

From Death to Shalom¹

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Our enslavement to technological and economic progress is leading us down a path to slow death. Our only alternative, says Goudzwaard, is to throw off the chains of our old masters and learn to walk with Christ, the beginning and the end of economic life.

Economic growth is a somewhat abstract term outside our everyday life, yet at the same time we know it well as something which is good, but which also has its shadow side. We read in the papers about the depletion of resources; some of them may be used up by 1980 or 1990. We read about the scarcity of a lot of things which we are using — iron, gold, copper and things like that — and at the same time, we read about food shortages. There are big food shortages in Africa, shortages that are expected to repeat themselves in coming years. We read too about energy problems and a gasoline crisis. They occurred last year, but they may repeat themselves again and again. And then there is the problem of the pollution connected with growing rich and with having the good life. We are here near Niagara Falls, but I read that not far from here Lake Erie is already becoming a dead lake in which the fish cannot find food or even swim.

Somehow all of these problems were with us in the past too. At the time of the Industrial Revolution about a century ago, life was bad in the slums of great cities with all the pollution. And so all these problems are old problems, but what is new is that they are confronting us all at the same time. It looks as if we are crashing against the borders of our earth. We are using up energy, destroying the possibilities of having fresh air and water. Everywhere we turn something is limiting us.

And now we are standing here with our economic growth, and we must think about the two issues together. Perhaps I can make it more explicit by giving you some examples. Per head of population the average American consumes 20 ton of new minerals every year, *20 ton*. You can imagine that such consumption cannot go on indefinitely; somewhere there is a limit. Another example: the old world oceans have a very thin layer of oil on their surfaces. At this moment the layer measures 1/10th of a millimeter.

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Biologists tell us, however, that pollution is pushing that layer to 1 millimeter because of the oil used by ships. With that layer the fish and plants in the ocean will not have enough oxygen to live. Because of the oxygen shortage, the food chain, the life chain in the oceans will collapse. And so here too, we are approaching some kind of limits.

The resources race

With the present situation in world politics, nations are racing for the ocean's resources as well as those in the underdeveloped countries. There is a run on them as there was in the past, but it is a new kind of run. The nations that need these resources most are not the poor countries but the rich ones. For instance, the United States of America is the largest producer of minerals, but at the same time it is a have-not nation. One third of the minerals used in the United States must be imported; a very rich nation has grown into a have-not. Therefore the United States has to make its political power felt everywhere just to guarantee a sufficient supply of resources to produce and consume. It is a situation to which we become accustomed and don't consider dangerous.

However, I believe this situation *is* dangerous because it is linked to a similar situation which was developing before the second world war. At that time the have-nots were Italy, Germany and Japan. Those nations did not have enough resources to provide adequate space for living the industrialized lifestyle they had chosen for themselves. *Lebensraum* was the term Hitler used as the motive for German expansion. If a nation needs scarce resources, there is a tendency to fight for them, as these earlier have-not nations did.

Today, we are seeing a new run for the developing countries to guarantee our own opportunities. As multi-nationals become extensions of ourselves to extract resources from the soils of developing nations, tensions can arise, not only in east-west relationships, but also in north-south relationships.

The have-not rich

Now we have a paradox. Can a nation be rich and at the same time be a have-not? That is a new situation. Can a nation be powerful, with all the opportunities it desires, and at the same time be powerless? In the Middle East crisis, for instance, the rich nations were dependent on the oil supplies coming from the Arab states, but they could not

adequately deal with the problem of the Middle East. Thus, they have become powerless even while they tried to maintain their mighty power. By seeking wealth we may end up in a have-not situation, and by trying to gain power, we may somehow bring ourselves to powerlessness. These modern types of powerlessness are not little weaknesses, little disturbances on the fringes of our great power, problems which we can expect to resolve in the future. They are at the very heart of our power, at the very place where we expected to become strong.

Let me give two other illustrations /16/ just to broaden the discussion of the world we are living in. We have seen very good efforts to deal with unemployment in our countries and to bring a certain amount of wealth to many poor people. We know how to use the weapons of modern economic science to solve this problem. We can push money into economic systems and everything is buoyed-up - production grows, creating the new jobs we need. And so we have been using money to solve our problems of unemployment and poverty. But now our widespread inflation tells us that the world is overwhelmed with money. Perhaps you have heard the old story about the magician whose pupil knew how to produce water but didn't know how to get rid of the water again. And so he was drowned with all the water streams coming over his head. Something like that is present in our society: we know we have power to eliminate unemployment, but we don't know what to do about the inflation as the money pours out and overwhelms us. We sense our powerlessness in the midst of our use of power.

Another illustration. We grow richer and richer, but somehow our riches can also create loneliness in the lives of a lot of people. If everyone watches his coloured television set, we have a substitute for communication between men. We have a total lack of contact with real people, which can create loneliness. But how can we deal technically or economically with loneliness? Again, we sense our powerlessness.

Voluntary slavery

The question is what has caused this helplessness? I think it has to do with the choice of our hearts. It is connected with Psalm 115 which says that the idols we choose for ourselves will, not leave us unchanged. They will turn us into images of themselves. We cannot deal with false gods and remain the same. In western societies we have sought our life fulfillment in following the path of growing more powerful by technique, by science, and by having

more opportunities to grow rich. At the same time we have guaranteed one another that we can become happy by increasing our power. Surrounding ourselves with a lot of goods not only brings us a cheap kind of happiness, but it also brings an imitation of fulfillment in our lives. We expect to see Shalom, the completion of civilization as we turn our hearts to follow the path to power.

We should not be surprised if we end up as servants. If you choose a master in your life, you must be willing to become a little bit of a servant. In the case of our path of development, we can choose a path of trusting and enlarging our power technologically and economically. But we have to stay on that path once we have chosen it. If a problem like loneliness arises along the way, we cannot deal with it because it does not have a technological or economic solution. Therefore we have to ignore such a problem. If we are to go on becoming rich, we will somewhere become dependent on the path to riches and indeed will have a lot of difficulties. In our case, a Middle East problem.

I can imagine that you are objecting that I should not oversimplify the issue by saying the idols in our lives are too closely related to technical and economic growth. Indeed, we all know, I think, that technological and economic development are not demonic in themselves. They are given by God as creational possibilities to be developed. And so, dealing with technique and with economics does not in itself make us slaves, but when we make a religion of it, you say, then we are indeed trusting in it.

I am inclined to agree with that, but I would add that our trust has to do with a whole path of western development. In western civilization we have had a period of renaissance, of enlightenment, and of industrial revolution, all different periods but connected by a common trait. That trait was the humanistic belief that we can create our own happiness. In that view, happiness is not something which God has given as a platform out of which we can live; it is not the Shalom God gives. In the humanist belief we have to create our own happiness by going to the world and extracting everything from it, working with things, working in science so that we can come to self-realization.

That search for happiness and self-realization reminds me of what Martin Buber once called an I-it relationship. Buber says that in such a relationship I am here with all the things of the world and that I can only come to my destination, to happiness, to the fulfillment of my life by

working and forming the "its." The things of the world are my source of happiness. Martin Buber says that the biblical way is to lay more stress on the I-you relationship so that you can become human. As a human being, I am myself an "I" in relationship to the living God and in relationship to my neighbours. But that is not our way in western society. We want to become more human, more happy through our relationship to things. That has been the consistent commitment of our western society — our belief that we can make happiness, that it is a product. For us happiness is not a question of grace but something that can be created.

Tyrannical progress

Our belief in our ability to create happiness has to do with our modern progress. You can read in literature, for instance, that progress has come over us as a fate: we can do nothing about it. Progress is on its own progressive way, and we cannot stop it. It has its own power apart from us. A Latin American journalist says that mankind is now sitting in a train without a driver on a track which we do not know, heading for a destination which may bring destruction. Along the way the train passes many switches which may be handled by demons; meanwhile mankind sits in the train, looking backwards. That is a very expressive way of picturing the idea of powerlessness. But the origin of that powerlessness is that since we have trusted the train to take us in a guaranteed good direction, we now must follow it wherever it goes. It is a saviour. We trust and follow that train because it is a comfort for us in /17/ all our situations in life.

And so you can say that the riches growing from our technique have become our saviour, our mediator, but they also have brought enslavement as we have become a servant of our mediator. A minister of finance of West Germany had an expression for that slavery. He said that people should not say we can do without economic growth because — to use his expression — we are riding a tiger. It is possible that by sitting on the back of the tiger that promises growing riches, we will bring about our own destruction. To ride a tiger is a risky thing, but it is going so fast that we cannot even risk jumping from its back, for then we will surely end up in ruin. That is the powerlessness that creeps into a culture that has chosen to let technique and economic growth have their own development. We will go along in the wake of that growth, and we will be saved. Whatever comes along we'll simply accept because we chose it.

One of the Dutch humorists adapted that brand of progress to the Eskimos. He asked what is progress for Eskimos? Progress is first to give them sensible heating and then to sell them refrigerators. Something like that is present in our society too. We believe that in following that path of progress everything will be okay. Powerlessness, then, is not just a natural development, it finds its origin in our previous choice of what we must trust in to guarantee our good outcome.

The word-filled earth

Since this is the situation in the society we live in, we have to ask about our responsibility as Christians. Let me try to say it this way. The Club of Rome report on the limits of growth said that today we are blocked everywhere by the limits of the earth. The way in which the report is written reflects the authors' belief that the earth was somewhat too limited for mankind. It cannot support us in all the ways we want to develop. The earth is too small, for our population has become too great for such a limited earth. I have also read something about that in other kinds of literature where men are saying that we have to deal with a badly created earth. It is like the Israelites who were standing between the Red Sea and the rocks. They shouted to Moses, "Have you brought us here to perish?" Today men ask, "Has God created the earth as a stage for our total destruction?"

As that question arises, we Christians have to ask again what we believe. When we echo Genesis, which says that God created a good earth, I think we have to read it with new eyes. Did God create the earth for robot human beings that go their mechanical ways as soon as they are wound up and walking in the direction in which he oriented them? Has God made the earth for robots? Or has he made it for human animals that live just by instinct? Are they animals that let anything within them come out, living by their instincts, and then cursing a God that hinders them in the realization of what is in them? Is that the meaning of the earth? I do not think it is.

God created the earth as His Word. That beautiful passage in the first part of what St. John is saying tells us that God has created the earth by His Word, that is, his Son. The triune God is present in that earth. God the Father speaks through His Son, and somewhere there is breathed the breath of the Holy Spirit. And so the word has come to us, the world was created.

Speaking about a Word presupposes an answer. God

presupposes that we answer the Word he has spoken to us. Now we have to take up the dialogue and answer Him. That is our basic responsibility. Since the world God created by his Word has an answer structure, we cannot speak about economic life and about technological development without seeing that they are in one way or another our answer to the living God, our way of telling Him what we will do with his mandates.

Living within the answer structure

God gave us the mandate of stewardship as his Word to us; it is up to us to answer. That is our Christian vocation in economic life. I think stewardship is a beautiful term. I will especially stress two elements in it here. First this: a steward is not someone who can say, "Now, I will just do what I want to do." A steward has to listen to a master to whom he is responsible. His obligation is responsible answer-giving. We are responsible for what we do with creation because it is not our possession. In a rented house we do not kick against the walls because it is someone else's. If we say that this world is the house of the living God, we have to be careful with it, knowing that we are responsible for the life of animals, of plants and all other things.

There is a second element in stewardship. When God said, "You are my stewards," He was not saying we should subdue the earth limitlessly. Genesis 1 is often quoted to say that man is supposed to grow without limits. People read that God blessed man and said, "Fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea." That is where most people stop, but Genesis 1 goes on, for God say [sic], "I give you also plants that bear seeds everywhere on earth and every tree bearing fruits which yield seed. They shall be yours for food and all green plants I give for food to the wild animals." God is not saying we can grow without limits, but is somewhere pointing out that we need food. God is telling us that we may get our food from what is growing and bears seeds on the earth, but the wild animals should also have an opportunity to live. God gave them the green plants. In giving us this mandate, God is setting us in an answer structure where we have to respond.

Growth as an answer to God

Now I have returned to what I was trying to say at the beginning of my speech. If economic growth has to do with giving answers, then it has to do with developing economic possibilities. However, that development must

take place so that it is an answer to the living God and to our neighbour. By recognizing that we are responsible for what we do with technique and for what we do with economic possibilities, we turn away from the beliefs that /18/ have grabbed our whole society. We do not have to say that technique and economic possibilities are angels leading us to a better situation. Nor do we have to say that they are devils which can only uproot us.

In our culture we forget that economic and technical possibilities are given to us by God as part of the answer structure. We say we have no choice, for the possibilities are already determined by technique itself and by economic growth itself. When we consider economic growth only in terms of growing rich and having a higher income, we are inclined to say that we should first grow as much as possible. Then we can check to see if our growth causes us to hit against the borders somewhere. Then we will have to deal with the problems with our techniques. Perhaps we will have to stop growth and have to find purifying devices. This way of approaching things does not start with what God gave to us but with ourselves, with our instincts, our desires as we live like robots. We want to be rich, but we see that somehow we are crashing against the borders. We begin to back up a bit only at the point where we run into obstacles, expecting that with a little accommodation the situation will improve. We look for technical and economic solutions for our difficulties, for we think of that path as our power.

Our approach should be just the opposite. First, God is saying, "You have a responsibility for this earth, to conserve it so that it will give life possibilities for human beings, for plants and for animals. That is the starting point. After you have fulfilled that mandate, you may find the possibility for some economic growth."

Stewardship starts with the principle that we first have to honor whatever we are charged with. Then we can think of ourselves. We have done just the opposite. We have tried first to have everything for ourselves and then have tried to correct the damage we've done to animals and to plants. It is not a good relationship.

I think we must go back to the beginnings and ask ourselves as western human beings, what did we trust, what gods are we following, wherein lies the real point of happiness in our lives? Have we believed that happiness comes in the opening up of every day of the Lord and in using goods as an expression of our love for God? Or have we believed just the opposite?

Immanent shalom

I am inclined to say that we have to start from the beginning and open up our lives, but we should not believe that we ourselves can reorient everything that is going on in this world as a result of following gods that have betrayed us. We should trust our Saviour, but that trust also has a deep meaning for our economic life. It does not bring with it a full program for the total reorientation of the world, but rather it asks for signposts of the kingdom — to use an expression of Hank Hart. We are to erect signposts which make visible in this world that our orientation point lies in Christ, that He is the beginning and the end also of economic life. He is our steward, and our happiness is in Him. If Christ becomes the starting point in our life. He will bring with Him a different life style. And that is a signpost in a culture.

To make it a little bit more practical, I can imagine an American family in which the husband says, "I will choose my labour for the opportunity it offers to earn the highest possible income." At the same time the neighbours look at his family and say, "Now that is an important guy. He is very rich, we should try to have contact with him." The power to make money determines not only his evaluation of his work, but it also affects his relationships with his neighbours. What is the value of that guy?

I can imagine that such a family might give the children substantial pocket money so they can do whatever they like. Then they can say, "We have now done our duty in relation to the kids. They can have a bright future and live happier lives than we have lived." That same family is also likely to think of consumption as simply buying the goods they need as cheaply as possible. Nothing but the price matters in consumption.

Now I am asking you, is there somewhere a family which is the witness of the Lord, whose members reorient their lives to a living Saviour? I hope you will be stimulated with me in seeking possibilities to live in an opened-up way. For instance, to refuse to buy a new car because the fashion has changed. A different way of life also has to do with our labour, with asking if the labour we do gives meaning to our lives. It has to do with the way we are using our goods and our incomes to open up relationships with others. How are you using your own house? Reserving it for yourself as individual property or opening it up to others to be a signpost of the kingdom in this world?

Standing on the flywheel

A concluding remark. Our big problem is that we are living in a societal system and that system has taken the same orientation point that we have taken in our lives: the orientation point that says the real meaning of an enterprise is to throw out products and the real meaning of the state is to bring economic growth. The state and the enterprise are not just independent powers; they are expressions of our interpretation of life. Like a flywheel set in motion, our society continually turns and flies, making it difficult to take a different standpoint.

Still, the Bible offers a promise of hope in Christ's call to believe in Him. He spoke those words to his disciples who had said, "Give us more faith so that we can handle our problems today." As He did many times, Christ just turned the question around and said, "If you have faith, you can say to this mountain, 'Shift yourself into the sea,' and it will be shifted."

Now I can guarantee you that the systems of our western society have been built up by our faith in progress, both in the past and in the present. Nevertheless, we have the promise of our Saviour Himself that in Christian belief there is a power to replace. It is not a power emerging from us, but one that has its fulfillment in his coming kingdom in which He will change our present world to restore justice. In that kingdom we will find shalom dwelling immanently in our intercourse with Him and with our neighbours. It will not be a product of our activity but will simply dwell there as something to be lived out of. I think we have to expect that kingdom and erect a signpost of that kingdom in our present society.

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