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THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

In a world in which there is so much poverty, hunger and disease, the very fact that market economies are capable of creating wealth more effectively than socialist economies seems in itself a good enough reason to advocate the extension of the free-enterprise economy. But for the Christian who wishes to defend the market economy, there is one very real problem. If we take the text of the gospels seriously, it seems at first sight as if there is a grave inconsistency between the teachings of Jesus on the subject of wealth and poverty and the principles on which market economies depend for their success.

In the West today we tend to judge economic success in terms of prosperity: a rapid rate of economic growth, rising per capita consumption, a continual accumulation of wealth. Yet when Jesus addressed the prosperous people of his day, it was not to congratulate them but to warn them. 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God',[1] 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth',[2] 'Blessed are you poor',[3] 'Woe to you that are rich',[4] 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions',[5] 'You cannot serve God and mammon',[6] It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'.[7] We applaud the market economy because it enables people to prosper. Yet prosperity was the very thing which Jesus warned against in his teaching.

Then there is the matter of property. The market economy depends for its success on private property, because private ownership enables people to reap for themselves the benefits of hard work and shrewd investment. A socialist economy does not enable people to do this, and for that reason socialism is not nearly as successful as capitalism. But certain of the sayings of Jesus on property fit in uneasily with such a position. 'Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor ... and come, follow me;'[8] '. . . they left everything and followed him,'[9] 'Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again,'[10] 'whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.'[11] The early Church took this teaching literally. The Church in Jerusalem shared their material possessions. When the occasion demanded those with property sold it, so that there were no needy people in the community of the Jerusalem Church. When subsequently as a Church they became poor, St Paul appealed to other Churches to help them. The principle which he advanced was that of equality and the basis of his argument was the Incarnation: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.'[12]

Yet another possible area of conflict is the contrast between the competitive and individualistic ideals of the market economy and the sense of community and caring which is emphasised in the New Testament. The most well-known metaphor which is used to describe the Church in the epistles is that of the body of Christ. The body is a powerful image because it suggests an organic unity which exists within the Church and which cuts across all known barriers of race, nationality, status, wealth or power. Its

practical impact derives from the fact that within the body relationships are not just between the head and an individual member but among individual members themselves. As a result the Christian Church is a trans-national, trans-cultural and trans-racial institution. It would be difficult to find a metaphor which was further removed from Adam Smith's ideal of an atomistic, property-owning, profit-maximising society than that of the body.

Whatever one's preconceived views, the teaching of Christ and the practice of the early Church cannot be dismissed lightly. There is no doubt that for many, over the centuries, it has formed the basis for a certain kind of socialism. A society in which the individual has a responsibility to the community, and in turn, in which the community has a responsibility to the individual, is seen as the ideal of Christian economic life. In England this was the view of Christian socialism in the nineteenth century. More recently it has been put within a Third World perspective. In his lifestyle and teaching it is claimed that Jesus identified himself with the poor. A recent book by a Dutch theologian on the subject claims that 'The gospel is written from the perspective of the poor man' and Jesus is seen as the embodiment of the poor person.[13] He was born in a stable, owned nothing throughout his life, and died in poverty. If at the same time it is assumed that poverty and wealth are not independent phenomena but that the poverty of some is the direct consequence of the wealth of others, then the resulting economic inequality is viewed as the consequence of the structures of society. Jesus was therefore seen as a member of the exploited proletariat, suffering because of unjust economic structures but nevertheless graciously identifying with others of his class. It was because of his suffering and his strong sense of justice that at the beginning of his ministry Jesus proclaimed that the poor were to hear the good news, the captives were to be released and the oppressed were to be liberated. His life and ministry were directed to this end. If the process he inaugurated is to be continued, so contemporary theologians argue, it means the radical transformation of those structures which create inequality. The Christian is involved therefore in a fight against private property, money, profit, competition and everything else associated with the market economy. It is an opposition which should not just be marginal but total.

What Did Jesus Really Teach?

Until we come to terms with what Jesus really taught on the subject of wealth and poverty we shall never face up to the full weight of the theological objections to the market place. If Jesus's teaching simply amounted to a straightforward attack on wealth and an identification with the cause of the poor, as the above thesis suggests, it would at least be relatively easy to understand. But in terms of what Jesus actually said and did, matters are not that simple.

There is another side to Jesus's teaching on all these issues. The parables of the talents, the pounds and the unjust steward were all spoken to the disciples.[14] They were all concerned with the proper management of resources and the lesson of each is that the Christian has a responsibility to use his resources in the best interests of the Kingdom of God. Private ownership is never defended but taken for granted in these parables, and the resourcefulness of those who increased their wealth applauded. In addition, Jesus upheld the Mosaic law which commanded children to support their parents and encouraged people to give charitably;[15] but financial support and charitable giving require the resources to be able to do so. In his lifestyle, Jesus accepted dinner invitations from the rich, used for himself resources provided by his friends and never suggested that as a rule for living his followers (such as Zacchaeus) were to sell all they possessed.[16] For all who sought the Kingdom of God the promise was that 'all these things [material needs] shall be added unto you'.[17]

The temptation facing each one of us is to interpret Jesus's teaching to fit our preconceived ideas on these matters or else simply to justify our present lifestyle and interests. I believe that it is all too easy to

argue that the parable of the talents justifies private ownership, private profit and inequality, and yet ignore his warnings to the wealthy. But it is just as easy to listen to his indictment of the prosperous and ignore his teaching on property and stewardship. The fact that Jesus is variously portrayed as social reformer, revolutionary socialist and compassionate capitalist suggests that the task of interpretation is not easy. It is easy to be selective: but it is difficult to hold together the seemingly diverse strands of his teaching.

On reflection, however, it becomes clear that there is within the life and teaching of Jesus a basic unity which is centred around what he called the Kingdom of God. For the Jewish society into which he was born, Jesus was seen in messianic terms. Despite poverty around him and the oppression and injustice of the colonial situation in which he found himself, he rejected a secular interpretation of salvation. When tempted, he refused to turn stones into bread. In a similar vein he refused to establish a government which would throw off the shackles of Roman domination. His primary task was to establish a kingdom but it was a kingdom whose dimensions were spiritual and not secular. Whenever and wherever anyone accepted the authority of God over their life, there and then the Kingdom of God was extended. The Kingdom meant the reign of God over the lives of individuals. As a result it was impossible for mortals to build this Kingdom. It was established by God; and its extension depended on the Holy Spirit. 'The Kingdom, as Jesus knew it was God's, and men could no more establish it than they could make the sun rise in heaven ... His attitude was always that of waiting on God, of trust in a divine power and wisdom that working on our behalf will accomplish for us what we cannot do ourselves.'[18]

The essence of the Kingdom was that it viewed man's fundamental problem as spiritual and not political; it was established in response to the deepest and most intractable of human problems, namely man's independence of God. Jesus was no legislator or political activist by today's standards and the Kingdom was not set up by campaigning for greater justice in the Roman administration or joining the guerilla movement for national independence. Even if Jesus had been handed political power and offered the position of procurator or even Emperor, it would have been an irrelevance to his basic purpose. It would have been then, and remains to this day, impossible to legislate the things about which he talked and preached, simply because the ethic of his Kingdom was love and the source of its power supernatural.

When the Kingdom is viewed in these terms Jesus's teaching acquires a distinct emphasis. Take for example the inaugural address in Luke's gospel, when the Messiah announces that he is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy and outlines his ministry with these words: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'[19] This passage is frequently interpreted to lend support to the establishment of a welfare state, revolutionary change, or the campaign for human rights. Whatever the merits of demands for these things may be I find it impossible to believe that these words should be understood in political terms. They are best understood in terms of what Jesus actually did during the three-year period of his ministry which directly followed his making them. He went about and did preach the good news to the poor, he miraculously healed the blind, he liberated those who had been imprisoned by evil spirits, he healed a great many people. There is no evidence whatever to suggest that his own interpretation of these words, judged by what he actually did during his own ministry, involved a call to political action.

All of this is very important as a background to Jesus's teaching on wealth. In this teaching Jesus was concerned: with enunciating principles, not policies. He was not concerned directly with the creation of wealth or the removal of poverty. He did not examine in any detail the causes of either wealth or poverty

or any connection which there might be between them. He did not explore at all the relationships which might have existed between the inequality of wealth and poverty in his own day and the structures of his own society. How much surplus was extracted from Palestine by Rome? Were the rural poor the result of urban affluence? Was all wealth the result of exploitation? Should land be communally owned? Yet these are the questions which contemporary theologians and churchmen would have had him ask. But he did not, and it is significant that he did not. As we say earlier, because of the nature of the Kingdom he had come to establish, it is inconceivable that he would have concerned himself with issues such as these.

Yet in his parables and encounters with people he frequently talked of money; once again not in the context of some programme for economic reform but in terms of personal spiritual destiny. And it is in this context that a number of clear principles emerge from his teaching. The first is that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with wealth or particularly virtuous about poverty. The ownership of goods, houses and clothes is not a sin. Jesus had friends who owned such things and he himself stayed in their homes and went in their boats. In the various parables which deal with profit and investment such as those of the talents or the pounds, or those which deal with wages and employment, such as that of the steward, there is never a suggestion that work, business, banking or investment were of themselves wrong. In the parable of the rich fool, the fool is not criticised because his business was profitable or because of his desire to expand his capital assets: he was criticised because his life was centred on his own ego and because in consequence he was totally unconcerned about God.[20]

There are, however, two passages which might seem to contradict this principle. One is the story of Dives and Lazarus.[21] It might seem from this as if wealth or poverty is sufficient in itself to determine an individual's destiny. As is clear from the later part of the story, however, the rich man throughout his life, like the foolish farmer mentioned earlier, had lived a totally self-centred and godless life. His use of wealth and his neglect of Lazarus's needs were evidence of this fact. By contrast the implication to be drawn, even though it is not made explicit in the text is that Lazarus was a man of faith. The reason for this is that Dives, in pleading on behalf of his brothers, accepted the need for repentance as a condition for the position in which Lazarus found himself. To suggest that Lazarus was finally received by God simply because he was poor would be in violation of everything which Jesus ever taught about sin, repentance) new birth, redemption and entry into his Kingdom.

The other passage is Luke's record of the first of the beatitudes, 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God', which suggests that poverty is itself a virtue. The expression refers to those who are literally poor. The Greek word used means 'one who is so poor as to have to beg', that is the physically destitute. This passage might refer to those early Christians who became Christians from a background of real poverty. They experienced what it meant to become part of the Kingdom of God, and in a literal sense they were blessed. More likely, however, is that it refers to a poverty of spirit. It is quite common in the Old Testament to read of poverty as a shorthand for poverty of spirit. True poverty was humility before God. In this sense the passage means that the benefits of the Kingdom will only be received by those who come to God from a sense of need. Also significant is the fact that Matthew's account of the beatitudes read. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', so that no possible ambiguity arises over its meaning. Once again, to suggest that only those who are poor in an economic sense will inherit the Kingdom is artificially to isolate Luke's gospel and make a nonsense of most of the rest of Jesus's teaching.[22]

A second principle which may be drawn from the gospels is our responsibility for the use of our resources. We are trustees of what God has given us and the Bible makes it perfectly clear that he has given us everything we possess. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus assumes that all his

disciples will give charitably and his major concern is that it should be done in an unostentatious manner. The parable of the talents is frequently used to show Jesus's concern for proper stewardship. The primary intention of the parable of the talents, however, is not the stewardship of financial wealth but of spiritual wealth; it was meant as a warning to the religious leaders of Israel who had been endowed in a very special way with God's revelation. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to broaden the lesson of the parable so that its meaning extends to all the resources which we have been given. Similarly, in the parable of the unjust steward, the steward is commended for acting astutely and Jesus follows the parable by urging his disciples to use what he terms the 'mammon of unrighteous' in just as astute a manner in order to further the interests of his own Kingdom. Then he draws a parallel between the trusteeship of earthly wealth and the wealth of the Kingdom of God and reflects: 'If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches?'[23] Again in the poetic description of the final judgment in terms of sheep and goats, those who are favoured are commended for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, entertaining strangers in their homes, clothing the naked, visiting those who were sick and in prison: the implication of this being that those who are members of the Kingdom have a responsibility to live by its laws.[24]

A third principle which emerges from Jesus's teaching concerns the spiritual hazards which attach to wealth. The mere fact of owning wealth tends to produce a spirit of arrogance and self-reliance. Success tends to breed a philosophy of possessiveness: things become mine, my money, my property, my company, my workforce. Wealth gives people a false sense of security: it deadens the life of the spirit; it makes people unresponsive to the good news of the gospel. According to Jesus it leads to an indifference to the suffering and poverty of the world. In the story of Dives and Lazarus, Dives lived in extravagance; even though Lazarus would have enjoyed the scraps from his feasts, Dives himself was either totally unaware of Lazarus's needs or else totally unresponsive to them. It is impossible to serve God and Mammon: God demands from his followers a spirit of self-denial and sacrifice; Mammon encourages a spirit of self-indulgence and pride.

The Background to Jesus's Teaching

In trying to come to terms with Jesus's teaching on economic matters, it is important that they are set in the context of the Hebrew world of which he was part. Jesus was born in Palestine, a Jew; he was circumcised at birth and educated in the synagogue; from his own words we discover that he thought of the Old Testament as inspired and authoritative and the law as a divinely given rule of life, which has an enduring validity. In view of this we should not expect to find in Jesus's teaching an exhaustive treatment of those matters which are dealt with at length in the Old Testament, as this was something he assumed those whom he taught would know. In view of this it is important that we consider the teaching of the Old Testament on matters relating to wealth.

The Material World

The very first words of the Book of Genesis lay the foundation for Hebrew thought, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'. The material world of which we are part is a created order and Yahweh is its creator. He is not a part of his creation; he is not to be equated with trees and flowers and rocks; he is separate. But although separate from his creation, the universe is not like some grand machine which once set in motion runs on for ever. God is outside of his creation, but it still depends on his active, 'involvement for its continuation and survival. Yahweh is a God who cares for his creation. In the New Testament it becomes clear that the one who sustains the world is none other than the Incarnate Christ.[25] In the Epistle to the Hebrews we read that God 'has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.'[26] This is very different from

secular thought. The Hebrew world is quite different from the world of Aristotle or the world of the Enlightenment. For Aristotle the world is intricate and structured but above all rational. For the Enlightenment the world is like some complex machine created by a benevolent God. But in neither is there a God who cares about his creation and who is involved continuously in its well-being.

Another phrase which characterises the early pages of Genesis and the description of creation is 'And God saw that it was good'.[27] It appears no less than six times, being said on each of the days of creation. It is a theme which is taken up frequently in the Psalms.[28] The suggestion is that quite apart from its usefulness to human beings, the created world has a splendour and beauty in itself and as such deserves respect. But this is not the limit of goodness. There is in creation an abundance, a bounty: the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. Poverty, hunger and famine are not what God intended for this world.

This view of the created world is very different from a great deal of secular philosophy. In Plato's thought there was a strict dualism between the world perceived by the senses – the natural world, always changing and imperfect – and the world perceived by the mind – perfect and fixed, a world of beauty and the source of everything good. It was a short step from this to gnosticism, in which the physical world – and everything having to do with it – was the province of evil. In the Hebrew world there was a unity of the spiritual and the material. This world was God's world, physical and spiritual. Jesus had no trace of platonism or gnosticism in his thinking. God was involved in caring for his creation; the lilies were clothed, the ravens fed and the sparrows watched over. The Christian view of the physical world is important in thinking about the creation of wealth; for the physical world is literally the raw material to which value is added in order that wealth may be created. The two crucial facts about this world are that it is God's and that it is intrinsically good.

But man is part of the created world. Like other animals he too was made from the dust of the earth. 'Dust to dust and ashes to ashes' is true of men and dogs and trees: all are dependent for life on the Creator. But man is also distinct in the whole of creation. We are told that he and he alone is created in the image of God. Uniquely he has the capacity to think and speak, to decide right from wrong, to develop technology and culture; above all to exercise control over the created world. Both man and the animal kingdom receive the commands 'Be fruitful and multiply', but it is only to man that the two special commands to subdue the earth and rule over it are given, and they are closely related to his being created in the image of God.[29]

The Hebrew words for subdue *(kabash)* and rule *(radah)* are strong words. *Kabash* means to stamp on or bring into subjection. *Radah,* which is frequently expressed as dominion, means to trample on as in the treading of grapes or in the expression to prevail against. The choice of these words is important for they leave us in no doubt that man is given authority to control the whole of the created world. The form which this control should take is developed later when God instructs Adam in the garden of Eden 'to till it and keep it'.[30] The emphasis here is not on harnessing and controlling the natural world but on preserving and caring for it. The creation mandate is to be no excuse for an ecological crisis.

The tasks which man is given, and which we have brought together through the words 'subdue', 'rule', 'till', 'keep', are the starting point for a Christian view of work. Man was not created to live in a vacuum; neither was he created for a life of complete leisure, although creation recognises explicitly the need for rest. The fact that man has a desire as well as a need to work results from his being created in the image of God. It is no accident that on many occasions the Bible speaks of God as working, as for example in the six days of creation. This view of work was one which was shared by Jesus. Before his particular three-year period of ministry he himself worked as a carpenter. Frequently in his teaching he referred to

human work: the shepherd, the farmer, the doctor, the sower, the servant, the manager, the fisherman, the labourer. As he faced the cross he referred to the particular 'work' which remained to be done. Similarly, the apostle Paul was a tentmaker and in certain of his letters he makes it very clear that he was proud of the fact that he was financially independent of the local congregation. In writing to the Church at Thessalonica he mentions those who are 'living in idleness',[31] not doing any work and repeats in writing the verbal command which he gave when he visited them: 'If any one will not work, let him not eat'.[32]

It is wrong therefore to think of work as simply being the result of the fall. Nevertheless the fall is important. Again the early pages of Genesis have something to say to us: they teach unequivocally that God passed judgment through the fall in a way which transformed work into toil. All human work – whether physical or mental, skilled or unskilled, creative or routine – takes place in a situation of tension and frustration and involves an element of drudgery regardless of whether it is in an office, a factory, a construction site or the home. But it still remains that it was for work and not for leisure that God created us, for no other reason than that we were thereby to share with him one of his own activities.

The basis of the Christian view of work is the concept of man having been delegated the authority to manage or have dominion over the physical world. This is a privilege because it puts man at the head of the created world. But it also .carries a responsibility. Man is in consequence accountable to his Creator for his use of God's resources.

When we put together the Christian views of the physical world and of work, they have major implications for economic life. Man has been created with an urge to control and harness the resources of nature in the interests of the common good, but he is subject to his accountability to God as trustee to preserve and care for it. This process is precisely what an economist would refer to as a responsible form of wealth creation. Anything which transforms the material world so that it can be of greater use to fellow human beings is an act of wealth creation. It may be bringing waste land into cultivation, improving the productivity of existing farmland, extracting minerals and using them in some manufacturing process, or using the products of manufacturing to provide services to other people. In all cases the output at the end of the day is of more value than the sum of the inputs were at the beginning. A businessman concerned with construction, manufacturing, agriculture, extraction or services is involved therefore in the complex task of fulfilling the creation mandate. Of course such a process may be open to abuse: monopoly, corruption, fraud, exploitation and pollution. But we should not judge the legitimacy of the process by its abuse, in the same way that we should not condemn eating because of gluttony, sex because of perversion, worship because of idolatry, or property because of covetousness. At heart the process of wealth creation stems from a fundamental human drive, the result of man being created in the image of God.

Trinity

One of the most mysterious aspects of the Christian faith is the question – Who is God? Yet it turns out that the biblical answer to this question, with its emphasis on Theism rather than Deism and on Trinitarianism rather than Unitarianism, has profound implications for economic life. Already we have noticed in passing that the God whom the Christian worships is a personal God. He has a mind, a will and an existence of his own. He is variously described throughout the Old and New Testaments in terms which we readily understand: he protects, he comforts, he forgives, he warns, he judges, he rescues, he loves. He is not some mysterious supernatural influence or some impersonal Supreme Being. He is God the Father, Christ the Incarnate Son and the living Holy Spirit. As a result, he is very different from the God of Deism. The Deist answer to the question – Who is God? – was in terms of a creator, an architect

of the universe, a source of power. The Deist looked to find God in the laws of nature. The God of Deism was essentially an absentee landlord: his power, reason and will were to be found in the universe but he was not a God concerned and involved with his people in a personal way. (As we shall see later, this is critical to understanding the thoughts of Adam Smith.)

The fact that the God of the Christian revelation is a personal God has profound implications for economic life because economic life has a personal dimension as well. The act of employment is not just a legal transaction or some input into a production process; it becomes a personal relationship between two human beings and the work situation becomes a network of such relationships. The act of selling is not just finding a point on a demand curve but a transaction between two people with a God-given sense of absolute standards. The 'market' is not just some construct devised to solve the problem of price determination but a series of individual exchanges between people in which mutual trust is extended and accepted. The profit which is earned on a transaction is paid for and quoted by people with a sense of fairness and equity.

The fact that economic life has this personal dimension has one very important implication. It is impossible for economic life to be personal without it at the same time being moral. If man is created in the image of God then morality is as certain a facet of the personhood of man as it is of God. It is interesting to notice how this method differs from that of economic science. Economics starts with *homo oeconomicus*, economic man or – as some economists have baptised him – rational evaluative, maximising man (REMM). It would be wrong to say that economic man has no personality. He has, but it is the personality of a soulless computer, always searching, always choosing and always groping for a least cost solution. To all intents and purposes economic man is impersonal. But if we start with an impersonal economic man, we construct an impersonal economic system; and in an impersonal economic system the concerns of the human person become lost. Because morality is part of personality, an impersonal economic system becomes an amoral system as well. Hence the workings of the economic system are held as 'value free', beyond the domain of the moral and immoral, the fair and unfair, and of right and wrong. In fact, for economic man the choice between right and wrong is no different from the choice between two brands of soap powders. The rejection of Theism leads inevitably to a meaningless world.

But the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is more than a belief in a personal God who has revealed himself in a very special way. It is also the mystery of the Three in One, one living and true God. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons of one substance, power and eternity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Among world religions, the Trinity is unique to Christianity. It affirms that before time there was plurality of persons in the Godhead. God was not alone. He was not some solitary figure, unable to communicate, for whom love was a meaningless idea. The Trinity was a community, a fellowship. The persons of the Trinity related to each other and always have done. This has two important implications. It suggests that the idea of community is crucial to the life of society. Any view of society which analyses behaviour as if the individual were some form of automaton is deficient because it falls to capture the importance of relationships. We were not created to live as Crusoe-like figures. As well as this, there is also the relationship which the Trinity expresses between the one and the many, unity and diversity. In the Trinity the one God does not take precedence over the many persons, neither do the many have priority over the One. When in religion the One is given preference, as in Islam, the consequence has been a form of totalitarian state which attempts to discern the will of Allah. When the many are given priority the result is anarchy. But the tension is one which extends to economic philosophy. Fascism and Marxism are both an attempt to emphasise the one to the exclusion of the many and to find salvation in economic terms through the state. Libertarianism is an attempt to emphasise the many at the expense of the One and is a prescription not just for *laissez faire* but also for

anarchy. The relevance of the Trinity is to emphasise both the individual and the state, as well as a large variety of mediating institutions which form the basis of a pluralist society. As far as economic life is concerned these include corporations, partnerships, trade unions, professional associations, committees concerned with setting standards, and so on.

Property

The nature of property rights was a subject dealt with at length in the Mosaic law. The eighth commandment 'Thou shalt not steal' – guaranteed the right to individual ownership. The penalty for sheep-stealing was multiple restoration and that for stealing a man was death.[33] In addition, there were many laws which dealt with reallocation of titles to land ranging from the arrangements for the Year of Jubilee to the sabbatical laws and even including restrictions on the use of the capital markets.[34]

The starting point for the Pentateuch on this subject was that all property was owned by God. 'The earth is the LORD's' formed the basis of Hebrew thinking. The Jews were constantly reminded of the fact that it was God who had given them the Promised Land. Ultimate ownership rested with God; nevertheless he delegated dominion over the land to families.[35] As a result private property is the norm for ownership in the Old Testament. The Mosaic law guaranteed the rights of individuals to the ownership of property which included the right to buy and sell.[36] There was never a suggestion that the state or the community should be the owner, because that would in some sense be more just or equitable. In a society which was avowedly theocratic this may seem a little surprising. If there was ever a situation in which one might imagine some form of common ownership – comparable to Nyerere's Ujaama policy in Tanzania – it would have been when the Jews entered the Promised Land. Yet each family received a parcel of land and their rights to it were absolute. This meant that in terms of the Mosaic law they had total and unconditional use of their property. That is the meaning of ownership. This might seem surprising in view of what was said earlier about the ultimate ownership of the land being God's. But it is not in any sense a violation of that fact. The fact that all land was held in trust from God meant that each family had a trusteeship responsibility in the sight of God. They were the stewards of what they owned. That did not undermine the total and absolute rights at law which each family had with respect to their property. In fact one can go further: unless each family had been given absolute rights of ownership it is difficult to imagine how they would have been able to exercise their trusteeship responsibilities. If the land had been communally owned and its use controlled by, let us say, the priests, this would have made redundant the idea that each family had trusteeship responsibility.

While property rights were absolute, there were nevertheless within Pentateuchal society certain constraints built into the law to prevent ownership falling into the hands of a few large families. Every sabbatical year the land was to lie fallow, its harvest was for the poor and in addition debts were cancelled. Every fiftieth year, the Year of Jubilee, all debts were cancelled and land was to return to its original owners, if ownership had changed.[37] The reason given for this redistribution is that while the people were tenants, the true owner was Yahweh. 'The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.'[38] Usury, the lending of money for interest, was prohibited between fellow Jews.[39] The major purpose of these laws was to put a sharp brake on the ownership of land being concentrated in a small number of families – to prevent a cycle of deprivation developing where those in difficult circumstances sold their land, increased their debt and finally found themselves on a treadmill: a situation little better than slavery. Put more positively, each family had the opportunity of a second chance.

These laws were intended to have far-reaching consequences. If they had been applied it would have been impossible for 'labour' to be in conflict with 'capital'. The problem to which Marx addressed himself arose in a situation where capital was owned by a few, but the majority were without access to

that capital, other than by being hired on the labour market. This was precisely the situation which the property laws of the Pentateuch were designed to prevent.

This approach to property was never stated explicitly by Jesus; but it was assumed throughout his teaching. In the parables he told which dealt with property, the right to ownership was not only never questioned, but the lessons which he drew depended on this very fact. The fact that ownership is absolute comes out very clearly in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.[40] A farmer hires labourers at various times of the day including one at the eleventh hour, telling him that he will pay them a fair wage but without mentioning a specific amount. At the end of the day each is given the same wage. Those who worked longest complained. His reply is significant: 'Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge me my generosity?' The implication is that ownership involves total discretion. This reaches to the very heart of Jesus's teaching. He was not concerned to coerce individuals into income and wealth redistribution; he respected the freedom which private property implied but wanted to see it used for the interests of others.

The view of property which emerges from the Pentateuch has one very important implication. The freedom and ability to exchange rights to private property constitutes the definition of a free market. A free market is nothing more than an opportunity for property owners to exchange their titles to ownership. Any economic system therefore which involves private property rights also involves to a greater or lesser degree reasonably free markets. From this it follows that markets are likely to be features of all societies, ancient and modern, which allow some degree of economic freedom.

Justice

Another theme which emerges from the Old Testament and which would have formed a background to Jesus's teaching was that of justice. The God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, was a God who executed justice. 'For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.'[41] The Torah contained many laws which were specifically concerned with justice, quite apart from the Decalogue itself. Some we have already touched on under the subject of property: the laws relating to the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee. If a family had been reduced to poverty and forced to till the land, they could purchase it back at any time and not have to wait till the Year of Jubilee. The gleaning laws were an attempt to ensure that the poor and disadvantaged had access to food. The system of tithes was a form of income tax to support the Jewish priests and effect a redistribution to the poor. Usury was prohibited to prevent the growth of inequality and the phenomenon of permanent deprivation. If loans were made to fellow Jews, collateral could not be demanded. If poverty forced some families into serving others they were not to be treated as slaves but as hired servants. In the Year of Jubilee they were to be set free. If they did become slaves they were to be freed every Sabbath Year with a liberal provision from the slave-owner on their being freed.[42] The laws were meant to be a framework within which economic justice could be established. They were an attempt to ensure that there was never permanent poverty, exploitation or gross inequality within the tribes of Israel.

After the Jews had settled in Canaan around 1200 BC, however, it was not long before problems began to emerge and the historical books record the emergence of serious economic problems. The basic forms of injustice recorded are the exploitation of the disadvantaged, fraud, a corrupt legal system, bribery and dishonesty – many of them linked to violence. It is this which God is against because it is a violation of the Torah and the Torah is the decree of God himself. The most outspoken critics of the injustice which developed, however, were the prophets. The first of these, around 800 BC, was Amos who criticised in

no uncertain terms the exploitation of the needy by the wealthy, dishonest trading practices, and the opposition of the rulers to any sense of justice. Isaiah, who came soon after, attacked the accumulation of property – both farmland and houses – by individuals, and also the exploitation of the poor and needy by the wealthy.[43]

Although the prophets exposed the social malaise of their societies, the attack on injustice is never conducted in purely socio-economic terms. The prophets indict the rich for exploiting the poor. Yet they never suggest that the remedy is therefore an economic redistribution conducted in some sort of spiritual vacuum. They invariably pinpoint the root cause of the trouble as spiritual: the nation has departed from God and economic injustice is one result. The priority therefore is not socio-economic reform but spiritual repentance. In this they showed great insight. Massive redistribution of wealth and complex laws to coerce the rich to divest their properties would be of no avail whatever if there were not a simultaneous commitment on the part of those involved to change their values and behaviour. It was this that the prophets saw as the basis for a just society.

Jesus and the Market Place

Having examined the teaching of Jesus himself and the background to his teaching in the Old Testament, we are now in a better position to deal with the problems raised at the beginning of this chapter, namely the apparent inconsistency between the Christian faith and the market economy.

To start with, there is the legitimacy of economic life itself which is not just an issue for the market economy but for any economic system. We have already noticed our Lord's strictures on the wealthy. In the context of his command to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, concerns such as responsibility at work, choice in consumption or the value of investment seem trivial if not wicked. In facing this problem we have to start at the beginning, and in the context of Genesis the fundamental affirmation which any Christian must make is that the world in which we live is God's world. He created it and he created us. We bear an integral relationship to the material world and it is because of this that the business of creating and using wealth is a natural activity for mankind. Life itself demands that we be continually involved in the process of wealth creation. The basic necessities for living are not provided like manna; the land has to be cultivated, the sea has to be harvested, minerals have to be extracted, the city has to be supplied with services. God created us with the capacity and the desire to do all these things. Life itself, therefore, demands that we use what God has given us to provide the necessities.

But God intended far more than that. We were not created to live our lives in hunger or on the breadline, in a state of poverty using only the barest minimum. God intended us to enjoy his world. The land which he promised Israel was to be flowing with milk and honey. No Christian should feel a sense of guilt from living in a decent house, driving a solid car, wearing a proper suit of clothes or eating a good meal. If we take seriously the fact that this world is God's world, then the business of creating wealth has a Christian foundation.

But to allow wealth creation legitimacy is not to endow it with autonomy. To allow economic life independence and place no bounds on wealth creation would be to justify a philosophy of materialism. For the world which God created is a spiritual world as well as a material world. God is a spirit, and being created in his image we are possessed of spirit as well. Being made, therefore, from the dust of the earth but endowed with spirit, we are to pursue our lives in a material world, yet in the context of a spiritual order. We have a choice: either we seek God and live by the laws of his Kingdom as Jesus taught in the beatitudes or else we worship money and live for consumption and the creation of a

personal fortune. The injunction to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness is to, choose the former not the latter. But this is not the same a s saying that the life of the spirit is superior to the life of the material world or that the life of the spirit is good while the concerns of the material world are bad. It is rather to expose priorities. The call to seek first the Kingdom of God is not a call to the life of the monastery or to a narrow-minded form of personal piety which rejects the material world. We are to seek God and live by the laws of his Kingdom within the material world which he himself has created and of which we are part. The challenge for the Christian then is not to reject the material world and the creation of wealth in favour of some higher spiritual priority but to serve others through the process of wealth creation in the perspective of serving God.[44]

A second major issue has to do with the relationship between the Kingdom of God as Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated it and the kind of economic system which, it is claimed, follows from it. Numerous writers have argued that the Kingdom of God is far closer to a socialist organisation of economic life than the institutions of a market economy. I believe, however, that this is a view which needs to be challenged. The Kingdom of God which Jesus inaugurated was, as we have seen, a Kingdom whose roots were supernatural, whose nature was spiritual and which for those very reasons was in contrast to the kingdoms of this world. When asked by the Pharisees when his Kingdom would appear, Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed', i.e., with spectacular events such as rebellion, revolution or war, 'nor will they say, "Lo, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'[45] Because the Kingdom of God depends for its very existence on an inward supernatural power, it is impossible to translate it into contemporary social, political and economic institutions. It is made up of new people with new motives and is brought about by the mysterious influence of the Holy Spirit. Even when we take the present manifestation of the Kingdom – namely those who have heard the good news and found for themselves reconciliation and redemption and a new lifestyle in a new community, the Christian Church – we find that the source of its life and the rules by which it lives depend crucially on the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It was because this community was so different from that of a fallen world that St Augustine developed the concept of the two cities – the Civitas Dei and the Civitas Terrara.[46] To attempt to translate the principles of the one in terms of institutions for the other is to court disaster. Even if we were to construct an ideal economic system which followed precisely certain theologians' understanding of the New Testament concept of the Kingdom of God, the attempt to legislate these ideas into practice immediately comes up against the fact that the real world in which we live is a fallen world and not a community of saints. Not only is it impossible to deduce socialism from the Kingdom of God: it is impossible to deduce any economic system. In arguing that a socialist economic system is not the logical outgrowth of the Kingdom, I am not for one moment suggesting that the market economy or democratic capitalism or some such concept follows logically either. The point about the Kingdom is that by design it is God's and not ours.

If we are to have institutions in our society which can cope with the reality of a fallen world then we must look for something much more robust than the spontaneous sharing of the early Church. In terms of social ethics, social structures and economic justice, it is very difficult to derive specific principles from either the gospels or the early Church. To the extent that the Judaeo-Christian religion deals with these matters (and they are never treated exhaustively) such principles are surely to be found in the Pentateuch. The ones which emerge there – private property rather than social ownership, each family having continued access to a permanent stake in economic life, some form of anti-poverty programme – seem more compatible with the modern concept of a social market economy than with some variant of Marxism. There is nothing to suggest in the whole of Scripture that the basic institutions of capitalism are incompatible with a Judaeo-Christian world-view. Quite the opposite. The plurality of institutions

and the respect for the human person which underlie Western economic institutions are compatible with a Christian world-view.

NOTES

All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

1. Luke 18:24.
2. Matthew 6:19.
3. Luke 6:20.
4. Luke 6:24.
5. Luke 12:15.
6. Matthew 6:24.
7. Matthew 19:24.
8. Luke 18:22.
9. Luke 5:11.
10. Luke 6:30.
11. Luke 14:33.
12. 2 Corinthians 8:9.
13. Conrad Boema, *Rich Man, Poor Man and the Bible,* SCM, London, 1979, p. 50.
14. Parable of the talents – Matthew 25:14-30. Parable of the pounds – Luke 19:11-27. Parable of the unjust steward – Luke 16:1-13.
15. Provision for parents – Matthew 15:3-9. Charitable giving – Matthew 6:2-4.
16. Dinner invitations – Luke 11:37; Luke 14:1; Luke 5:29. Use of friends' resources – Luke 8:3; Mark 1:29-3 1; Mark 3:9. Zacchaeus – Luke 19:1-10.
17. Matthew 6:33 (King James Version).
18. E. P. Scott, *Ethical Teaching of Jesus,* Macmillan, New York, 1924, quoted in R. E. 0. White, *Biblical Ethics,* The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1979, p. 79.
19. Luke 4: 18-19.
20. Luke 12:17-21.
21. 2 1. Luke 16:19-31.
22. Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3.
23. Luke 16:11.
24. Matthew 25:31-46.
25. Colossians 1:15-17.
26. Hebrews 1:2-3.
27. Genesis 1:12.
28. Psalms 19, 33, 104, 148, for example.
29. Genesis 1:28.
30. Genesis 2:15.
31. Acts 18:1-4; 1 Corinthians 9:6-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9.
32. 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.
33. Exodus 22:1 and 21:16.
34. Re-allocation of titles – Leviticus 25:1-7, 8-34 and 42-55. Restrictions on capital markets – Leviticus 25:35-8 and Deuteronomy 23:19-20.
35. The Promised Land was first divided into territories on a tribe-by-tribe basis, then into towns and villages (with their surrounding lands) on a clan-by-clan basis, and finally into fields and vineyards (with houses) on a family-by-family basis. The concept of family property occurs several times in Leviticus 25 and 27,

and again forms the basis of the charge against Ahab when he sought to dispossess Naboth of his inheritance (I Kings 21).

36. Leviticus 25:14-17 and 25-34.
37. Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15:1-11.
38. Leviticus 25:23 (New International Version).
39. Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Leviticus 25:35-8.
40. Matthew 20:4-15.
41. Deuteronomy 10:17-18.
42. Sabbath Year and Year of Jubilee – Leviticus 25. Gleaning laws – Leviticus 19:9-10; Leviticus 23:22. Tithes Deuteronomy 14:22-9. Prohibition of usury – Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Leviticus 25:35-8. Collateral not to be demanded – Exodus 22:26-7; Deuteronomy 24:10-13. Treatment of slaves – Deuteronomy 15:12-17.
43. Amos 2:6-9; Amos 5:7-12; Amos 8:4-6; Isaiah 5:7-23.
44. In setting out the challenge of the divine mandate to exercise dominion over the physical world and to be involved in the process of wealth creation, it is also necessary to remember that 'even in the Garden of Eden, the cultural mandate was not man's noblest calling. Adam was called to walk and talk with the living God. Intimate communion with the most high God is itself the deepest want of the human heart and the highest dignity of human existence.' (Walter J. Chantry, *God's Righteous Kingdom,* Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1 980 p. 23.)
45. Luke 17:20-1.
46. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Everyman's Library, Dent/Dutton, London and New York, 1945.