

Kingdom Perspectives on Economics: Utopian idealism or a visionary call to build a better world?

For the October 2000 CBFA conference

Lisa Klein Surdyk, Ph.D.*
Associate Professor of Economics
Seattle Pacific University
Seattle, WA 98119
Phone: 206-281-2709
E-mail: lsurdyk@spu.edu

Abstract: I contrast the basic postulates in economics of **scarcity**, **unlimited needs and wants** and **self-interested** behavior with biblical themes of **abundance**, **limits** and **stewardship**. Sabbath and jubilee laws reveal much about how God intends for his people to live in economic systems, so I describe these then discuss some possible contemporary applications, such as debt relief, land reform, sharing resources with the vulnerable poor, environmental stewardship and workplace reforms. Sabbath and jubilee involve exercising restraint, trusting in God's abundant provision for meeting people's needs, showing mercy to others and assuring that households have access to a productive base to be able to live a dignified life in society. As God's stewards, we acknowledge God as the creator and owner of all resources, are grateful for and generous with God's good gifts, and act as co-creators and caretakers in the world, sharing God's concern for the dignity and well-being of all persons and all of creation.

"This is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'" (Matthew 6:9-13)

When we accept Jesus as our Lord and our Savior we become citizens of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not OF this world, while we still live IN this world. Jesus pointed the way to the Kingdom, and we experience it when we hear and do what Jesus says and allow God's spirit to transform us into the image of Christ. As we mature in our faith we realize how different the values and priorities of "the world" are from God's will and we seek, with God's help, to carry out God's will on earth as it is in heaven. This has important implications for all aspects of life, including economic decision-making, a significant part of our lives and the focus of this paper.

The basic postulate in economics is that people's decisions in large part are a consequence of **scarcity** of goods and services. Scarcity, in turn, depends upon the postulate that people prefer more goods to less or that **humans have unlimited needs and wants for material things**. Otherwise goods, though limited in supply, would not necessarily be scarce. Economic systems, then, are a response of

* The author thanks Anthony Avallone, a fellow CBFA member, for the inspiration and encouragement to pursue this topic, for suggesting articles to read, and participating in ongoing discussions on the topic. Thanks are due also to an anonymous referee from the CBFA membership and to Dennis Proffitt and Beth Oppenlander for valuable

humans to overcome relative scarcities and to try to regulate exchange activities for their own benefit or **self-interest**. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God created the earth to provide **enough** resources to meet humans' needs and wants, that material needs and wants are **limited**, and that people of God, while rightly concerned about their own well-being, are to be **other-interested**; to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Further, all resources ultimately belong to God and are entrusted to our care for our own benefit as well as the benefit of others and all of creation. In this paper I explore the contrasts between the basic postulates in economics and biblical principles and discuss some possible applications in today's economy. Interestingly, biblical sabbath and jubilee provisions reveal much about how God intends for people to operate in economic systems. They involve exercising restraint, trusting in God's abundant provision for meeting people's needs, pursuing justice, showing mercy, and assuring that households have access to a productive base. Our world seems to be crying out for alternative approaches to economic problems and challenges, such as overwork, materialism, poverty and injustice. And since God reveals to us a better way, we can be salt and light in our world by teaching and modeling biblical principles and applying them creatively in many settings. To do so we need to understand our economic systems, acknowledge realities and accept genuine limits, but we also can question key assumptions in light of biblical principles. This paper is a work in progress and I welcome constructive feedback. I hope readers will find the content helpful as they integrate biblical principles with business issues and try to impact our world in the name of Jesus Christ.

What do we really want?

The notion of **unlimited human needs and wants** for material things runs contrary to a biblical worldview, I believe. Certainly, human needs and wants are ongoing, but what we need in unlimited amounts are not material things, but things of God. We are fundamentally incomplete and have a figurative hole, but it is a God-shaped hole, not a Mercedes-shaped one. (No offense to Mercedes owners.) I believe what drives people, Christian or not, more than the desire for material things or financial success is the fulfillment they experience in the striving. It is the work itself, the challenges, and the connections with others that give people a sense of fulfillment. This was and is God's intent for

comments on earlier drafts. Finally, the author thanks her students at SPU during the winter and spring quarters 2000 for ideas and challenging questions pertaining to biblical principles and their applications.

humans, so perhaps we can do better in getting the word out about it! Kim Polese, a successful entrepreneur from Silicon Valley, had this to say on the subject:

I think there will be a backlash against all the greed. I think people are going to get just fed up and realize it is not fulfilling. . . . I have so many friends who started companies who are worth \$50 million and more, and they are depressed. They think that they've made it, and they take six months off and they realize they're more depressed than ever. Because this wasn't really what ultimately it turned out that life was all about. . . . I see unhappy billionaires . . . coming back again and again to start another company. And what really attracts them is connecting with other people. It's the team. It's creating something. It's having a mission. That's what turns people on. That's what life is about (Petzinger).

The erroneous perception that material needs and wants are unlimited can create an imperative for unlimited economic growth, leading, some would argue, to insurmountable social and ecological problems. It also can lead to unwarranted fears of scarcity, discussed next, and to systems of distribution so unequal as to guarantee great disparities of wealth and power.

Scarcity vs. Abundance

“Scarcity” implies that available resources are insufficient to satisfy all desired uses thereof. While certainly to some extent scarcity is an objective problem in our world, and is a primary reason humans have developed public institutions and economic systems, much of the scarcity we perceive may instead be subjective. If so, then scarcity is a choice rather than a given. The emphasis on scarcity is simply unsupportable if we believe God’s provision is adequate for all. When I find myself focusing on scarcity, I realize it is because I am falling prey to fear and not fully trusting in God’s abundance.

The key to survival in any profession is to provide a good or service that people cannot or will not produce for themselves. The greater the degree of scarcity (real or perceived), the higher the price will be and the higher potential profits will be. Now, certainly, profits are important as they enhance the long-term viability of businesses and expand job opportunities, but not all products or services are beneficial and a goal of ever-higher profits can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as the imperative of higher and higher levels of consumption. Jewish scholar Tsvi Blanchard claims that “anxieties fuel much of our consumption,” and to successfully exploit these anxieties advertisers must make us believe their “theological dogma.” As Blanchard put it: “We are flawed, broken and missing something important, but we can be made whole if only we buy something, namely, the product they are advertising” (97). As a Christian consumer or producer I need to be careful not to fall prey to these lies and perpetuate them but

instead to think critically about the true value of what I may be promoting or buying, knowing that nothing people buy can meet their inmost needs.

According to Genesis 1 and 2, God created a world overflowing with abundance where humans' greatest challenge was managing the wild productivity of the world. After the "fall", scarcity did come into being where work now involves sweat and toil and relationships between humans and God are broken, and ever since, the world has been affected by untamed evil and disregard for God. However, God's intent for the world has never changed. God created the world to produce enough to sustain human life and it is still capable of doing so. Our measure of economic "success" should go beyond per capita GNP. Rather, it should be measured person-by-person. And while greater levels of production and profitability are necessary for helping meet people's needs, they are not sufficient without appropriate distribution of resources.

As with many aspects of our faith, we experience a paradox: we live in a world of limited resources yet we believe that God created the world to provide enough resources for our needs. We acknowledge the world's reality, but we have a more complete view of reality if we consider God's perspective. The world tells us to trust in material abundance; the Bible tells us to trust in God. The business world stresses that scarcity is necessary to drive up prices and profits; abundance mentality says: grow enough and distribute appropriately to all. The world teaches us to fear material scarcity and believe we can never have "enough;" the Bible teaches us to fear God and pursue righteousness and that will be enough. It's all about balance and what truly constitutes **enough**. (See, e.g., Proverbs 23:4-5 and Proverbs 30:7-9). Parker Palmer aptly explains the paradox this way:

The Gospel sees abundance where the world sees scarcity, and scarcity where the world sees abundance. . . . In gathering material abundance we will find spiritual scarcity, while in sharing material scarcity with the larger community we discover spiritual abundance (92).

He expresses great concern that fears of scarcity cause us to become more and more self-interested and less and less other-interested. He notes the irony that the more we fear scarcity the more we hoard goods, creating more scarcity. Even with modest scarcity in our society, we tend to ignore many critical issues such as high infant mortality rates, high inner-city poverty and unemployment rates. How would we behave, Palmer asks, if genuine scarcity were to occur? (94) He points out a harsh reality about affluent Americans who are obsessed with personal gain:

In giving our self-interest priority, in declaring our independence from the common life, we become not strong but weak and vulnerable. We know that we have set ourselves apart, that we are pulling for no one and no one is pulling for us—and we fear the day when we cannot pull for ourselves. So, private life in acquisitive society is shot-through with scarcity. We are scarce in support, scarce in the satisfaction that cooperation and mutual aid can bring—but abundant in the fear that comes as we realize how alone we are (102).

By contrast, he points out that “to belong to a community that cares, a public that knows how to distribute resources with equity—that is to know real abundance” (102).

Perhaps if we focus on abundance rather than scarcity, we can more readily share our resources and/or devise solutions to cultivation or distribution problems in the face of homelessness, hunger and other problems. I’m emphasizing here the difference between acknowledging realistic limits and perceived scarcity. Possibly it’s simply semantics, but more directly it is an issue of perspective. What if we obsess less about what we lack, are more grateful for the “plenty” we do have, and consider the possibility that resources may be more abundant than we think? Perhaps then our prayers that God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” actually envisioning heaven on earth, will help us not only discern God’s will more clearly but also bring to mind sources we haven’t even considered. God certainly can and does provide resources in miraculous ways and all we need do is ask and then be grateful for God’s abundant provision.

We who are “rich” by worldly standards need not be embarrassed by or feel guilty about our wealth, necessarily. (Guilt can be a useful prompt toward self-examination, though.) Nor is it necessary for us to become impoverished so that others will have more resources. That mindset also runs counter to the abundance doctrine. Inequalities will inevitably arise in “fallen” society, and a Judeo-Christian worldview acknowledges this and does not stipulate that all persons necessarily have an equal amount of resources. However, the bible does indicate God’s desire that all people have access to sufficient resources to live an abundant life, so God’s people are instructed, in part through sabbath and jubilee provisions, discussed below, to dismantle the fundamental patterns and structures of stratified wealth and power so that there is “enough for everyone.” It’s part of our role as God’s stewards.

Stewardship vs. Self-Interest

The Greek word for economic, *oikonomia*, is the same word used in the New Testament for *stewardship*, and it means proper management of the household. The term is no longer discussed in secular economic settings, but it is important for Christians to keep the terms linked since stewardship is

such a predominant theme in scripture. God is the creator of all, and creatorship implies ownership. For instance, Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Further, Genesis 1:26 and 28 indicate that humans were put on earth, in part, to cultivate it, to make it more productive, to help creation go on creating. So as stewards, not proprietors, managing another's property, we help carry out God's intent that the earth's resources benefit everyone. As Ron Sider notes, "property owners are not free to seek their own profit without regard for the needs of their neighbors" (87). Blanchard asserts that stewardship is the way of "sacred consumption" and suggests we consume our world with profound gratitude and deep awareness of its holiness (102). That way, he says, we will more fully acknowledge the real costs to others of our consumption. It requires that we slow down, live in the moment, and think more deliberately about what we have, what we are doing and why we make the choices that we do. Observing the Sabbath is one important way to do these things.

Sabbath and Jubilee Principles from the Old Testament

The Sabbath day became for the Israelites a weekly reminder of trusting in God's abundant provision, of self-restraint, and the goal of enough for everyone. In observing sabbath, God's people say "enough for now" and have faith that the world will continue to operate for a day without human labor.

Observing Sabbath honors the holiness of God and God's command:

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

This, the longest and most detailed of the Ten Commandments, is linked to God's choice to rest on the seventh day when the work of creation was done (see Genesis 2:2-3 and Exodus 31:16-17), and make the day holy. In turn, God's people and all in their household are to imitate God and rest one day in seven and remember God's merciful deliverance. Truly sabbath rest was then, and is now, God's gift to mankind. It provides time to commune with God and it serves, as Jan Wood says, as a "hedge against endless toil that kills body and spirit" (50).

The manna story in Exodus 16 describes the Israelites' lessons about keeping sabbath and trusting in God's faithfulness. In the hostile wilderness, God provided enough resources for human life to survive and thrive. Each person gathered food according to ability and each miraculously received according to need each day. There was no shortage or surplus and the manna could not be hoarded. Hoarding was a sign of distrust of God. Then, on the sixth day of each week, God provided enough manna to last two days, so the people did not need to worry about the next day's provision. This was the gift of the Sabbath. After 40 years, the patterns of working six days and resting one day and trusting in God were well established.

Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 discuss Sabbath Year provisions for letting the land rest and for debt forgiveness. They taught Israel about restraint and its dependence upon the land as a gift to share equitably, not as a possession to exploit. Like the land, the vulnerable were not to be treated as commodities to be exploited without limits. These themes are direct applications of *stewardship*. As with Sabbath day observance, Sabbath year observance would disrupt human attempts to "control" nature and "maximize" the forces of production. Similarly, Leviticus 23:22 indicates the importance of setting aside gleanings from each harvest for the poor and the alien. Lowery explains that households in ancient Israel were honor bound to help the vulnerable, to mitigate their shame, and help them restore family honor (12). He explains that when agricultural production was not sufficient to meet families' tax obligations, they borrowed money from wealthier families that were morally obligated to lend to neighbors in need. It was considered immoral to profit from another's misfortune, so charging interest on these *subsistence* loans was forbidden. Sometimes one loan led to another, people lost their collateral, their land, and at worst became debt slaves. The rich got richer while the poor got poorer (Lowery 14). Further, permanent enslavement was prohibited because God had freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Thus, as God showed mercy and generosity toward enslaved Israel, the Israelite creditor was to show mercy and generosity toward the Hebrew debtors and slaves (Lowery 34). Forgiving debts and releasing slaves would restore former slaves and debtors to their previous place in society, and allow them to celebrate sabbath, become more involved with their extended families and care for the needy. Fairness, equity and care for the suffering were signs of Yahweh's sovereign authority, whereas injustice and lack of compassion were acts of rebellion and public affronts to God's sovereignty. As Proverbs 14:31 says: "He

who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” The prophets were quick to criticize those who took advantage of the poor even in observance of the Sabbath (Amos 8:5, e.g.). Indeed, Isaiah 1:10-23 indicates God’s displeasure with Israel’s observance of sabbath and other rituals when at the same time their rulers “do not defend the cause of the fatherless” and “the widow’s case does not come before them” (v. 23). Most telling of all, says Ched Myers in “Jesus’ New Economy of Grace,” is the tradition that attributed the downfall of Jerusalem to the people’s failure to keep sabbath: “God took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped the sword...to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years” (2 Chronicles 36:20-21; See Leviticus 26:34-35).

The Jubilee Year, described in Leviticus 25:8-13, is the Sabbaths’ sabbath and was to be celebrated every 50 years. In that year, debts to community members were to be cancelled, slaves were to be freed, and each household was to return to its family property. In that day, family-owned property would be sold only in the event of financial need, so the Jubilee land redistribution would assure the long-term survival of households, preserve ancestral property, and serve as a check on the concentration of wealth in the hands of a rich few. It emphasized the need for each household to maintain and control a productive base and the importance of strong, extended families. As Myers explains in “God Speed the Year of Jubilee!” Jubilee “aimed to dismantle structures of socio-economic inequality.”

Lowery notes that there is no evidence jubilee was ever observed (69), and he asserts that observance of sabbath or jubilee years was largely impractical as real-world social policy. Nonetheless, the laws were and are important, he says, not for their practical impact but for the principles they establish (79). The underlying notion that God owns both land and people reorients economic assumptions and lays the moral foundation of a just society, says Lowery (70). The vision of a world of mutual support is a poor person’s dream world, the world as it should be: a world of abundance, self-restraint, universally shared human power, and leisure, where every person gets what he or she needs to survive, everyone who is able to work works and gets adequate rest, and greed is condemned (Lowery 102-103). This vision stands in marked contrast with the realities of ancient Israel and of our world today. But they function as prophetic critiques of the status quo and offer visionary hope for a better world.

Sabbath and Jubilee in the New Testament

Sabbath and jubilee are prominent themes in the Gospels. In fact, Jesus began his public ministry, according to Luke 4:18, by declaring that God's spirit sent him "to preach good news to the poor . . . proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." While the spiritual dimensions of this proclamation are important, as Myers points out, only real debt-cancellation and land-restoration in the spirit of sabbath and jubilee years, could represent *good* news to poor people. Further, disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees often revolved around sabbath observance. For Jesus, sabbath was about the character of God, justice for the vulnerable poor, and a hopeful celebration of full and prosperous life for all.

Jesus emphasized that sabbath was made for human beings. So again, we see that sabbath is God's gift to mankind. On the Sabbath day when Jesus' disciples plucked grain they did so, explains Lowery, not as workers or owners, but as the economically vulnerable who had a right, in the gleaning tradition, to take what they needed to survive (128). (See Mark 2:27-28.) On other sabbaths, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5), released a woman from bondage of physical weakness (Luke 13:10-17) and healed a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-4). In each case, Jesus restored the person's place in society and his or her ability to work and, therefore, to rest on the Sabbath day. So Jesus modeled sabbath as a day of release, a celebration of abundant life, healing, and justice for the outcast.

The manna story also has a central place in Jesus' consciousness, as Myers emphasizes. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus faced the wilderness temptation concerning bread and sustenance (Matthew 4:1-4). Then, at key junctures he re-enacted the wilderness feeding, and all who participated had "enough" (Mark 6:42; 8:8). Jesus took what limited resources there were, just a few loaves and fishes, and multiplied them. After the meal, there was such abundance that the disciples collected mounds and mounds of leftovers! Perhaps most revealing is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples with the double petition: "Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." This prayer alludes to the sabbath-manna story (enough bread for today) and the sabbath-year release (forgive us our debts). Craig Blomberg notes that while "debts" is clearly a metaphor for "sins," it also reflects a background of Jewish experience with literal indebtedness (131).

The opposite of sabbath living is hoarding, as illustrated in Jesus' parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21). The rich man is foolish, says Lowery, because he misses the purpose of the miraculous

harvest—a “sixth-day bounty” to make sabbath restraint possible (141). The man plans to use all of the surplus himself rather than for the good of the community. His doubts about God’s ongoing provision of enough to survive lead him to fear and foolishly try to control tomorrow by hoarding today. But his actions prove futile. He squanders a sabbath miracle and thus squanders his own life. How do we respond, I wonder, to “miraculous harvests” that may come our way? Are we aware of those sorts of miracles and do we pray for guidance as to where and how to use those resources?

The early church applied sabbath and stewardship principles in their “little economy”, as we see in Acts 2 and 4, and in II Corinthians 8 and 9, for instance. The vision is of solidarity among believers who care for each other’s material needs so that all will have enough. Paul even quotes Exodus 16 in the II Corinthians 9 passage. Paul does not call for absolute financial equality among believers, but, as Blomberg explains, he is concerned that no one lacks and insists on the right of all to a fair share (195). Nor is Paul calling for renunciation of material possessions, but he wants people to make them available to others as needed. Further, Paul clearly believed that giving is a gift which God enables people to exercise. So Paul commands generosity because it honors God (Blomberg 191, 212).

Summary statements

As Lowery aptly says, “A theology and practice of sabbath . . . begins with the royal nature of God and human beings, created in God’s image” (147). It then leads to an attitude of gratefulness for God’s abundant provision and to promotion of peace and justice for all. Again quoting Lowery: “Sabbath has a radically humanitarian rationale, centered on justice and relief for the most vulnerable members of the household “ (146). We Christians can take the lead within society in offering sabbath-like time in the pursuit of mercy, modeling our lives after Jesus. Living as God’s stewards and acknowledging God’s sovereignty remind us that we do not control everything, yet we still are responsible for how we exercise authority in the world.

Implications and Modern Applications of Sabbath and Jubilee

How might we apply sabbath and jubilee principles in our capitalistic system—with its often fierce antagonism toward biblical principles? Is it utopian idealism to try applying sabbath and jubilee principles in this day and age? I agree with Lowery when he says that while practical solutions will shift and change over time, the Bible offers enduring principles by which to shape our lives together (149). Individually, we

may think we are not able to accomplish much, and certainly the needs are very great, but as more and more people get involved and prayerfully consider where they and the organizations they influence can make an impact, the effects will multiply, just like in Jesus' loaves and fishes miracles. And ultimately it isn't up to us. God simply asks that we faithfully seek God's will, offer up what little we have, and give God the glory for the results. Below I briefly describe a few contemporary applications of biblical principles in the private and public spheres. Many are not without their controversial elements, but certainly Christians can get involved with these and similar issues and carefully analyze the details and likely effects on all members of society in light of biblical principles. We also can be advocates for change and help develop creative solutions or alternatives, as appropriate.

Debt forgiveness

A religious coalition called Jubilee 2000 has been lobbying governments worldwide for debt relief to the world's very poorest nations. The hope is that by applying biblical principles of debt forgiveness for the economically destitute, they will have access to more resources for education, health care and employment and thus have a firmer productive base from which to work themselves out of poverty. Since 1996 the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have developed and implemented programs to provide debt relief to over 40 countries through the Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative (World Bank). Concerns about these initiatives center around whether they are designed to actually benefit the poor rather than to benefit government officials or other wealthy people. Also, some people argue that debt forgiveness is neither necessary nor sufficient for improving conditions of many of the world's poor people, especially if governments do not give priority to helping the poor.¹

Land Reform

The Rural Development Institute, as one example, is working to alleviate poverty and instability in developing nations by advocating land ownership and other forms of secure land tenure for farmers. RDI attorneys encourage legal reforms that create market-oriented land systems where farmers own their own land and thus are better able to enhance their economic opportunities. When people own their own productive base, in this case farming land (the basis for the Jubilee provisions), families have more food for themselves and are able to sell their surplus, they have an incentive to improve and maintain their

land, they become more involved in political processes and advocate for democracy since they have more to lose if political instability threatens their land, and the economies tend to grow more rapidly. RDI has worked in 27 nations since 1981 in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Their field research involves spending significant amounts of time with farmers to learn about their needs and concerns and with local officials to find out what legal hurdles stand in the way of land reforms. For more information, see their web site at <http://www.friends-partners.org/~rdi/>.

Education reform

Locally and nationally we are seeing proposals for reforming our educational system through charter schools, voucher systems, stricter promotion and graduation standards, etc. Many educational systems are leading to less than desirable outcomes, especially in some inner-city districts with high dropout rates, high poverty rates and high unemployment rates. Working for more effective educational programs for all members of society is in line with biblical principles since in our time, a good education is necessary for people to have a stable productive base, in the spirit of the Leviticus 25 Jubilee provisions. As we analyze proposals for educational reforms, perhaps devise other remedies, and advocate for change on national level, we can also be involved locally in PTAs, tutoring and mentoring programs, and/or on school boards.

Environmental stewardship or “Creation Care”

Interestingly, **Ecology** (house-study) and **economics** (house-management) are interrelated words, and the Christian understanding of stewardship encompasses both, in terms of caring for creation. Yet over the decades the two disciplines have diverged tremendously. For this reason many religious leaders have called on Christians in recent years to be more environmentally aware in light of our role as stewards of God’s creation. Numerous websites and publications are devoted to raising environmental awareness and promoting eco-friendly companies.

One example of an eco-friendly company is AES (formerly Applied Energy Services) that builds and operates efficient and relatively clean coal-burning plants to produce electricity. They use high-tech scrubbers and other devices to make sure burning is as clean as possible. Further, each year the company plants enough trees to purify a volume of air equal to the amount their scrubbers fail to clean

¹ For a useful dialog on these issues, see the Spring 2000 edition of *Faith and Economics*, a review by the

up. For more information see <http://www.aesc.com/culture/responsibility/index.html>. Further, some large home improvement companies plan to stop selling lumber and other wood from endangered forests. They will base their wood purchases on a certification process that tracks the product from forest to shelf. If consumers are committed to buying and using environmentally sustainable products, it certainly helps when businesses subscribe to the philosophy also. There are trade-offs, of course. In the short run, at least, products may become more expensive as supplies are restricted. American consumers, myself included, are so quick to complain about higher prices and we often brag about getting a “good” price. But shouldn’t we be willing to pay higher prices for items that are produced in ways that sustain the environment and natural habitats in our world? The same could be said for initiatives to improve living conditions for animals that provide us meat, eggs, milk and hides.

Generosity in giving time, money or other resources to respond to needs of the vulnerable poor

John Mason discusses blending the sabbath provisions of time and mercy to impact three areas of concern in the U.S.: broken families, poverty, and troubled inner cities. First, he asserts that simply “being there” is the key to raising healthy children, providing support to aging parents and grandparents, and the sick, dying or left-out (112). Second, he says in responding to poverty, it is important for people to spend considerable amounts of time with poorer households to develop trusting relationships, discern the precise measures of assistance needed, encourage responsible behavior, perhaps pressure elected officials to address harmful social conditions, find suitable employment, and, of course, share the Gospel (112). Lastly, regarding inner-city problems Mason speculates that the elders of ancient Israel would counsel us, in light of Jubilee principles, to build strong extended families, develop more effective educational systems and analyze employment structures to provide more good-paying jobs for inner-city residents (114). About the sacrifice of time, he says that is exactly where sabbath principles come into play. Indeed, if we use our time appropriately, we will have more time for “just being there” for our families, poor household members and for mentoring or other volunteer activities. Mason notes that when we remember God’s great sacrifice on our behalf, first by saving Israel from slavery in Egypt then by sending Jesus to atone for our sins, that becomes our motivation to serve others rather than ourselves (116). The blessings we receive from giving of ourselves, our time, and other resources are so immense,

especially as we see the effects multiply. Most anyone can be involved in these sorts of activities. Students I know tutor disadvantaged children, retired persons I know of help care for babies and young children while their parents work or attend bible studies, and countless members of the labor force are involved with literacy campaigns, mentor programs, soup kitchens and other missions of mercy. Many companies allow and encourage their employees to volunteer time, even during working hours, to various social causes as a way of giving back to and improving the communities that support them.

We could cite numerous of incidents of generous contributions of money to aid the poor. Some recent examples are large grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, including a \$1 billion pledge to supply vaccines worldwide, \$133 million in a series of health grants for such activities as the promotion of the development of new tuberculosis drugs, and \$100 million in grants to fight AIDS in Africa (King). Of course, persons need not reach Bill Gates' level of wealth to exercise generosity in giving! The biblical perspective is that giving is a gift for all persons. Further, giving does not impoverish us. On the contrary, when we give, we can participate in "loaves and fishes" multiplication miracles as our resources bless others, even in ways beyond our knowing. When we stop (on the Sabbath?) and realize what an abundance we may have and remember to trust in God's provision for us, it seems very appropriate to share our surplus with those without such abundance as our hearts are moved by the needs around us. That is cheerful giving at its best, I think!

Workplace reforms and human rights initiatives

A number of managers and executives lead their businesses with integrity and apply Christian principles in their businesses (e.g. Max DePree and Bill Pollard) and identify and address the dehumanizing influences of worker isolation or overwork. Many authors have written about these issues from secular as well as sacred viewpoints. For instance, Sue Shellenbarger, in her "Work and Family" column in the *Wall Street Journal*, often describes firms that consider work-life balance for their employees' well being and creative ways that people are making time for themselves and their families while still working productively. Further, a number of books and articles about keeping sabbath have been published just in the past year or two.

Many firms, such as Boeing, offer training and placement services following decisions to downsize or move operations offshore (Galvin). Such programs help people retain a productive

employment base so that they are not simply “set adrift” as firms try to reduce labor costs. Similarly, the Welfare to Work Partnership involves more than 12,000 member businesses that together have hired and retained more than 649,000 people from the welfare rolls (McDermott and Thompson). Such programs are consistent with the biblical principles that everyone who is able to work works and everyone gets what he or she needs to survive. Work also provides fulfilling challenges, a sense of personal achievement, and offers opportunities to connect with people.

Community groups and unions across the U.S. are lobbying for municipal “living wage” ordinances that mandate pay levels substantially above the minimum wage, arguing that the minimum wage is too low to help the working poor. Economists and others who oppose such legislation argue that it leads to a reduction in jobs and fails to address true causes of poverty among low-wage workers (Noguchi). So while raising mandatory wages may not be the optimal solution to problems of poverty among lower-skilled workers, the sentiments of such proposals are valid. It is imperative for a society to determine the reasons some citizens’ living standards fall below what is necessary to live a dignified life, especially in the cases of the most vulnerable citizens such as children, and then effectively address the issues so that living standards will rise. The problems are usually more than economic, and often stem from broader problems such as lack of education, broken families, lack of social services, substance abuse, etc.

The Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) is a student-led group trying to persuade colleges and universities to be more aggressive in monitoring wages and working conditions in overseas “sweatshop” factories producing athletic apparel carrying their schools’ logos. The concerns stem from reports of forced labor, child labor and unhealthy working conditions among people who are essentially powerless and who are trying to work their way out of poverty. These concerns are consistent with biblical principle of justice for the vulnerable poor. The WRC has been criticized, however, because it does not allow representation from the apparel industry, nor does it define “fair wage” (Asher and Barr).

A favorite example of mine is Aaron Feuerstein, a business owner who continued paying his workers after his Polar Tec fabric mill in Massachusetts burned down in December 1995. Mr. Feuerstein, a devout Jew, noted at the time that it was the “right thing to do and there’s a moral imperative to do it irrespective of the consequences” (Lorant).

As with ecologically sensitive production, many of these workplace reforms may lead to higher prices and/or lower profits, at least initially, but when we have so many resources compared to the majority of our world's citizens, I for one am willing to pay a little more so that workers at home or abroad are safe, treated with dignity, getting adequate rest and earning enough to sustain a decent living standard. When we make economic decisions based primarily on what's best for "me," "my family," "the corporation and its shareholders," or even "our nation's interests" we too easily lose sight of how our decisions impact others across town or around the world. Again, I am not arguing for equality of living standards and I don't believe the "rich" must become impoverished for others to prosper, but I do believe we must be concerned for the well-being of all persons and seek creative solutions to the plight of the poor, sick and powerless around the world, and these solutions may involve some alterations to our relatively opulent lifestyles.

Some may argue that people or companies "just can't afford to do these things." As far as I know, Mr. Feuerstein never said that, and I would speculate that in many or most cases, people and companies could afford it, if they choose to. Each case will differ, of course, but in each instance I think it is important to ask the deep, probing question, "What sacrifice(s) are you willing to make to do the right thing and live according to biblical principles?" There are many examples, as with ServiceMaster, where companies or individuals who make choices consistent with their faith-based commitments "succeed" very well, even in terms of worldly measures—profits, income, low employee turnover, high productivity, etc.

In general, any actions motivated by love, taking into account other persons' well-being are examples of living out biblical principles. Often, the principles bring a humanizing influence in a world that often seeks to dehumanize us. If, on the other hand, we treat people as objects or merely economic agents, we depersonalize them, treat them with disrespect, and falsely assume that we need not concern ourselves with their problems. If we speak of "the company," "the poor," "the workers," or "the government" we may forget the human faces and souls within those groups. Wood describes this tendency as a seduction that is culturally acceptable yet it leads us, she says, away from the heart of God and keeps us steeped in a sinful culture (100, 103).

Concluding Remarks

When we view our world through God's eyes we are not limited to narrow, worldly solutions to its problems. We can acknowledge the realities and accept limits of existing systems and structures, but we can also raise questions and advocate even radical changes, as appropriate. We won't necessarily transform realities all at once, but we can take small steps and, as God's stewards, we can join God in completing the world. All that is required is obedience to our loving God. We have nothing to lose, and we gain a life that is truly life, a life abundant with riches beyond measure.

So, are we obedient? Do we trust in God's abundant provision enough to stop trying to completely control every aspect of wealth creation and instead consider how more persons can have enough resources to live on? Do we try to influence economic decision making in our world in light of biblical principles? Do we observe sabbath, setting aside one day a week to rest and nurture relationships with God, family and friends and encourage others to do the same? Or do we balk, or even boast, and say, "I'm too busy"? Certainly, hard work and career advancement are commendable goals, but at what cost to our families, our society, and ourselves? (Which of the other Ten Commandments would we boast about breaking?) Do we stop periodically to consider how much is enough? Are we able to say, "enough for now"? Do we regularly participate in acts of mercy and give generously of our resources? Do we consider the plight of the oppressed in our world and take the time to become a part of the solution to their problems, or do we give up in frustration because the problems seem insurmountable? May we daily trust in God's abundant provision, always remembering that God provides **enough**: enough time, enough resources, and be grateful for those gifts and for life itself. May we continually tap into God's unlimited power and resources, praying that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Works Cited

Asher, Mark, and Josh Barr. "Nike Cuts off Funds for 3 Universities: Schools claim firm is upset at their stance on labor practices." *The Washington Post* 7 May 2000: A1.

Blanchard, Tsvi. "After Eden: The Search for the Holy in a Consumer Society." *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*. Ed. Rodney Clapp. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998. 91-106.

Blomberg, Craig L. *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Galvin, Kevin. "Tapping a natural resource." *The Seattle Times* 11 April 2000: C1.

King, Warren. "Gates Foundation gives again to fight AIDS in Africa." *The Seattle Times* on-line edition 13 July 2000. <http://www.seattletimes.com>

Lorant, Richard. "Rebuilding Corporate Compassion." *The Seattle Times* on-line edition 11 December 1996. <http://www.seattletimes.com>

Lowery, Richard H. *Sabbath and Jubilee*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2000.

Mason, John D. "Stewardship, Sabbath and Time." *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*. Ed. Rodney Clapp. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998. 107-117.

McDermott, Bill, and Debra Thompson. "Doing well, doing good: welfare to work." *The Seattle Times* on-line edition 29 March 2000. <http://www.seattletimes.com>

Myers, Ched. "God Speed the Year of Jubilee! The biblical vision of Sabbath economics. Part 1 of 2" *Sojourners Online* May-June 1998. <http://www.sojourners.com/soj9805/980520.html>

Myers, Ched. "Jesus New Economy of Grace: The biblical vision of Sabbath economics. Part 2 of 2" *Sojourners Online* July-August 1998. <http://www.sojourners.com/soj9807/980724.html>

Noguchi, Yuki. "Work for a Living Wage." *The Washington Post* 4 October 1999: F19.

Palmer, Parker J. *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*. New York: The Crossroad, 1994.

Petzinger, Thomas Jr. "Kim Polese: A tech entrepreneur discusses creativity, values and the gold-rush mentality" *The Wall Street Journal* 1 January 2000:R24.

Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Dallas: Word, 1990.

Wood, Jan. *Christians at Work: Not Business as Usual*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999.

World Bank. HIPC web site (<http://www.worldbank.org/hipc/>).