

"Wherever riches have increased..."

The postmodern milieu cries out for a reassessment of the axioms, systems, and practices of modernity. The Enlightenment myth of progress, in particular, and the vision of economic growth represented by the GDP as the measure of well-being are under revision. Many voices call for radical change in the way we understand the notion of prosperity. Tim Jackson, for example, writes: "Prosperity consists in our ability to flourish as human beings – within the ecological limits of a finite planet. The challenge for our society is to create the conditions under which that is possible."ⁱ Others, quoted by Jackson, propose a new relationship between economics, society, and spirituality:

A new politics of the common good...requires a more demanding idea of what it means to be a citizen, and it requires a more robust public discourse – one that engages more directly with moral and even spiritual questions.ⁱⁱ

We must bring back into society a deeper sense of the purpose of living. The unhappiness in so many lives ought to tell us that success alone is not enough. Material success has brought us to a strange spiritual and moral bankruptcy.ⁱⁱⁱ

These are discussions and advocacies in which Christians *ought* to participate, despite differing worldviews. The Bible provides a plethora of insights about money that would be useful. What does prosperity really mean? What are the necessary conditions for humanity to flourish east of Eden? What *are* human beings, anyway? These and many other presuppositional themes emerge from the critical questions being raised about economics, consumerism, sustainability, and human well-being in postmodernity.

Because of common grace, further, we should not squander the *opportunities* inherent God's beneficence to this world. Christians can and should focus upon what is possible and incumbent for the sake of the gospel. We can and should pursue the common good. We can gladly support and applaud worthy ventures of those who disagree with us (social entrepreneurship and the CNN "Heros" project, for example). We must acknowledge all that is admirable and beautiful in culture that exists "under the sun" (see Ecclesiastes). We can praise God for his continuing "witness" (Acts 14:17) in our fallen *oikonomia* (economy).

Christians ought to participate in these discussions and activities, furthermore, due to self-interest and economic justice. As stewards of the planet, a sustainable prosperity is highly relevant as both a logistical and moral issue. We must *share* this planet until the Lord returns. If it prospers, we also prosper. If it suffers, we also suffer. Moreover, as Scott Sabin writes, "Environmental stewardship is also a justice issue." He adds:

We see the environment as a luxury. Yet the poorest people in the world are not so insulated. When the rain doesn't come, people starve. When soil erodes, families go hungry. When water gets polluted, children get intestinal diseases. When all the trees are cut down, women walk hours for firewood. When the land is deforested, watersheds no longer function, causing rivers and streams to dry up. When the rain does come, deadly landslides ensue...Preserving and sustainably using those assets, so as to not further degrade those ecosystems—serving creation as stewards—becomes central to serving those people.^{iv}

And yet, we must *never* forget that our cultural aspirations and expectations are conditioned by the eschatological mission of God. That mission remains undaunted. God *will* provide a renewed physical environment in which to tabernacle with his holy people again. He *will* put Humpty Dumpty back together in all his pre-fall glory—and so much more. One day, God *will* unveil his cosmic empire, a homeland, free of sin and Satan in which human beings can truly flourish. In the “new heavens and new earth” *homo economicus* (man, the economic being) will be alive and active (Isa 60:4-11, 17-21; Rev 21:24). The “dismal science” (economics) will be transformed to yield dignity, abundance, productive work, and meaningful relationships within a secure and sacred environment.

Until that time, we must also never forget that anything sinners do is problematic. Everything and everyone in this age are subject to Murphy’s Law and there is a “Catch 22” in all our endeavors. This is manifestly true in the economic realm. With regard to commerce and money, John Wesley said it well:

Wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.^v

For all these reasons, Jeremiah’s counsel to the Babylonian exiles is *apropos* for us, as well, at this time:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jer 29:5-7)

Thematically, the parallel between their day and ours is striking. They were in exile and in a very real sense, so are we. They longed for restoration, and so do we. They dreamed of an edenic homeland, and so do we. They lived in a “mixed situation” of common grace and **sin**, and so do we. They strived to maintain a “distinction,” an alternative *oikonomia* (economy) than Mammon, and so should we. They understood that true prosperity in all its dimensions is experienced only in proximity to the dwelling of God. And so, they were told to hope in the eschatological mission of God, and so should we. In the meantime they were instructed to flourish and bring prosperity to their place of exile for their own benefit and as a foretaste of better things to come, and so should we.

ⁱ *Prosperity Without Growth*, 16.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Michael Sandal, 187.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Ben Okri, 143.

^{iv} “Whole Earth Evangelism,” *Christianity Today* Vol 54 (2010) 28.

^v Quoted by Max Weber in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 2003) 175. A similar idea is expressed in the anonymous proverb: “The gospel had a daughter—prosperity. The daughter ate the mother.”