

Werner Elert's chapter on Economics in his book The Christian Ethos. (Part 2)

Colleagues,

For introductory information on this two-part posting, see last week's Part 1, now on the Crossings website: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2010/thur062410.shtml> Here is Part 2. Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Werner Elert: The Christian Ethos Chapter 3. THE NATURAL ORDERS Unit 19 Economic Interdependence

[The text of subsections 1 and 2 of Unit 19 were last week's Thursday Theology posting.]

3. The Godliness of the Economic Order and its Vulnerability

Economic interdependence is therefore not only a "Seinsgefuege" (web of daily-life existence) for individual persons, also not simply a collaboration of human activity. It includes within it a three-fold "Sachgefuege"—a web of things ("stuff" needed for daily life), of work, and of wherewithal (wages, property and possessions), all linked to each other. It is a "natural order," a "good order of God," in the words of the Augsburg Confession (Art. 16) wherein "buying and selling, possessing property" are "bonae ordinationes dei," good things ordained by God. And in the Apology to the AC comes

the sentence "Therefore there will be different rewards for different labors." (Art. 4:194) This order, like all the others, does not make us good or bad, but it gives us, as do all the other orders, the possibility to demonstrate, to verify, whether we are good or bad.

Like all the other orders, God's economic order too is exposed to the danger of distortion, destruction and demonization.

The demonization of a life lived without working is luxury, which spends itself in self-enjoyment. The demonization of work without having something to show for it is slavery, which makes human beings into replaceable objects. Slavery makes interdependence a one-way street and thereby undermines the very foundations of the economic order. It is not the slave, but the slavemaster who is accountable before God for this destruction.

A third form of demonization that arises from denial of economic interdependence is the wealth accumulation of "Grosskapital" [often translated "big business," today possibly simply rendered as "Wall Street"], capitalism run amok, which divides all human relations into luxury on the one side and slavery on the other. ["Big" capitalists do not have to depend on anyone for their economic survival—or so they think.]

These three forms of demonization expose a "law unto itself" at work within the economic order. It reveals that God's good "natural law" operative in the economic order encounters a contrary "law of evil" (section 11:3 above) at work there, just as "the law of evil" is also present in all other manifestations of God's natural law. For this reason the economic order too, like the orders of family, marriage, and nationhood, calls on the authority of the

state to exercise its “usus politicus legis” to preserve and protect it in the face of evil now at work in the fallen world.

4. **Economic Order in the New Testament – “Apostolic Economics”** The linkage between these three–life’s needs, human work and wages/wherewithal–is a “natural order,” a given for human existence. Consequently the Christian church cannot change it without destroying it. Yes, in small groups it does happen and has happened that specific forms of such changes have occurred, but the economic “law” in such cases has possibly been momentarily suspended, though strictly speaking, not that at all. When the Christians in Jerusalem tried a possessions-collective form of economics (Acts 4:32ff), they soon had to abandon it, for a few years later we find the mother of John Mark once more owning her own home. (Acts 12:12) Quite possibly the Jerusalem congregation attempted this because they expected the immediate return of Christ, and quite possibly they abandoned it when that immediate return didn’t happen. Possibly also they abandoned it because one could not determine the interior intentions of people coming to join the common-property collective. (Acts 5:1ff) For the long term it couldn’t last because it was unproductive, for the third factor in the economic Seinsgefuege, daily work, was not–according to the information we have–a part of the equation. That may also be linked to Paul’s later efforts to gather funds to support the Jerusalem congregation.

The monastic movement once more repeated the experiment in its own way, and filled in that gap by making work a part of the program (Rule of St. Benedict, chapter 48. “Ora et labora” – pray and work). They acknowledged the economic order about possessions in that, although the individual

monk had none, the community did indeed. But as an overall option the world cannot be changed into a monastery, today even less than at that time.

Living without possessions as did St. Francis and his friars minor is indeed humanly moving; and when, like Berthold von Regensburg, they never ceased to condemn greed, they also impacted the world in resisting the demonization of possessions. But the fatal “other side” was mendicancy, begging from others so that you could live, which also upset the balance in economic interdependence. We prefer to follow Paul’s citation of a word of Christ, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), and we can thank the Reformation for exposing the false appearance of superior piety that comes with begging. (Aug. Conf. 27.53)

When we ask the apostles themselves, they answer here in matters of economics just as they do in matters of civil law, neither as utopian revolutionaries, nor as dreamers disinterested in worldly affairs. There is in fact an explicit “apostolic economic order.” When Paul speaks of physical needs for living, he does not first think about someone caring for someone else. Instead he firmly admonishes people to work. Caring for physical needs and daily work come under the law of recompense—getting what you deserve from what you’ve done. (2 Thess. 3:10) Whoever tries to abandon this law is acting “ataktos” (vv. 6 and 11). [Greek term usually translated “lazy,” but literally “a – taktos” = “against the order”].

The first sentence of this apostolic economic order goes something like this: Everyone works with the ability he has to care for his own needs. That is not a self-centered statement, for it is made with the neighbor in mind. From

this assertion Paul can cite himself as an example, for he himself worked as a craftsman, in order “not to become a burden to others.” (1 Cor. 9:6,15; 2 Cor. 11:9; 12:13; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8) A similar style of working so as not to burden others is what he expected from his congregations. (1 Thess. 4:11f.)

Presupposed, of course, is that work is recompensed with wages that cover one’s daily needs. Thereby we come to the second thesis: The laborer is worthy of his hire. (Lk. 10:7; Mt. 10:10; 1 Cor. 9:9; 2 Tim 2:6) Take note: not the work, but the worker is to be remunerated. That thesis makes the employer responsible for the person of the worker. He shall guarantee that the worker receives “what is just and fair.” (Col. 4:1) That such fairness frequently does not take place is not a complaint arising only in modern times. It is indeed a basic reason for the frequent condemnation of the rich that we find in the New Testament. (James 5:4)

Human slavery that we encounter in today’s economic scene as demonized work was, at the time of the apostles, a de facto legal institution of the state’s system of justice. On their own they could not undo it. But they did bring it under the rubric of the order of mutual interdependence. On the one hand that happened as they welcomed slaves as brothers into the Christian congregation and thereby granted them the quality of personhood, something that existing civil law did not. This resulted then in their enjoining slave-owners, as far as their authority extended, to be personally responsible for the personhood of their slaves. The classical example of this is the Epistle of Philemon. When read in its wider context it shows that slavery in the ancient world finally came to an end not for economic reasons, but for ethical ones.

Thereby the church succeeded where the Stoics did not, even though the Stoics' line of thinking about slavery was close to that of the Christians.

Conversely, the apostles also called the worker to be responsible TO his employer and FOR him as well. They called not simply for obedience—for coerced obedience does not change slave mentality—but for faithfulness, and they said the same to the slave-owner.

Finally property too is brought in under the order of economic mutual interdependence. The Old Testament sees wealth for the most part from the viewpoint of the law of recompense. It is received either as a blessing or a reward from the Lord (Gen. 33:11; Ps. 112:3). The New Testament is without a doubt more cautious. Here wealth is seen first of all as danger and temptation. Danger in eclipsing God from view, temptation in doing the same with the neighbor. Worshipping possessions and serving God cannot be united (Mt. 6:24). The love of money, which sees life fulfilled in having everything, is for that very reason the root of all evil (1 Tim.6:10). It is of all the vices the one most denounced in the New Testament. But simply to have nothing is not the solution, for poverty itself does nothing to curb the desire for riches along with all its temptations (1 Tim. 6:9), and conversely possessing goods is only then contrary to loving God if it closes the heart to the brother in need (1 John 3:17). Temptation in this direction is great, but it must be resisted.

The third thesis in "apostolic" economic order is: Ownership obligates. If we do not hear much of that in the New Testament, that lies in the social composition of the first Christian congregations. Although the majority of

the members were not well-to-do, those who were people of means were always committed—not to purge themselves of their possession, but—to help the impoverished with the goods they had that exceeded their own personal needs. (Rom. 15:27: 2 Cor 9:8ff). Let everyone “labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy!” (Eph. 4:28)

It would be imprudent to understand the apostolic economic order as a kind of economic program or even only to draw from it a theoretical model for organizing work, possessions, and daily material needs. The genuine “apostolic” quality of this order is rather that it sticks to the elemental givens of daily life, that it lets what is natural be natural, that here (as it does in sexual matters) it simply seeks to resist everything that is “against nature.”

The linkage between work, wherewithal and human need is a natural order. But it is only then “in order” if neither the whole system is absolutized, nor one of the three components absolutized (as in those three forms of demonization mentioned above) to the detriment of the other two. This threefold network of interdependence in no way stands as an “iron-clad law of economics” alongside or above human common life and interaction. Rather it constitutes the “givens” underlying daily life. It can be used correctly, can be misused and can also be destroyed. It is used with justice when the mutual interdependence [Aufeinanderangewiesensein!] of everyone comes to fulfillment.