

A Theologian's Perspective on Economic Activities in the Christian World Mission

Robert W. Bertram

[Address, St. Louis, Missouri, September, 1971]

ABSTRACT

Not just asking can individual Christians operate in their private economic roles as Christians but can the Christian community itself engage in economic activities in the Christian world mission, might that community support itself by profit-making activities without compromising itself for that very mission? To raise such a question asks, by what authority may Christians supercede the whole retributive order of economic activity? Four theses can elaborate an answer: (1) Greed is a reality factor in all things economic and that very greed is complicated by criticism; (2) Yet, even the most godly criticism presupposes an underlying economic process which is good and where all can justly receive what they deserve; (3) Still, the just economic process under divine evaluation must be superceded by its opposite, mercy, claimed in the authority of the Son of Man to forgive sins in order for Christians to introduce what is uniquely theirs to give; and, (4) Christians actualize that authority experimentally (beyond theory) without either subverting the existing economic order or without retreating into sects as Christ's sign to the world of God's new ordering of undeserved compassion. (Stephen C. Krueger)

Introduction

Can the Christian community conduct an economic order which, as such, is Christian? The question is not how individuals – say, as consumers or employees or investors – can operate in their private economic roles as Christian persons. The question is rather about a corporate operation, the church as an organic whole, acting as a single public agent. For instance, my assignment from Dr. Danker suggests that this agent might “be a church structure or a separate para-structure . . . operating in fraternal relationship with the church.” The question is whether such churchly structures can “engage in economic activities in the Christian world mission.”

To do that, Dr. Danker further suggests, the church would not simply depend on “cash offerings” but would also “supplement its income by profit-making economic activities.” But if so, wouldn’t the church become just one economic enterprise among others, “making profit” the same way any good business does? I think that would be hazardous, perhaps not so much for moral reasons as for “mission” reasons. For what would then distinguish these churchly economic activities as Christian? The mere fact that their profits are turned over to “the Christian world mission?” Is that distinctive enough to qualify the economic activities themselves as Christian?

The objection is not that economic activity is corrupt. It is, of course. But so are government and education and marriage. Yet all these sectors of life, including the economic one, are simultaneously the good operations of God. Yet look how God operates them. Does he operate them the way he does his church, by grace? Can you operate an economic order – even a churchly, mini-economic order – by grace? Still, wouldn’t that be essential? If these churchly economic activities are to act out the Christian world mission, they ought to be more by far than

merely left-handed means for getting that mission financed. Rather they ought to pantomime that mission's own uniqueness, God's mercy in Christ. By the very way these structures would accumulate wealth ("make profit") they would have to signify how God in Christ gives people not what they have coming to them but gives them everything gratis. Can even the church do economics that way? Especially so, since the mission church is but a tiny minority and the vast economic environment on which it would have to depend operates by quite different, "alien" rules. If these alien rules happen also to be God's own, who is the church to tamper with them? Can there be, this side of the final glory, an economic order *sola gratia*? But can a church business which operates with any other rule still look like and be the Christian world mission? The problem is indeed theological, not to mention overwhelming.

One way to keep this unwieldy problem at least minimally manageable is to concentrate on just a few biblical texts. Why not choose texts which are generally familiar, as the old epistle lessons from the churchyear are? One such text, from the epistle lesson for the third Sunday after Pentecost, is at the time of this writing still fresh in the memory: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (I John 3: 17). Another similar text comes from the epistle lesson for the very week in which our conference occurs, the twentieth week after Pentecost; "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need." (Ephesians 4: 28).

The intention here is not to press these texts literalistically as though they exhausted verbatim the whole of the Christian economic ethos. Obviously there is more to the Christian community's ethos which is economic than merely doing honest

work and sharing with the needy. And there is more to the community's economic ethos which is Christian than mere exhortation. Still, these texts do harbor far-ranging implications well beyond their explicit prescriptions. These snippets of apostolic paraenesis are concrete universals, reflecting broad assumptions about the economic order generally and about the apostolic community's relation to that order.

What follows are four theses, each with its own series of elaborations. First, greed is a reality factor in economic activity, also in the economic activity of the Christian community; and apostolic injunctions against such greed, because they imply criticism of it, evoke resistance and still subtler forms of greed – greed complicated by criticism. Second, the apostolic admonitions presuppose also an underlying economic process which is good – good, if only because it is that process which greed is damaging; and that economic order – where men get and give what is deserved, all by an elaborate process of critical evaluation – is likewise a fact of life, as factual as greed is, and not just a moral ideal. Third, since economic man gets as he is entitled to get, reflecting how he is constantly under divine evaluation, any attempt to supercede that critical order by its opposite, sheer mercy, requires the highest possible authorization – which is exactly what Christians claim to have by virtue of “the Son of Man's authority upon earth to forgive sin.” Fourth, whether the Christian community can actualize its authority for non- retributive, non- critical action also in economic life, whether it can do so either without subverting the Creator's existing economic processes or without retreating into economic sects, is I think answerable not theoretically but only experimentally.

First Thesis. Greed is a reality factor in economic activity,

also in the economic activity of the Christian community; and apostolic injunctions against such greed, because they imply criticism of it, evoke resistance and still subtler forms of greed – greed complicated by criticism.

a) One look at our two biblical texts is enough to tell us that there is in their Christian communities, prior to any exhortations or prior to any words at all, an ugly reality situation. There are, behind these apostolic admonitions, real live Christians, who in the Ephesian community are outright thieves (*kleptoon*) and in the Johannine community owners of “the world’s goods” (*bion tou kosmou*), in both cases withholding help from those in need.

b) That, alas – namely, that actual thievery and stinginess – is itself part of the Christian community’s economic ethos. Real sin is as much a part of that community’s ethos as the earnest exhortations are which counter it.

c) But do the exhortations even do that? Do they counter the sin, really? Might they not actually worsen it? For the sorry fact of thievery and greed already makes the apostles’ exhortations into something considerably more than exhortations, namely, into clearly implied criticism, into judgment. And judgment, by alienating a man and evoking his resistance, can disable him outright from doing the very thing the exhortations are exhorting him to do.

d) For that matter, we may wonder why the apostles’ judgments in these cases are not more condemnatory, the situation being as reprehensible as it is. That is an important question, one which theologically demands an explanation and one to which we shall have to return.

e) At any rate, this much has to be said now: The people whom the apostles are here addressing are not morally free. That is,

they are not free simply to do what the apostles urge them to do. And why aren't they free to do that? Because what the apostles are doing is not simply urging but also criticizing, and because criticism does not leave a sinful man free but already constricts and paralyzes him the more.

f) He is not, in that supposed "moment of decision" as he considers the apostolic imperative, hovering there in pure neutrality, free to act either one way or the other. And what binds him is not only his past, his accustomed thievery or the addiction to his wealth, but worse than that: this very imperative binds him which on the contrary is supposed to start him on a new future. It paralyzes him by its implicit accusation.

g) Oh, the imperatives may get him to stop stealing or even to begin sharing, though we should not be too quick to assume that because that prospect is conceivable it is therefore probable. But suppose it were probable. Even so, the problem with this thief or this miser – precisely his ethical problem – is more abject than explicit thievery or explicit greed. Worse than that, he "closes his heart against" his brother. Will exhortations cure that, especially when they are at the same time really thinly veiled accusations? Still less likely, will they make "the love of God abide in him?" What if those judgmental exhortations would extort from him some new show of generosity. Might that not disguise more deceptively than ever his inner atheism and heartlessness? Isn't that conceivable? Even probable?

h) Still, aren't these ugly realities – both the *de facto* stinginess and its worsening under criticism – constant components of Christian economic ethos? It would be fatuous to reserve the adjective "Christian" to only such ideal behavior as seems to be extolled in apostolic paraenesis, and to ignore

those human realities which directly occasion that paraenesis – consigning such embarrassments to, say, “non-Christian” ethos. Christian ethos ought not be simply equated with good behavior, flattering as that might be.

i) The flattery is only slightly more subtle when we pretend that Christian ethos is but one moment after another of free decision-making. ‘As though the very demands upon us, being judgmental as they are, did not already prejudice our decisions and our chances. ‘As though all we needed for right decisions were some moral guidance and sufficient motivation to carry it out. ‘As though we didn’t need, first of all and continually, to be relieved of the criticism.

j) Christian ethos is the actual ethos of Christians, as that is being actively and immanently evaluated by God and as his ongoing evaluating of it influences their ethos in turn. One dimension of this divine evaluation is judgmental, with the result that Christians too begrudge it – begrudge both God and brother. But then that grudging result likewise belongs to their ethos, though it is no less Christian of them to strive that it won’t. How does Paul say it: “the law begets wrath?”

Second Thesis. The apostolic admonitions presuppose also an underlying economic process which is good – good, if only because it is that process which greed is damaging; and that economic order – where men get and give what is deserved, all by an elaborate process of critical evaluation – is likewise a fact of life, as factual as greed is, and not just a moral ideal.

a) So the apostolic admonitions imply something else – in addition, that is, to the negative reality of greed-compounded-by-criticism. They imply another whole reality, this time not an evil one but a good one. It is that very reality in fact which

thieves and misers violate and in conflict with which they are thieves and misers. Let us call it, at the risk of misunderstanding, "the economic order."

b) This term cries out for at least minimal definition. For aren't we here suggesting that the economic order, in order to be good, must be distinguished from such evil things as greed? But does this square with the facts? Isn't it often enough the very factor of greed which keeps the economic order going at all? How can we then, at least on economic grounds, pretend that greed is evil? Or alternately, if greed is essential to the functioning of the economic order, how can we say the economic order is good?

c) Remember, the way we are using "economic order" in present context is determined by the apostolic paraenesis, not by an empirical study of the economy, at least not directly. The economic order which these passages implicitly affirm is admittedly something less than the de facto economy. It is that economy all right, but with such factors as greed and thievery abstracted from it, as subversive elements in it to be repudiated. Whether or not they are subversive of the existing economic system, (though they might be that too) at least they subvert the "brother in need," "honest work," "the love of God." The fact that the existing economy may "need" greed or even poverty and oppression for its orderly operation only illustrates that mere order, as such, is no absolute good and may well be demonic. Or to put it affirmatively, it illustrates that a resourceful Creator can by his orderings bring good not only from nothing but even from evil.

d) On the other hand, to say that this good and greed-less economic order is inferred from the apostolic paraenesis is not to say however that this order exists only as an ideal, as a wistful blueprint for some perfect "Christian" economy. That is

a conclusion, to be sure, which many a quietist, many a resigned idealist is content to draw. No, this valid ordering of economic life is not only something which ought to be but also something which is. It is an actuality, as actual as the predatory greed and the grinding want and the oppression with which it is inextricably intertwined. Whether the one can be distinguished from the other except on Christian trust – and even then, perhaps, often only in principle – is another question. But the sure implication of the texts at hand is that certain economic arrangements are good and are in fact already operative in the economy round about.

e) Such economic arrangements as what? At least three: wherewithal, wealth, work. First, wherewithal. There are those human needs which can only be met and are being met by the “goods of the world,” by what we call a “living” (*bion*), the necessities of life, the wherewithal. The apostles simply take for granted that this wherewithal is available. Its availability is a plain, good fact of life, not just a noble imperative. The necessary wherewithal is, if only for the fortunate few, a daily occurrence, so actual that those deprived of it, the starving millions, are the surest to notice it does occur. Second, wealth. Since those who have are to share with those have not, the former must obviously have something to share beyond their own immediate needs, beyond the wherewithal essential for their own existence. We are calling their surplus “wealth.” It is gratuitous to say people ought to have wealth. The fact is they do. At least enough of them do, so the apostles are assuming, to be able to share their wealth with others who don’t even have the necessary wherewithal. Wherewithal, wealth and thirdly, work. Although a thief too might by his stealing make a living, or even amass surplus wealth beyond his immediate wherewithal, his stealing is what is out of order – out of order, that is, with those other economic arrangements which are good. What is

in order is for the thief to stop stealing and instead to “labor” (*kopiatoo*). Getting comes with working. Not only ought it to do so. It does. At least the apostle assumes that the working-getting sequence is a regular enough experience in economic life so that he can recommend it as a realistic expectation for the Ephesian Christian thief. – These three realities of the good economic order – wherewithal, wealth and work – are intricately connected with one another. Together they weave a web of persons and goods and services. One of the essential bonds which holds them together (not merely ought to hold them together but in fact does) is that process by which men get what they are entitled to. Distribution assumes retribution. Wherewithal and wealth accrue to those who work for it. But wealth in turn, hardly an absolute possession, accrues also to those who lack wherewithal, “those in need.” It is only when this retributive process breaks down in practice that it has to be shored up with verbal admonitions and, implicitly, with criticism. That critical process reflects a massive activity of personal evaluation of people’s deserts and performance. It is God’s way, one of God’s ways, of getting things done. It is good.

f) Let us reemphasize that this valid economic ordering, though it is inferred from the apostolic admonitions, is not however brought into existence by such admonitions. Nor does it depend upon them for its validity. On the contrary, the admonitions already presuppose that order as a prior given. It is there to begin with. They simply take it for granted and, by their admonishings, reenforce it. Why make a point of that? Because there is a tempting illusion to the contrary. ‘As though the very question whether to have economic structures at all, like wherewithal or work or wealth, were primarily a matter for decision, needing perhaps only the right (preferably “Christian”) ethical rules. ‘As though even the most basic human

relationships, like marriage or family or nationality or economic role, are essentially moral responses to some imperative. 'As though we enact these relations by first obeying some admonition, some rule or norm, like "Be fruitful and multiply" or "Fall in love" or "Be born a Smith" or "Grow up an American" or "Consume goods." 'As though the very prescriptions we receive for these situations don't already assume that we are situated within them.

g) The issue here is not between situational ethics and an ethics of rules, between "norm and context." The point rather is that as often as not a "rule" – for instance, Share your wealth with the needy brother – assumes from the outset a pre-existing "situation": namely, that I do in fact have a brother, that he is needy and I am wealthy, and that my wealth is in order to his needs. Probably none of those situational factors originated with any decision of mine, or with any rule. Without the situation as it is, the rule would be hypothetical and academic. But given that prior situation, which is but a particular instance of the whole underlying economic ordering, the paraenetic "rule" gives new voice to that ordering, now so sadly muted, and prosecutes its cause out loud.

h) The word "prosecutes" reminds us once again that the apostolic exhortations are not only that – not only non-prejudicial exhortings – but also, by implication, criticisms. But that is true likewise of that primordial economic ordering for which the exhortations speak. It too advances criticism. It does that, not first of all through criticisms spoken or written or even with any words at all, but through its own mute processes. Native to these processes is that function of theirs called retribution, that persistent arrangement whereby men, as we say, are to get what is coming to them – *suum cuique tribuere*. This retributive dimension is not of course unique to economic processes. It pervades all human relationships and

every social structure. But in economic transactions the element of retribution is especially vivid. Witness the way theology, in order to dramatize the fact of retribution, borrows some of its most telling metaphors from the economic sector: recompense, reward, redeem. "Forgive us our debts." "The wage of sin is death."

i) For retribution in the theological sense, however, economic retribution does not only provide an analogy. No, God does his own retributing and judging precisely by means of these economic counterparts – obscurely no doubt but ever so immanently. The latter execute the former, enacting the divine recompense itself through the immanental transactions of buying and selling, earning and losing. Granted, that conclusion is not directly inferable from the empirical data. What for the economist may be nothing more than the natural effect of a cause, a probable outcome of an antecedent condition, a "concomitant variation," for the Christian – perhaps for the selfsame economist *qua* Christian – takes on the depth dimension of an ultimate evaluation, an eschatological verdict. At least that is the sort of in-depth retribution inherent in the biblical interpretation of history.

j) Even on this interpretation, however, it isn't as though every worthy economic transaction is neatly balanced by some corresponding cosmic approval, or every unworthy one by disapproval, tit for tat. Such merit-badge individualism falsifies, if nothing else, the facts of economic history, not to mention the biblical interpretation of it. No, the retribution here is not piecemeal but comprehensive: whole judgment for whole men, for whole economies, for the whole of history.

k) For that matter, why limit retribution to judgment – to judgment, that is, in its negative, punitive forms? Don't the

same retributive processes which recompense evil also recompense good? And why is even the former needed except to encourage distributive justice, to promote not adversity but prosperity? Not only is destructive economic behavior punished but also constructive economic behavior is rewarded. Ah, but the very fact that economic man so much as needs such retributive inducements at all – isn't that already a standing criticism of him? That he cannot live without retribution is incriminating evidence that neither can he live with it – genuinely live. In fact, his rewards, his retributively induced prosperity, his very affluence, his institutionalized gluttony, his disproportionate longevity may themselves incriminate him. The youngster who prayed The Lord's Prayer conflating the petitions, "Forgive us our daily bread," committed more than a Freudian slip. Comes now John's rhetorical question about the Christian who keeps more than enough for himself. "How does the love of God abide in him?" But that criticism, with its implication of divine disgust, is not only read into but off of the economic facts, whose internal logic supports the criticism.

Third Thesis. Since economic man gets as he is entitled to get, reflecting how he is constantly under divine as well as human evaluation, any attempt to supersede that critical order by its opposite, sheer mercy, requires the highest possible authorization – which is exactly what Christians claim to have by virtue of "the Son of Man's authority upon earth to forgive sin."

a) The question behind this thesis asks, In the economic ethos of the Christian community is criticism the last word? So it might seem, the moreso since the critical process is not merely the construct of theologians. It is already anticipated in the pre-theological, pre-verbal orderings of economic life, in the

way such life has to proceed by retribution. But if this critical process is no more dispensable than the economic order itself is, what then? Or to put the problem theologically, if the divine Word, the ultimate evaluation, is not only verbalized in words but is played out in the most elemental structures and functions of economic existence – then what? Is there, in other words, a saving alternative at least as radical as this pervasive criticism, to trump it and – eventually, at least, and for now bit by bit – to replace it? The Christian faith stands or falls by just that hope.

b) In fact, as perhaps we ought to have admitted long before this, none of the devastating negations we have been making so far could even have been conceded except in the hope for what supercedes them. In the absence of that hope, the negations could hardly be taken seriously (except perhaps by a world-renouncing pessimist), evoking at best – and understandably so – offense and aversion.

c) Still, as we said originally, that was the very reaction which the criticism, whether as verbal paraenesis or as pre-verbal economic retribution, was bound to elicit from the miser and the thief: namely, aversion to criticism and a new and subtler self-justification of their greed. The law does beget wrath. Incrimination intimidates. But not inevitably so. For as we also hinted earlier, this reaction of defensiveness in face of ultimate criticism is a reaction Christians have power to combat, having authority to do so. True, they cannot live without the retributive order or without its incriminations, which continue valid. But they do claim to live with it – really live. They are not bound to begrudge it, but neither are they bound to grant it the last word.

d) By what right? Their authority, in a word, is that authority which the Son of Man has upon earth to forgive sin. But does he

have it? Either he does or he doesn't. In view of that disjunction we had better amend our statement of a moment ago about that hope by which the Christian faith stands or falls. For it isn't the hoping as such, however resolute and heroic, (which it seldom is) which is decisive. What the hoping in turn stands or falls by is this Son of Man. The christological issue is of the essence. Does he indeed have the authority to forgive sin, and to do so "upon earth"? That is, is he authorized to reverse an entire criminate order, at once both eschatological and earthly, both factual and unconditionally valid, and to supersede it by its opposite: forgiveness?

e) The question is not, Was he authorized to demand of men that they forgive one another, on pain of being themselves unforgiven if they don't? He did demand that, too, but that is still retribution. Love thus demanded— which is still my neighbor's just due — is not really an alternative to "justice," as Christian ethicists sometimes pretend. That is still only justice, though now in its most stringent requirement, which when refused is justly retributed. No, the question is, Was Jesus authorized to amend even that order of justice, forgiving men for no other reason than that they conceded him that authority, men who themselves had not forgiven?

f) For example, could he forgive a culprit like the Ephesian *kleptoon*? Could he, on his own authority and without fear of being outranked or countermanded, forgive a thief? As his last dying act, one thief he did not forgive and another one, who trusted him, he did. But was the thief's trust justified? Was Jesus' own trust justified? "He trusted him who judges justly." But that One did confirm Jesus' new authority — not only by words, but characteristically by historic action: by raising him from the dead.

g) His radical authority, thus won "upon earth," boldly extends

forgiveness now to a vast motley of beneficiaries right where they are, "upon earth," still very much implicated in the criminate order, in its incriminating processes of wherewithal and work and wealth. They need not contest that order, and not only because its incriminations are of course incontestable, but also because they are free enough not to contest it, entitled as they are to appeal beyond it. Among them, no doubt, are still thieves and misers and who knows what sorts of economic sports – all of them, as the Pharisees foresaw, bad risks. But that risk, they dare to believe, the Son of Man calculated and vindicated.

h) So here at last is the answer to that question we had wondered about from the beginning: Why do those paraenetic texts we quoted treat the thief and the miser as leniently as they do? Why, if greed is incriminated by the Creator's very order of things and explicitly by his Word, is that criticism now so muted and gentle in these apostolic exhortations? It isn't that the authors, either the Johannine or the Ephesian author, no longer recognize the enduring validity of that criticism. They do indeed, even to the point of insisting that the criticism is nothing less than annihilating for those who have no recourse beyond it. And that, as they warn, is a continuing possibility also for Christians. It is altogether possible for a well-to-do Christian to infer from his greed that the loving God no longer "abides" with him but has abandoned him, with retribution then as the last and only word.

i) The fact is, though, that John intimates this rejection only as a possibility, and then only in the form of a question. The criticism is still there, though not as the last word. The miser is still assumed to be within range of the apostle's voice, the forgiving Word, and hence within range of "the love of God." Too, he is still assumed to be within the Christian brotherhood. And the same is assumed of the Ephesian thief. In other words, both are still under the Son of Man's protective "authority upon

earth to forgive sins," contrary as that authority may be to the criminate order in which they likewise operate. The struggle to live under both authorities simultaneously, with forgiveness as the decisive one, now actually comes to the surface in words and syntax in the way the apostles formulate their sentences: a prodding question here, a bit of advice there—though now not unto death but unto life. Say it another way: the apostles can risk direct imperatives and at least a gentle rebuke, even with the weak and wayward, in view of the higher authority which liberates these culprit from being defensive. Isn't that The Secret, the mysterion, behind the predominantly constructive tone of apostolic paraenesis?

Fourth Thesis. Whether the Christian community can actualize its authority for non-retributive, non-critical action also in economic life, whether it can do so either without subverting the Creator's existing economic processes or without retreating into economic sects, is I think answerable not theoretically but only experimentally.

a) Is what we have said so far, much as that may be, all there is to the economic ethos of the Christian community: namely, the freedom to live within the criminate order without being driven to further defensiveness and self-justification by its incriminations? Or if the ethos is more than that, is it only this much more: namely, to utilize one's freedom aggressively within this order not only by taking its criticisms in stride but also by heeding its just demands and actively doing them – doing honest work, sharing with those in need? True, if even that were all the community dared hope for (and many a prudent Christian ethic has not ventured beyond that), that would already be an immensely ambitious hope. All the moreso, if Christian agents in the economic order not only discharged its

existing demands but actually advanced its demands and, by one retributive incentive or another, amplified what it exacts most justly of all, peace and mercy. But what is still more than all this, Does the Christian ethos not only free men for the criminate order, to do it justice, but also introduce into that order – in, with and under it – a whole new order of its own?

b) If so, might such a new order invade the old one also in its economic sector? Can the Son of Man's "authority to forgive sins" so insinuate itself "upon earth" that the very interactions between wherewithal and work and wealth would themselves be governed, not by recompense and just deserts and appraisals of worth, but by grace alone? That, if you will pardon the pun, is a big order. Still, though such an achievement is not likely, we ought not be too quick to say it is altogether unlikely. It has in fact been attempted from time to time, as the history of the church demonstrates. Christian communities, beginning with the earliest one in Jerusalem, have tried in the Name of Jesus to renounce all right to private property (what we have called "wealth") or, as in the case of mendicant monastic orders, even gainful employment ("work"). Might something like that still be a possibility for the Church today, at least in limited ways?

c) Of course there is that one "order of grace" which the Church has never been without, and cannot be and still be the Church: the mutual sharing of the Gospel and the sacraments, the apostolic ministry of the Word. That too is ethos, and not merely a private ethos of the inner person but a public, supra-personal structuring of human relationships for giving and receiving, acting and being acted upon. To emphasize how this public ministry of Gospel and sacraments is indeed a corporate, supra-personal structure, we need only recall that it does not derive its distinctive character from the individuals who carry it on, whether its ordained officiants or its lay recipients. It

is distinguished as Christian, this communal order, by its graciousness, its logic of non-retribution. That is of the essence of its institutions: the Gospel it shares, its baptisms, its Holy Communions, its mutual absolutions. Yet all these socially structured transactions retain their gratuitous character independently of the subjective qualifications of its individual participants. It may even be that some of them, including its officials, are themselves not Christians. (That has been said to happen.) Conversely, it is not by their mere enacting of this order – say, by receiving its sacraments or preaching its Gospel – that they become Christians, *ex opere operato*. This churchly ministry of reconciliation is an overt structure like any other social order, yet (let us hope) without their inherent retributiveness.

d) But can this grace-ordered giving and taking of Gospel and sacraments take similar shape, non-retributively, in Christian economic community? Is that perhaps implied in the Johannine passage we have been considering, with its talk of “need” (not deserts or rights or due) and of “give” (not remunerate or repay or negotiate) and especially of “brother” (not debtor or creditor or prospect)? Does this brotherhood, in which the participants grace one another with Gospel and sacraments, imply a similar brotherhood of “goods” – all of it without any reckoning of what the other has coming to him or of what he owes?

e) No doubt the suggestion sounds idealistic, and by “idealistic” we might mean, I suppose, “It will never work.” But the hazard, really, is worse than that. The greater risk is that, even if such an undertaking could succeed internally, it might do so only at the expense of the surrounding economic order. That is, it might create the public misimpression that basic economic processes – not only wherewithal and wealth and work but also their essential retributiveness with its critical

evaluations – are in principle invalid. Of course that kind of tampering with the realities of creation might incur the added disadvantage as well of economic disaster for the Christian experiment itself – or, almost as sadly, economic compromise. Examples abound, and Dr. Danker's rich bibliography shows more of all this than I either need to or can. Witness the original experiment by the Jerusalem congregation. When the hope of Christ's imminent return was disappointed, the practice of communal ownership had to be discontinued. Only a few years later the mother of John Mark is reported as owning her own home. But could the venture have survived in any case, failing (as it apparently did) to provide for the element of productive work and liquidating the community's productive assets? Could this have been why Paul had to take up a collection for the "poor brothers in Jerusalem"?

f) Later Saint Francis and his Poverello showed that in the meantime they had at least learned the importance of work, if only of begging, though never for wages or alms beyond what they needed for one day at a time. Yet more than that was needed, when Francis died, to finance a basilica in his memory at Assisi; so Brother Elias installed a moneybox. Brother Leo smashed it, and the split ensued between the Spirituals on the one hand, who still insisted on their master's *regola senza glossa*, and the Conventuals on the other. Inevitably, though, the Franciscans' growing success, both in size and wealth, demanded Cardinal Ugolini's compromise: let the church have the *dominium*, the lordship over their wealth, and grant the friars the "use" of it. Caesar of Heisterbach, himself a monk, summed up the story of monastic economics: "Discipline begets abundance, and abundance, unless we take the utmost care, destroys discipline; discipline in its fall pulls down abundance." Admittedly, the Franciscan experiment was brilliantly successful in denouncing the surrounding greed. But

it seems to have disavowed too much, also some of the essentials of good economic order, (for example, by its idealizing of beggary) and eventually had to make its peace with that order and with its brand of retribution. One alternative might have been to remain a cloistered little company. But then that, too, would belie the world outreach of the Christian world mission.

g) Isn't it that very outreach, in fact, which again and again has inspired efforts toward a distinctively Christian – that is, distinctively gracious –economic community? By that I do not mean merely the church's involvement in the same old secular economic order for the expedient of subsidizing itself. That, as we mentioned at the outset, does little to dramatize the church's unique divine mercy, its hard-won "authority upon earth" to give and not to count the cost. Nor am I speaking of that embarrassing recourse which the church has often had to take when it comes into some ill-got windfall and, like Zaccheus, must decide upon the most virtuous way to dispose of it. Under such circumstances the thirty-third of Zwingli's Sixty-Seven Articles offers as good a way-out as any: "Unjust gains, if they cannot be duly restored, should not be given to temples, cloisters, monks, priests and nuns, but to the needy." The Black Manifesto of a few years ago was a shrewd variation on this principle. But no, our question has been about something more radical still. Can the Christian community manage a kind of economic order – shall we say, a "demonstration" economy? – which is proper to its own special genius? Can it do so without suggesting a *theologia gloriae*, as if God's present economic history were already over and done with, and yet anticipate by its own structured graciousness that the present economic processes, especially their retributive judgment, do face an end in the return of Christ? Can the Christian world mission become even by its economic organization a semeion to the world of that unparalleled love which calculates no man's deservings and

requites every man's wrath with only generous compassion? How often hasn't the experiment been tried! Might it succeed the next time? I can think of only one way to find out. And after all, what was it that inspired the Johannine paraenesis we have been looking at? Wasn't it something like John 13:35; "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That same passage, come to think of it, was the motto of Bugenhagen's experiment in welfare economics.

Robert W. Bertram
Saint Louis, Missouri
September, 1971

[Economic Perspective RWB71 \(PDF\)](#)