives overlap. Centering our economic lives on serving the poor is what God requires as an act of economic worship, they stress; when we give to the poor, we reflect our creation in the image of God. By contrast, letting money take the central place in our lives is a type of idolatry—the most frequent type that people experience, they claim. When we orient our lives toward personal “earning, getting, and keeping” (p. 57), we become “deformed” and reflect not God’s image but that of the idol of money. The authors draw connections between idolatry and the concept of *homo economicus*, and suggest that the latter often leaves humankind empty and alone. They assert that we are being trained for a materialistic world but are “horribly unprepared for life in the King’s economy” (p. 59) and are “worse and worse at connecting, caring, and serving” (p. 60).

In Chapters 3 and 4, about the “community key,” they make the case that our motivation for our economic activity should not be to just meet our personal needs, but to enable all members of the community

to participate and contribute. We shouldn't just give to the poor out of our abundance: we are to give in order to make ourselves interdependent, and to show that we trust in God for our provision, not ourselves. The authors pay particular attention to the feasts that the Israelites celebrated, meals that included the entire community, including the sojourner. They discuss the economic actions of the church as recorded in Acts 2 and suggest they are instructive for us today. An analogy the authors use throughout the book is the difference between a soup kitchen and a potluck dinner. They assert that the goal of our economic activity should be participation by all, where everyone can and does bring a plate.

Next, the authors discuss work, which they understand as a good part of God's creation. In sync with the apostle Paul (Eph. 4:28), they emphasize that work allows us to "have something to share with those in need" (p. 131). Even while discussing the positive nature of work for those created in God's image, the chapter stresses shortcomings of the labor market, including low wages, discrimination, and difficulties for formerly incarcerated citizens. Although the current labor market is historically strong, the authors suggest that "our biggest problem may not be that people don't want to work . . . [but] that for too many of our neighbors, work just doesn't seem to work anymore" (p. 135).

The fourth pair of chapters, about equity, compares God's design for the economy of Old Testament Israel with the economy of Egypt that the Israelites had left behind. Discussing the Year of Jubilee, the authors write: "Yahweh cares infinitely more about every family having the opportunity to provide for themselves and participate in the economy than he does about any one family's 'right' to acquire more and more, whether through thrift or theft" (p. 167). Suggesting that this concept goes beyond typical conservative-liberal economic policy disagreements, they note that the Year of Jubilee created equity by "restoring the factors of production to Israel's equitable starting point" (p. 167), "not by redistributing the results of the community's labor" (p. 167).

The authors propose that Christians support "educational efforts among those often left behind by our educational system" (p. 194), but their suggestions are primarily for individual action in the current system. Given that the acquisition of human capital is a primary way to obtain economic opportunity, I think they could have fruitfully considered the promotion of greater choice in education, or other more

112 FAITH & ECONOMICS

structural changes in education, as a modern day analogy to the redistribution of land in the Jubilee.

The chapters on creation care do an excellent job of discussing relevant biblical passages, God's care for His creation, and our role as co-rulers and stewards. Another welcome element that may be new to some Christians is the authors' consideration of God's concern for animals. However, the book sets up a straw man (or woman) argument by highlighting the views of Ann Coulter, who wrote that a biblical view of nature is to "rape the planet—it's yours" (p. 198), and then suggests that this is the worldview of many Christians. This caricature is out of date: we observe now that most Christian publications write frequently to extol creation care, and almost every significantly sized business has environmental initiatives. A fairer, more realistic, view might be that the problem for many Christians (especially younger Christians) is not the lack of concern for the environment but a lack of understanding of the real tradeoffs that exist in the decision-making process of environmental stewardship.

The final key in the book is rest. Offering examples of various ways to take time off, the authors nevertheless suggest that we shouldn't prescribe rules for others, which makes sense. But they present the Sabbath as much more: extending to all corners of our economic lives, entwined with empathy for the sojourner and the marginalized, and bearing implications for the design of the economy. This interpretation is creative and challenging, but some readers might see this chapter as an encouragement to work harder in various ways rather than as an inspiration to find new ways to rest.

There is much to like about this book. The authors make a strong case for increased emphasis on serving the poor in our economic lives, and the companion chapters enrich the theoretical case they make for each of their "keys." Those follow-up chapters give the book both a realistic bent (communicating "there are people who have done this") and a practical one ("here are things you can do"). Inspiring stories and examples engender hope for things that could be done. This is all the stronger for the fact that the authors themselves are involved in many amazing avenues of service.

I wanted to love the book but, for a variety of reasons, I ended up only appreciating it. While the authors call for action and change, at the same time they may downplay the importance of thinking through the

full complexities of many economic issues. “A central argument in this book,” they write, “is that we can’t see or know how to make it through complex problems until we’ve begun practicing economic discipleship in our lives. Pick something that makes sense and get to work” (p. 230). They also assert that “even the best economists and policymakers don’t know for sure how to fix our systemic problems or avoid unintended consequences” (p. 50). While we certainly need to do more than just think about economic justice, Christian citizenship requires both careful thought and intentional action.

Throughout, the authors contrast their arguments (many of which are based on interpretations of Old Testament Israel’s laws) with what they suggest is “our contemporary Western Christian idea that what God is doing is rescuing our souls from sin so that he can blast the earth and take us to strum harps on clouds” (p. 210). I believe the book would be more effective if it structured its arguments in response to what the sociologist Christian Smith calls “moral therapeutic deism,” which I think better describes most current Christians’ beliefs about their faith and their responsibilities in the world.

A few times in the book, the authors go out of their way to inform the reader that their proposals are not just politically left-leaning ideas. The foreword to the book assures us that it “is impossible to dismiss the kind of personal and community life as well as practices advocated here as mere left-leaning liberal idealism” (p. 14). In addition, the authors state that they “want to counter right out of the gate a suspicion you may have: that all this creation business is some recent liberal development” (p. 221).

While it is clear that the Bible calls all Christians to promote justice, I think they may have reason for concern that some readers may see this book as leaning to the “social justice” side on many of the issues they discuss. For example, the idea of working in a business to provide necessary goods and services as a God-given calling seems underemphasized in the book, unless the individual and the business are directly engaged with poorer communities. More broadly, it is clear that the Bible calls all Christians to promote justice, but while some faithful, thoughtful Christians might say that a lack of individual responsibility is the major driver of society’s ills, others might say oppression is the primary cause; on that continuum, this book certainly leans to oppression as a major source of difficulty. There is some truth to both, of course, and this is what makes solving problems difficult.

Even though *Practicing the King's Economy* is not directed toward professional economists, the book is well worth our serious consideration. The authors radically challenge the way that Christians orient our economic lives, and bound up in that is a question concerning how we teach and practice economics. The book made me uncomfortable as I thought about my personal economic practices, and I will have to take time to reflect and to make some changes in my own life. I may also need to confront my students to a greater extent with the message that these authors highlight. *Practicing the King's Economy* would be provocative reading for individual Christians, an appropriate catalyst for discussions at church, and perhaps a supplemental text for an introductory economics class. ■