

The Economic Ideal of the Word of God

Adopted by the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian
(Covenanter) Church, June 7, 1920.

Rev. Dr. James M. Coleman

This is God's world. He made it for His glory and when sin would destroy it, He redeemed it in His love. In His infinite wisdom He gave to men His Word, as a letter of instruction, telling how the world of men and things was made and how it should be run by those to whom He committed the stewardship of power. But while the authority of this Word has been confessed in the home and in the church, its supremacy has been denied in the empire of politics and business, where is entrenched the kingdom of this world. And from his strategic position in politics and in business, Satan is continually organizing his attack upon the home and the church to subdue them to his will.

In the midst of the economic revolution, in which the present industrial order is being re-adjusted, through the coming into power of the men with calloused hands, it is fitting that we should turn to the instructions God has given for the management of this world and see what He has written for our guidance on the way. While we may not find the details of the program to be followed, nevertheless the Bible furnishes the economic principles, whose serious application would engender peace among the partners in production and would promote the highest interests of the individual, the church and the commonwealth.

The economic creed of the Old Testament may be summed up in the proverb, "Give me neither poverty nor riches . . . lest I be full and deny thee . . . lest I be poor and steal." This argues alike against an aristocracy of wealth and against a disinherited class as alike hostile to the interests of the church, and would make all except a middle class impossible in the economic order. It is this middle class from which the Covenanter Church has been recruited, and the same is mainly true of all churches, so that the economic

program of the Bible would give the church the best conditions for its work.

In the early Jewish economy, agriculture was the chief industrial occupation, and for that reason, the laws in regard to land, furnish the main source for our conclusion in regard to the economic teachings of the age. Moses had an advantage, possible to few lawmakers, of having his code in force before the occupation of the land, instead of having to compromise with evils which had been sanctioned by immemorial usage. By the land legislation, the soil was to be divided equitably among the families of the nation, for the family and not the individual was the unit in the Hebrew system. Thus each family received a homestead in the apportionment and it was entailed in the family so that it could never be legally alienated. This program recognized the danger of a homeless, landless class, that has no interest in preserving the existing order, but who might even expect to profit in its overthrow.

To guard against the loss of the family stake, through the improvidence of any of its members, provision was made for the cancellation of all debts against person or property in the year of Jubilee. At any time between the Jubilee years, debts might be contracted, individuals might even be sold into slavery, but the next Jubilee year annulled all such contracts. In that joyful year all Jewish citizens must be freed and all indebted estates returned without encumbrance.

Another section of the law which was calculated to preserve a middle class was the method of taxation. All taxes were to be levied on the income of land which economically is a tax on rent, a provision which made land speculation all but impossible. The application of these laws left no place for the idle rich or the idle poor. Each man was at the same time capitalist and laborer, employer and employee.

What the spiritual effect of this legislation might have been on the life of the Jewish people is matter for conjecture, since in the time of the prophets and probably much earlier, men were joining field to field and destroying the homesteads of the Mosaic plan. So that before the time of Christ the homeless beggars lined the public roads, while the rich had the title deeds of the disinherited.

Jesus made no avowed attempt to restore the constructive plans of Moses, but since He came to fulfill the law, we may expect to find that His teachings had the same general purpose as the economics of Sinai. This is evident from the emphasis that He placed on the Old Testament views on poverty and riches, seeking to relieve one and to correct the other.

While there are many inferences that may be fairly drawn from the parables of our Lord, His central economic teaching, the economic concept which may be taken to include all others, is that of stewardship. Nor is the conception of stewardship limited to our duty to God. It includes as well our duty to men. Jesus does not recognize the absolute ownership by men of any form of wealth. That is an idea that has come down to us through the pre-Christian forms of Roman law and has no support in the divine law. Jesus recognizes not ownership, which rests only on God, but only possession.

In the parables of the pounds and the talents and elsewhere, He plainly states what place stewardship holds in His view of property duties, and also shows that where the law of stewardship is not recognized even possession lapses. Those who failed to regard their holdings as good stewards, had even the use taken from them. That was the teaching of Wycliffe which caused the nobles to burn his body, but they could not destroy the economic law of God. He said that none should monopolize land which they did not use. "Take the unused talent from him" was the sentence of the Lord.

Disregarding the obligation of stewardship means the robbery of God and man, a sin against one and a crime against the other. The principle of stewardship covers the whole field of the industrial war between labor and capital and offers a solution for every phase of the struggle.

It is not without interest that the word translated steward is the word from which we get economist. Fulfilling the obligations of stewardship of muscle and mind and money is the economical method of life.

The Apostles also deal with the labor question. Three things cried to God, the blood of Abel, the sin of Sodom,

and defrauded labor, in an age when it took fifteen day's work to get a bushel of wheat. Paul enjoins workingmen to labor as for Christ, and the employer to remember that both they and their servants have Christ for their master. Both masters and men shall receive a second reward from Christ for faithful service.

May it not be that the Church of God has sinned away the centuries in failing to preach and to practice the economic ideals of the Word of God until the red revolution must come to urge the reluctant church to her neglected task. Even now the masses of the mills and the factories have turned away from the church, which had its institution among those who labored with their hands, and are eating the forbidden fruit of atheistic teachers, who have promised that through this eating their eyes will be opened on the good things of this life.

THE LAND LAWS OF THE HEBREWS

Resolutions adopted by the R. P. Synod, June 9, 1916:

1. The Synod commends the land laws of the Hebrews as containing basal principles which recognize the perpetual proprietorship of God in the land.

2. Synod commends the object of these laws: (1) that each family should have a home, (2) that monopoly should be prevented, and (3) that equality of opportunity should exist.

3. That we believe the direct command, "Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work", has its corollary in the social obligation to make conditions such that there need be no worthy unemployed.

4. We hold that each contributor in the production of wealth, whether individual or community, should share in distribution in ratio to contribution.

5. We believe that the adoption of these propositions in our economic system would work for the attainment of the ends secured by the land laws of the Hebrews.