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From the Editor

As mentioned in the last issue, the annual meeting of the Tyndale Fellowship Ethics Group - July 1990 - this year focused on economics. The conference was a considerable success, not least in bringing together ACE members, as well as in the fruitful interaction between theologians and economists.

Two of the key papers from the conference are published in this issue. The other papers will follow in the next, due by the end of this year. (Both cost and common sense preclude overloading all the papers into one edition.)

ACE and the future

Longer-standing members will be aware that, for various reasons, ACE has in recent years struggled to provide the services for which it was created. However, there is much potential for good. With the agreement of Shirley Dex, who is standing down as Convenor, Donald Hay and I propose to accept administrative responsibility for ACE, given that, from now on, ACE aims to do just two things:

- (1) Produce this Journal twice-yearly, with myself as editor.
- (2) Hold an annual two-day conference, in the summer.

Please, therefore, note the date of the 1991 conference, and make every effort to come! It will be on 8-9 July (Monday & Tuesday), at Jesus College, Oxford. Several members have already agreed to give papers. Further details will of course follow. Donald is in charge of the conference.

Any comments on the above plans are welcome.

IEA conference, 19 November 1990: Christianity and Capitalism

Details are enclosed. I trust some members will be able to attend. (Reports for the next Journal would be gratefully received.)

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The Bible and Economics: A Evaluation of Alternative Approaches

Is there such a thing as *Christian* cookery? The question of the distinctiveness of Christian culinary delicacies was probably first raised in 1977 in the early pages of *Third Way*¹ magazine. The context was a series of exchanges on the character of the 'Christian mind' and its implications for academic disciplines and practical skills. My first intention in this paper is to pick up that debate and ask what it means to have a Christian mind on economics.

~~The characteristically evangelical affirmation of the supreme authority of~~ scripture almost inevitably entails that the Bible provides the source and sometimes the ideological legitimation of our Christian economic thinking. There is a compulsion to search for biblical contexts or to cite biblical prooftexts that develop or justify the Christian economic enterprise. My second intention is to review how evangelical economists actually handle the scriptural data and to make some assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches.

Preliminaries

Before proceeding, there are some important preliminary matters that must be dealt with:

(a) SCOPE: Much of the evangelical dialogue is pursued in the arena of 'social ethics'. Prominent issues include the relationship of social responsibility to evangelism², or which theological model best guides the way we do social ethics in a mixed society. However, the debate on whether it is the creation narratives, Mosaic legislation, the kingdom of God or shalom which

¹P.Helm, 'Developing a Christian Mind', 1(3), pp.7-9: P. Helm, 'Christian Mind', 1(11), p.17: A.B. Cramp, 'Christian Economics', 1(12), p.16: R. Russell, 'Thinking through a Christian Mind', 1(10), pp.7-9.

²A recent attempt is J. Woodhouse, 'Evangelism and Social Responsibility', in B.G. Webb (Ed.), *Christians in Society*, Explorations 3, Moore Theological College, Lancer Books, 1988.

provides the hermeneutical key for contemporary ethical discussion is tangential to what follows³. To begin with, at least, my focus is more narrowly concerned with economic analysis.

Traditionally the major economic debate in the Christian literature has been preoccupied with which economic system, market capitalism or democratic socialism or whatever, best reflects Christian principles in the allocation of resources⁴. Among trained economists, however, the discussion of the relative merits of comparative economic systems is a rather peripheral matter. Richard Lipsey, for example, in his popular textbook, *An Introduction to Positive Economics*, does not discuss the issue directly. The terms 'socialism' and 'planning' are not mentioned either in the index or glossary⁵. This is not to argue that such matters are not given attention by economists⁶, the point is that Christian discussions of economics tend to give disproportionate weight to this overarching question⁷.

(b) DEFINITION: Economics is a very slippery discipline to delimit. Definitions often fall into the trap of describing the research programme of one

³See the set of papers reproduced in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol LXII/No. 1, January 1990.

⁴This point is also well-made by J. David Richardson, 'Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship', *Christian Scholar's Review*, XVII:4, 381-400. He suggests such easily tilled and fruitful fields need some Sabbath rest.

⁵I've used the 7th edition, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989. The nearest Lipsey comes to the topic is in two chapters (out of 40) which discuss the theoretical cases for free markets and for government intervention.

⁶See, for example, the non-mainstream textbook by J. Robinson and J. Eatwell, *An Introduction to Modern Economics*, London, McGraw-Hill, 1973.

⁷The recent moves towards economic and political liberalisation in Eastern Europe, however, are inevitably generating more interest in these grand issues. See, for example, P.G. Hare, 'From Central Planning to Market Economy: Some Microeconomic Issues', *Economic Journal*, 100, 581-595, 1990.

of the many competing schools of thought⁸. This is not to deny that there is a textbook consensus which emphasises the price system (supply and demand) and exchange relationships. But historically the fortunes of dominant paradigms have witnessed decline and fall. I prefer the functional definition that economics is what trained economists do in the universities, government departments, in industry, the City and international organisations. It is the professional interests of the ordinary economist that are the subject of my attention. This is actually a narrower definition than that countenanced by most non-economists who often interlace social ethics and politics in their discussion of 'economic' affairs⁹. Perhaps the lesson is that economic categories alone are insufficient for studying social issues.

DESCRIPTION AND PRESCRIPTION

From a glance at the biblical material that bears (however tangentially) on economic matters, it soon becomes clear that much of it, though not all, is concerned with covenantal stipulations or moral exhortation. It deals with ethical norms which are typically given theological justification. Not surprisingly, then, much discourse in Christian economics deals with explicitly prescriptive questions: what should we do about the environment? how should a Christian economic system be structured?

⁸In North Atlantic economics, the neoclassicals are, of course, dominant. Hence, Richardson, *Frontiers*, defines economics (p.382), 'as the science of decision-making under scarcity'. But Marxian, Post Keynesian, Austrian and Neo-Ricardian traditions, that might dispute this as a complete definition, persist.

⁹An example of this is the recent Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, *Transformation*, 7(2), 1990. The overriding emphasis on justice is largely alien to an economist's conceptual toolkit. It is a social ethical, rather than a narrowly economic, category. It has a happier home in the textbooks of political theory than those of introductory economics (it barely gets a mention in Lipsey). However, I do not wish to argue that justice could not or should not be a high profile issue in the daily business of the economist (see later), just that in practice the matter is neglected.

There is, however, a prior issue concerning the relationship of biblical revelation to the description and explanation of economic reality. In the next section I will examine three views regarding the relationship between the Bible and descriptive economics before proceeding to address the question of how the biblical material shapes economic prescription.

(A) INDEPENDENCE

The first and most common position presumes disciplinary autonomy: ~~scripture may tell us something about the geography, history and religion of the~~ ancient Near East but it has nothing to contribute directly to the understanding of modern economies. There is a gulf between specialised theory and the biblical witness. The Bible does not teach us macroeconomics or the theory of international trade since it is not an economics textbook. Scripture may or may not have some bearing on ethical, or policy questions, but the status of economic analysis is that of a neutral input into such matters. Economics *qua* scientific enquiry only attempts to point out the consequences of alternative policy initiatives: which set of ends are compatible and when. So while economic models might forecast the trade-offs between inflation and unemployment at different levels of bank base rates, the determination of which ends are desirable is strictly outside the domain of the economist *qua* economist. Positive economics *per se* is of 'no more moral and spiritual significance than a slide rule or a mathematical equation'¹⁰.

As a corollary, God concepts are redundant in scientific economic theory. Economists have no need of the God hypothesis at least in their theoretical pursuits. The implication for the Christian economist in his or her professional

¹⁰Quoted from G.H. Aull, 'The Economics of the Bible', *Southern Economic Journal*, Vol XVI, No 4, 391-399, 1950.

capacity is that Christian witness manifests itself chiefly in outstanding professional conduct, standards of excellence, and personal qualities. This approach cannot easily be dismissed. It is the dominant position in the day to day work of contemporary secular and Christian economists.

Such a standpoint is echoed by Oliver Barclay¹¹ in his discussion of whether there is Christian insight in mathematics. He writes:

the fact is that Christian mathematicians have not shown themselves notably closer to the reality of God's creation in the mathematical world than other mathematicians. If they alone understood it correctly, they should do better mathematics. Not only do they not do visibly better mathematics, but what they do is indistinguishable from the mathematics done by others. The same could be said of many sciences

One danger with the 'independence' model is that there is no reason why economic categories, incentives and constraints should not imperialistically dominate thinking about any and every issue without restraint¹². After all, any social phenomenon can be conceived as human economising activity. Take, for example, the economic theory of the church¹³. In the case of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the Pope is the chairman of a huge multi-national corporation which produces religious, educational and social services. To quote Adam Smith, 'The clergy of every established church constitute a great incorporation'. The objective of the board of directors, that is the church cardinals, is to maximise ecclesiastical wealth. Thus a chief task is the recruitment of priestly and episcopal labour to convince customers that the discounted value of the future

¹¹O.R. Barclay, *Developing a Christian Mind*, IVP, 1984. The quote is from page 205. D. Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique*, Apollos, 1989, also uses the example of mathematics as an academic discipline that is remote from theological questions, without implying that this is true of all learning.

¹²The tyrannical tendency for economic categories to be exalted is made plain by R.K. McCloughry, *The Eye of the Needle*, Inter Varsity Press, 1990, chapter 4.

¹³E.J. Kane, 'Pareto Optimality and the Church as an Economic Enterprise', *Kyklos*, XIX, 425-442; B.B. Hull and F. Bold, 'Towards an Economic Theory of the Church', *International Journal of Social Economics*, 16(7), 1989; G.M. Anderson, 'Mr Smith and the Preachers: The Economics of Religion in the Wealth of Nations', *Journal of Political Economy*, 96, 1066-1088, 1988.

benefits of salvation exceeds their current opportunity costs, that is, opportunities for worldly pleasure. Since the church competes at the margin in an oligopolistic market, against other religions and secular substitutes, for the allegiance of individuals, it is loathe to make frequent adjustment to its prices. Hence theological novelty must be carefully monitored to avoid disturbing the equilibrium of tradition.

The product mix of the company includes temporal bliss (fellowship in theological jargon), social goods (such as income redistribution), deferred perpetuity (eternal life in theological jargon) and altered fate (healing miracles). Temporal bliss, as indicated, comprises goods relating to religious entertainment. These products provide a source of revenue and attract additional church members. But due to the existence of secular competitors in the market for temporal bliss, such as football, alcohol consumption, and the cinema, the church has an incentive to enforce a monopoly position by proscribing these substitute activities for the faithful. Alternatively the church must lower its relative prices or improve product quality with more up beat choruses, better provision for the children and improved car parking facilities.

And so the theory goes on, accommodating all behaviour to utilitarian calculus.

(B) INTERDEPENDENCE

The standard response to the 'independence' view is to note that it is predicated on a strict positive/normative distinction. Lipsey's textook, for example, is concerned with *positive* economics, that is, with the scientific study of economic phenomena through the statement and testing of theories. It is concerned with facts not values: what 'is' rather than what 'ought' to be. This dichotomy is based on the positivist view that facts *per se* are in principle

independent of values; there is a 'logical gulf' between descriptive and evaluative sentences.

It is now widely acknowledged, however, that at least in the humanities and social sciences such a sharp distinction is fallacious. And in practice most economists will admit that values sneak in the back door. It is difficult, for example, to remain dispassionate when advising on public policy. Also, language is replete with implicit values. Lionel Robbins protested that surely, 'equilibrium is just equilibrium', but as Joan Robinson pointed out, ~~'disequilibrium sounds uncomfortable, goods sound good, exploitation wicked, and sub-normal profits rather sad'~~. Furthermore, description may often be motivated by normative considerations. Poverty might be studied in order to contribute to its alleviation.

The most powerful argument against value neutrality is based on the weakness of theory testing.

All theories are constructed within a particular vision or world view with regard to the nature of economic reality. Neoclassicals interpret the world in terms of individualism and the market; Marxists in terms collectivities (social groups) and power relations. As such the preferred world view shapes the selection of problems for study and the conceptual framework. It shapes the way questions are posed, the data interpreted, the answers that are acceptable, the language in which the results are formulated and the test criteria preferred. Thus, methodological judgements or presuppositions about what has value very powerfully invade the *context of discovery*.

This would not matter if values could be filtered out effectively through theory testing, that is in the *context of justification*. Theories would be adopted that were most successful in the face of attempts at falsification. One would expect the best performing hypotheses, in general, to conform closest to

the true world view. In the hard sciences it would appear that we do have objective access to the empirical world through hypothesis testing. Bad theories generated by defective world-views can be filtered out¹⁴.

But as is well known, economics is an inexact science; the subject matter does not display universal laws or constants. The structure of the economic universe is always changing. Consequently theory appraisal is extremely difficult and few theories, if any, have been conclusively refuted. Since there are no decisive anomalies in the social sciences, testability fails to perform its filtering function. As a result there is theoretical pluralism in economics: a pluralism that reflects different visions of social reality and, therefore, different judgements of what is significant. And these judgements are normative in so far as they suggest what categories and tools are necessary for accurate description. Every economic description, because of severe difficulties with testing, ultimately has to reflect a value-laden judgement that this is how the world ought to be described¹⁵.

So while acknowledging the positivist view that economic analysis may serve as an input into biblically based ethical discussion, the interdependency position goes further to argue that conversely the Bible may serve as an input into economic discourse. It functions, for example, to set the agenda of what concerns are particularly of interest. This is basically the argument of Richardson¹⁶. He claims that some of the substance of economics is more

¹⁴Of course these methodological and epistemological questions are still hotly debated in the philosophy of science. I make no apologies for a simplistic approach. The line of thought reproduced here is fairly typical of those post-positivist critiques favoured by economists.

¹⁵An extremely useful survey of the literature on this issue is provided by C.K. Wilber and R. Hoksbergen, 'Ethical Values and Economic Theory: A Survey', *Religious Studies Review*, 12, 208-214, 1986.

¹⁶Richardson, *Frontiers*, 391-396.

intrinsically interesting to Christians: controversial topics such as poverty, welfare experience, income distribution, immigration and economic development are suggested for study. Certain tools of analysis may also much better fit a Christian's relational temperament, typically those which are more social in character such as interviews and surveys.

There are some difficulties with such an approach. First, it is not always clear which questions are uninteresting from a Christian perspective, or, more strongly, which topics should be avoided. Donald Hay suggests that a Christian would not be too preoccupied with outcomes regarding efficiency, growth and progress as dictated by the neoclassical research programme¹⁷, but with issues relating to responsible stewardship, satisfying work etc. This conclusion, of course, hinges on what is made of the biblical material, an issue considered below. Secondly, in practice, Christians who nominally adhere to the interdependence position easily lapse into the independence framework either through neglect, the lack of a supportive environment, or professional constraints: the research agenda and tools may well be selected on one's behalf. Finally, as Kenneth Elzinga¹⁸ laments, this agenda appears limited; it lacks a distinct Christian flavour:

if that's all there is to Christianity and economics, i.e., caring scholars doing mainstream work on a non-random selection of topics, this will be a disappointment to those with higher expectations for the impact of Christianity upon economics. For if economics as done by Christians is to offer a new paradigm that is so bold, so useful, and so close to the world of reality that it will influence the discipline, this has not happened.

¹⁷Hay, *Economics Today*, 124.

¹⁸K.G. Elzinga, 'Comments on J. David Richardson', *Christian Scholar's Review*, XVII:4, 401-405, 1988.

(C) INTIMACY

For those concerned to operate within a more distinctively Christian paradigm, the 'interdependency' model contains the seeds of a more radical approach¹⁹. The key idea, propagated mainly by thinkers in the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition of Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, and Van Til is that biblical revelation transforms economic description. Ethical (biblical) categories are required to perceive reality correctly. In the words of Storkey²⁰:

p.ix 'biblical revelation is a necessary prerequisite for perceiving our situation more truly'.

Biblically derived institutional norms not only show us how we are meant to live, how institutions such as the state, the family, the corporation and the financial system should be shaped, but also provide a way in to *understanding* pathological economic outcomes. Failures (and successes) of the economy are to be understood as failures to adhere to the normative principles governing the purpose and shape of economic activity. Ethical categories, then, are imported directly into economic description. The attitudes and values exhibited in economic activity and relationships are to be questioned as part of the analysis since they are integral to the data generation process. So, for example, poverty is to be understood as a deviation from scriptural principles. More controversially, Storkey ascribes the economic performance of the West to the success of the service ethic and neighbour loving not modern capitalism. The development of new forms of service is the dynamic of company growth. Ego-

¹⁹ Hay, *Economics Today*, for example, disgruntled with the standard utilitarian framework on which much economic theory hangs, argues (p.144):

If that [utilitarian] framework is *untrue* in its claims about man in his social relationships and economic life, then the analysis will be seriously flawed. There is therefore a *prima facie* case for reconstituting economics within a Christian framework.

Hay, however, refrains from taking up the challenge with regard to descriptive economics.

²⁰A. Storkey, *Transforming Economics: A Christian Way to Employment*, Third Way Books: SPCK, 1986.

centricity leads to industrial unrest, and adversarial values in company ideology produce rotten fruit.

'Economic' policy proposals also become explicitly ethical: the solution to unemployment requires changed institutional values and commitments and a different way of understanding our economic relations such that a strong, positive value is given to employment. As Storkey comments, repentance may turn out to be a central economic issue. The implication is that non-normative analyses seriously misrepresent what is going on. All true theory is Christian theory.

Such an approach is more common than might be imagined. Brian Griffiths²¹, for example, notes that although inflation may be technically related to the supply of money, the fundamental problem is not the control of monetary aggregates but the addiction of Western economic democracies to consumption. This creates an incentive for governments to expand the money supply in order to win elections.

One obvious merit of the Dooyeweerdian approach is that it brings biblical and ethical categories into a much higher profile. The Christian content and method is more distinctive and conspicuous. A standard criticism, however, is that the analysis ends up rather speculative. Garrod²² argues that it omits any convincing explanations of the causes of the breakdown of norms, beyond an appeal to sinful attitudes. Oliver Barclay is also very suspicious of the Dooyeweerdian school of thought since it tends to rely on a non-biblical philosophical framework as the starting point.

²¹B. Griffiths, *The Creation of Wealth*, Hodder and Stoughton, 113-114, 1984.

²²T. Garrod, 'Class and Christians', letter in *Third Way*, 8 September, 1977.

Prescription

Whatever view is taken on the correct way to utilise the biblical records in economic description, there still remains the crucial question, so far unaddressed, of what precisely is the character of the (prescriptive) biblical witness on matters economic.

In discussions of the biblical material certain key passages regularly appear²³. The creation narratives are used to mandate the creation of wealth, and responsible stewardship through work. From the Mosaic Law, the Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 turns out to be fundamental. Legislation on harvest gleanings, honest weights, tithing, slavery, loans, and the family also attracts attention. The prophets offer particularly choice selections on social justice and preferential options for the poor. The gospels and epistles, however, yield lower rates of return. In the Synoptic gospels, we have a few parables and some material on wealth and poverty which may be of interest. The epistles have a bearing on issues related to the State, and again some discussion of personal and ecclesiastical obligations to care for the marginalised.

Problem of Scriptural Distortions

A very acute danger in searching for texts relevant to economics is that enthusiasm for the project can lead to unnatural exegesis. Take, for example, the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20). Its central meaning surely has to do with the fact that the kingdom of heaven does not operate on the principles of ability or merit but God's sovereign grace. Christian economists, while acknowledging the fundamental truths taught in the parable, typically propose secondary meanings with wider application. Brian Griffiths, for example, derives

²³ Drawing on D. Hay, *Economics Today*, chapters 1 and 2; A. Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective*, Chapter 14; B. Griffiths, *The Creation of Wealth*, chapter 3; M. Schluter and R. Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family: From Biblical Norms to Public Policy in Britain*, Jubilee Centre Paper No. 1, 1986; and C.J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God*, Inter Varsity Press, 1983.

the lesson that ownership is absolute and involves total discretion. Alan Storkey understands the parable to point to a concern for unemployed workers. Alternatively one might distill lessons for union-management relationships. At best, such secondary meanings are a little strained and artificial. And some bizarre conclusions may result. One study²⁴ of Jesus' parables in the context of the economic circumstances of first century agrarian Palestine, for example, argues from the agricultural parables (of the Sower, Weeds, and Mustard Seed) that Jesus is implicitly advocating a collective strike by the peasantry for the sake of the Kingdom!

Recognising the dangers of eisegesis, there are basically three main approaches to handling the biblical data listed above:

(A) MINIMALISM²⁵

The minimalist denies that the biblical material generates much in the way of direct guidance even as prescription. There are two variants:

The extreme version argues that the biblical revelation is of little relevance for economic life, beyond personal responsibility not to steal from the taxman, and to respect private property. Christianity is understood as a religion which is not immediately concerned with the structure and operation of any political, social, or economic system.

A more moderate and less privatised position would accept the importance of biblical injunctions in their application to economic life but construe them as either too general or, in the case of the OT law, too culturally distant to be of any utility, or inapplicable to a non-theocratic society, or not binding under the new covenant. The injunctions are thus mediated more through the conscience

²⁴D.E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.

²⁵This label is not intended in any pejorative sense. It is a neutral term!

and Christian compassion. It is the law written on the heart which provides the motivation and justification for Christian involvement in economic affairs. So in dealing with the problem of unemployment, the minimalist would be content to take 'love thy neighbour' as programmatic and get on with the task as earnestly and imaginatively as possible within his or her personal sphere of influence. This is the approach I find often adopted by grassroots (frontline) Christians not given to academic conversations. The ethical demands impact primarily on the behaviour within the Christian community as it seeks to minister to a needy world in the name of Christ. This does not preclude involvement at the political level, but the distinctive Christian contribution is the faithful witness of the servant church as an exemplar for the world²⁶. The important point to note is that Scripture is viewed as insufficient in its models or detail for more than, at best, very general guidance in economic prescription. Authoritative biblical revelation is believed to be largely absent in this field.

(B) PRINCIPLES

For those who desire to pay closer attention to the guidelines of the biblical material, an approach based on a systematic formulation of derivative social principles (or middle axioms) commends itself. Acknowledging that it is not possible to pass directly from the scriptural counsels and directives to modern economic life, an inductive study of the Bible isolates certain dominant themes of relevance. There are several standard themes that typically emerge: stewardship of resources, the deconcentration of wealth and decentralisation of power; individual ownership of property and the need to share its benefits; the

²⁶I think the work of Stanley Hauerwas (eg. *The Peaceable Kingdom, A Primer in Christian Ethics*, SCM Press, 1984) falls in this tradition.

necessity and key role of work; care for the poor and oppressed; fair prices and wages; distributive justice and the quality of relationships.

A problem the approach immediately encounters is the one that besets the social ethics debate: that of which theme provides the hermeutical key. Those who stress principles derived from creation tend to reach different conclusions and emphases from those who rely on the prophetic call for justice. In part, of course, the preferred theme reflects the set of ideological spectacles that are being worn.

One of the advantages of the thematic approach is that it overcomes the problem of cultural distance between a theocratic agrarian society and the secular industrial situation by seeking universal principles in God's dealings with men and women. The trade-off is that the degree of abstraction is necessarily quite high. As a result proponents are usually long on conventional economic analysis, but very short on detailed prescription for inevitably complex economic problems. It is not, therefore, a terribly progressive research programme in terms of policy fruitfulness. In the words of Clements and Schluter²⁷:

[General principles] are at such a high level of abstraction as to be inadequately defined for specific application in contemporary situations.

(C) LAW

This critique forms a starting point for the theonomic approach which turns to the OT law, at least those aspects which deal with social institutions, as a normative, socio-political model for contemporary society. A theonomist is here defined broadly as anyone who subscribes to the belief that the OT Law continues to exercise (binding) authority over the NT believer in terms of its covenantal

²⁷ *Reactivating the Extended Family*, p.25.

stipulations except, of course, for those sections which have been rescinded or modified in the course of salvation history²⁸. Christians, for example, are no longer obliged to keep the ceremonial law (relating to the sacrificial system, the temple and the priesthood) since these obligations have been fulfilled in Christ's redemptive work on the cross.

There are, however, major differences within the theonomic school on what else does and does not carry over into the common era. I shall focus mainly on the so-called paradigmatic approach introduced by Chris Wright and adopted by the Jubilee Centre.

Here, the law is to be understood and applied as a paradigm in terms of the pattern of relationships between the component institutions (the local community, the state and the extended family), and the factors of production (land, labour, and capital). The interpretation of the law is not literalistic since due account must be taken of historical and cultural context and the intention behind the laws. Yet the norms which result are tied specifically to particular institutions, and fit together holistically as a model, rather than operating as general moral principles which may be applied elsewhere.

The theonomic approach is very appealing for those who wish to take all of God's revealed Word and the moral absolutes of the OT seriously. The pentateuch is also the richest biblical resource in terms of economic content. And in depth study does undoubtedly prove rewarding when it comes to policy questions. Much more detailed and precise analysis and proposals have been forthcoming from the theologians than from other Christian camps.

The fundamental theological question that the approach raises is a salvation historical one. Does the NT really teach the continuity of the Mosaic

²⁸ Even the hard line Christian reconstructionists (R. Rushdooney, G. Bahnsen, and G. North) acknowledge discontinuities between the old(er) and new(er) covenants.

law as a binding code for Christians except for those bits modified by the coming of Christ, or does it presuppose discontinuity (the in principle obsolescence of the law) unless reaffirmed under the new covenant?

Matthew 5:17-19 is the *locus classicus* for theonomic thought. The key to understanding these verses turns on the sense in which Jesus fulfils the law. For the theonomist Greg Bahnsen, 'fulfil' entails that Jesus confirms and establishes the continuing validity of the law in its precise details. There is, however, a slight inconsistency in his argument since even he qualifies verse 19 so as to exempt the ceremonial commandments which were fulfilled in Christ.

Against Bahnsen, I wish to argue²⁹ that Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets in the sense that they point to him. He is the goal of the OT. Jesus fulfils the OT prophecies by his person and actions; he fulfils the OT law by his teaching. By implication, he is its sole authoritative interpreter (hence, 'You have heard that it was said, but I say to you..' in Matt 5:21-48). The details of the OT commandments then are most properly obeyed by conforming to the teaching of the one who fulfils them. And he demands the moral perfection of God himself (5: 48).

The corollary of the position that I am affirming is that none of the Mosaic legislation *per se* is binding on Christians. New covenant believers are not obliged to obey it, not one jot or tittle (including the Decalogue). In short, Christians live under the stipulations of the NT and interpret the OT Christologically.

To a large extent, this approach undermines much of the theonomic enterprise, especially the radical version in which the details of Israel's social and political life are binding. However, this does not preclude studying

²⁹Following D.A. Carson, 'Matthew', *Expositors' Bible Commentary*, Vol 8, Ed. F.E. Gaebelin, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

the OT social system as a rich ethical resource so long as it is not appealed to as normative, that is divinely ordained as authoritative for today. It is true that the socio-economic laws and institutions of Israel embody those qualities of righteousness, love, justice and compassion which reflect God's own character. Thus they are still instructive and eminently worthy of analysis. However, the fundamental question is not, 'how do we apply the OT law?', but, 'how do we apply the teachings of Jesus and the apostles?'. My point is that even if an OT law (or model) can be demonstrated to be consistent with the NT, it is not necessarily terribly interesting. It may be very significant, it may stimulate fresh thinking, it may be unhelpful or misleading: but it is not binding as God's will for pagan society or for God's new society, the church.

Needless to say, the status of the OT law is a big issue which currently divides Reformed Christianity. Without the law, it might be argued that the Christian economic enterprise loses much of its cutting edge in terms of prescriptive content. The difficulty of proceeding only from theologically informed general principles to economic policy recommendations has already been pointed out. It may be that to look for *distinctively* Christian answers to economic problems is a blind alley. But perhaps it still leaves plenty of room for prophetic Christian commentary and good economic works springing from conscience and love for neighbour.

Ian Smith, Tyndale House: July 1990.