

# ECONOMIC LIFE

## A Confession

(First of two installments)

by Bob Goudzwaard

In several countries, including Canada, it is generally believed that trade unionism and religion are two strictly separate departments of life. Current trade union practice and labour legislation reflect the opinion that there is no direct connection between socioeconomic life and faith confession. As soon as people hear the word *confession* they think of the Apostolic creed, something that belongs in the church and is therefore quite unrelated to the social and economic problems besetting a nation. An enormous distance, even a contrast, seemingly exists between, for example, Christ's resurrection and our current inflation, or between faith in God the Father and today's unemployment. Such topics should not be mentioned in one breath.

In my opinion, this separation is unwarranted, because the contrast is more imagined than real. There is, in fact, a direct connection between our christian confession and our everyday social and economic activities. Perhaps I can amplify this in two ways. First of all, the Apostolic creed does not speak about a God high in heaven Whom we can reach only through arduous meditation and prayer.

The notion that man himself must laboriously blaze a trail toward a remote God is characteristic of nonchristian religions. The Gospel, however, teaches the exact opposite, for it confirms that Jesus Christ came to this world, took on our flesh and blood, and lived among us (John 1:14). He was a working youth in the shop of His father, Joseph Davidson. He became *one of us*. The Gospel therefore not only contains the promise of a new heaven but also of a new earth, a restored world. Precisely because Christ lived in this world and worked as a carpenter among fellowmen, our present unemployment problem is not a mundane matter unrelated to Him. Secondly—and this constitutes the warp and woof of the following discussion—whether we realize it or not, our entire individual and communal life is a form of confession. Confession in this context has a much broader meaning than the mere recitation of the Apostolic creed. By confession I mean the uncovering of what is the essence of our life; the making apparent of what profoundly motivates us; the revealing of our deepest convictions, focus and destiny of our existence. Thus defined, we can readily see that everyone's individual or communal life is a confession in one form or another. Communal lifestyle is always an expression of a religiously oriented choice.

Perhaps I can best clarify this by referring once again to that majestic first chapter of the Gospel of John, where we read that God created the world by His Word, i.e., His Son Whom He sent into this world. This means that creation itself is a word of God. In creation God addresses Himself to us for the first time; it is

God's invitation to man, for creation contains the possibility for men to live before the face of God and to live together. It implies an invitation to develop technology, to be culturally busy and to cultivate economic life.

### Truncated life and creational response

The above-mentioned possibilities are *creational* possibilities. This does not mean that they may be exploited as if they were ends in themselves. In a conversation or dialogue the words of one person require the response of another. Creation—God's Word or invitation to man—was ordered in such a manner that man can respond to the Father via his activities right within and through creation. Some years ago, professor L. Onvlee of the Free University of Amsterdam wrote a book entitled *Culture as Response* [Cultuur als antwoord] in which he explains that no culture exists which does not somehow respond to God. *Response* in this connection means the utilization of creational possibilities. This can be directed and open to God the Creator of the Universe, but it can also be diverted or cut off from Him. In either case, it is always a confession.

We may not use creation or any of its potentials as ends in themselves. Unfortunately, this is what has frequently happened. Take, for example, power, sexuality, technology or economics. How often have they not been regarded and used precisely that way? We've all met people who say: "Let's face it, politics is nothing but a power struggle. And despite all the fancy words about the husband-wife relationship, it merely boils down to sex and nothing else. And as far as economic life is concerned, let's be honest, it is strictly a matter of making money." When you encounter people with this supposedly "realistic" view of life, you intuitively feel that there is something essentially wrong with their arguments. Not that they are necessarily altogether out of it. For it cannot be denied that politics has something to do with power and that sex and marriage are closely tied together. It is equally true that economics cannot be separated from the earning of money. Where then lies the deception? It lies in the fact that the element of "response to God" has been removed. For when does politics, for instance, become a response? Whenever political power is used to administer public justice in society. Power then serves as man's response to the God-given law of justice. The same applies to sexuality. It, too, may never be seen in isolation, apart from its creational purpose, i.e., to express and deepen the love relationship between husband and wife. In that personal love relationship sexuality attains

its destiny. Authentic sexuality leads to a creational response of one person to another and, as such, to the living God. The reduction of politics to power struggle and of marriage to sex betrays a truncated, animalistic view of life, because it attempts to sever the tie between the creature and the Creator.

### Modern idolatry

The "realistic" truncation of life is a deadly danger, for it amounts to idolatry, i.e., a confession of gods other than the living God. Our notion of idolatry is not to be confined to rituals of certain primitive tribes. An idol is anything which attains a stature or significance of its own, apart from God, and for that reason begins to determine the direction and meaning of our life. When power is sought for the sake of power and when sex is isolated from truth, life becomes enslaved. When things are dislodged from the response relationship to creation and are given independent status, they become a menace, threatening life and the development of culture. If we accept the Scriptures as God's revelation for life, we will no doubt agree that the above holds for marriage, politics and the use of power. But it is a curious phenomenon that many people who thus far have nodded their approval, quickly become disinterested when similar conclusions are drawn with respect to technology and economics. Didn't God endow creation with technical and economic possibilities with which man is called to respond?

### Stewardship

Man's biblical response with God's gift of power is the administration of justice. His response with sexuality is the personal love and truth between husband and wife. His response with the economic possibilities imbedded in creation is stewardship. Stewardship consists of several elements: our relationship to God, to fellowmen and to nature.

Stewardship implies first of all a recognition that man is not the ultimate owner of the earth's resources and potentialities. Man is responsible to God, the true Owner, for what he does with the Lord's earth. Thus wise and careful management of scarce resources is required, for only in that way will it be possible to give an account to the Owner upon His return.

Stewardship also contains the beautiful biblical element of usufruct. When God gave man the mandate to cultivate the earth, He also granted him the right to enjoy the fruits of his labour. This does, of course, presuppose that he will protect the animals, for their care belongs to his stewardship. Further, the steward must see to it that, despite his enjoyment of the fruits, the Master's property receives such care that the continued yielding of fruits is ensured. He may not treat the earth in such a manner that its capacity to bear fruit is endangered. A good steward carefully maintains the estate which his Lord has entrusted to him.

Finally, stewardship also presupposes a particular manner of relating to our fellowmen. In the parable of the slaves Christ provides us with a striking example of how the relationship between fellow stewards deteriorates as soon as they stop expecting their Lord's return. That's when they become their own boss. They begin to beat and abuse each other, because the element of being responsible for what is entrusted to them has disappeared from their lives. This parable is particularly relevant to the way in which we treat the poor countries of this world. As soon as we, as westerners, stop to realize our responsibility with respect to the use of the scarce resources of this earth, we begin to exploit the earth. The element of response is thus removed and material welfare becomes an end in itself. Then we also begin to mistreat our fellow slaves by using them for our benefit without caring about their plight.

### The economics of the Kingdom

Stewardship means faithful response to God with everything He has entrusted to our care, including nature, our fellow human beings, our health and our time. Stewardship always defines property as a form of usufruct. God gladly grants us the use of the fruits, provided this entails respect and care for all that He has given us in trust. Our property invariably carries a so-called social mortgage—i.e., our neighbour's need—and we must always make our mortgage payments before we think of ourselves.

Is our society characterized by this kind of stewardship? This has become a rhetorical question. Christians no less than nonchristians have frequently acted as if economic means and technology are ends in themselves. We take a steady annual growth in material welfare for granted as if it were a right we are entitled to. We also convince ourselves that our own ever-increasing wealth will enable us to preserve nature more carefully as well as provide some aid to the poor nations. But our thinking presupposes that our own material well-being, personally as well as nationally, must receive priority.

I am inclined to state that in this framework of thought things have been turned upside down. Mind you, the question is not whether economic growth in itself is good or bad. Our concern here is with the sequence of things. Stewardship means: first take care of the earth for which God has made you responsible, first see to it that others have enough, and then you will discover that there is plenty left for you and your own society. This is what I would call the economics of the Kingdom. First seek that Kingdom and all things will come to you as a matter of course.

### Enslavement

A truncated lifestyle also enslaves man, for it makes man incapable of extricating himself from that which has become an end in itself and gradually takes complete hold of him. This is true perhaps especially of economics and technology. To possess and to be possessed are often very closely related. A society which no longer responds to God's mandate, enslaves. In this connection we would do well to remember the apostle Paul's warning to Timothy when he writes about people whose purpose in life is to become wealthy. Says Paul: "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. . . . But as for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:9, 11; R.S.V.) We are inclined to take these Bible texts very personally which is most likely what Paul intended. But it goes without saying that his words also contain a message for entire societies, particularly those societies which have made the pursuit of wealth their primary concern, expecting that this will lead to national well-being. In the final analysis they are going to be the losers, however, for they will be pierced with many self-inflicted sorrows. The pursuit of wealth as an end in itself inevitably leads away from shalom.

In the next installment we will illustrate how the enslavement of man leads to a truncated society no longer concerned with a lifestyle guided by divine norms. We will do this on the basis of a discussion of three examples; namely, time, ownership and work.

*(To be continued in the next issue.)*

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