

## Vanguard Forum

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### CHRISTIAN ECONOMICS?

by Bob Goudzwaard

Recently VANGUARD co-editor Robert Carvill sent me a copy of *Christian Economics*, a magazine which was unknown to me until I received this issue. Its subtitle reads: "A better America through Christian principles in Action". Eagerly I began to read, very anxious to discover its contents. It isn't every day that you come across a magazine whose title immediately associates economics and the Christian religion. You don't often find a publication that refuses to reserve the Christian religion for Sunday worship and ecclesiastical activities; even rarer is the periodical which understands that the Good News of Christ is of universal importance, penetrating to the very core of all aspects of contemporary life.

But what a disappointment when I began to read! Perhaps I can best illustrate my disappointment by quoting and then discussing the magazine's basic foundation-its underlying confession printed every month in the editorial section: "We uphold the Constitution of the United States and the limited government which it inaugurated; we believe in the free market economy and the faithful application of Christian principles to all economic activities."

You might ask yourself, "What's so disappointing about that?" Why am I concerned? Isn't it a very good thing to confess that people should execute "a faithful application of Christian principles to all economic activities"? And why would anyone be against "upholding the Constitution of the United States"? And isn't the free market economy clearly preferable to totalitarian economic systems?

The reasons for my disappointment can only be understood if we look at this confession (that which we believe!) more carefully. Doesn't something strike you as odd in the order of arrangement of these *confessional* tenets? That's right -the application of Christian principles is mentioned, not as an all-determining point of departure, not as the dominating norm, but as that which is in third place, of only tertiary importance. What does have priority? First, the *limited* competence of government, according to-not the Bible--but the Constitution of the United States; and secondly, belief in the free market economy. Only in this arrangement of priorities and in line with these suppositions is the *application* of Christian principles mentioned. In other words, it's implicitly presupposed that these Christian principles are in full harmony with the limited task of government, and with an unhindered free market economy. Limited government and an unrestricted free market remain beyond discussion. Why? Because these two items are of a religious nature. They're part of what these men *believe*. Only after you've already accepted these beliefs in the free market and limited government in the socioeconomic realm, can you then consider (other!) applications of Christian principles. Note the term *application* - a technical term which reminds us of attempts to *instrumentalize* the Good News in the same way as you adapt technical directions in your daily work.

What's my confession? My confession is of a quite different nature from that given by *Christian Economics*. I believe that the Good News of Christ is of universal significance for the whole of life, and that it impels us indeed, relentlessly drives us, to continually lay our whole lives at the feet of our Saviour, without holding anything back. Therefore, neither the

Constitution of the United States, nor our ideals of a free market economy (with a limited task for government) can avoid being subjected to the critical power of the Word of God. When, for example, the Christian Freedom Foundation declares at its Convention that “we believe in: the Bible – U.S. Constitution-private property system – economic freedom – church and private welfare” then that declaration is (perhaps unintentionally) already in its formulation a violation of God’s second commandment, which directs us to serve God, and Him alone, and not to serve other gods we have alongside of Him. Furthermore: even in the Apostle’s Creed the words *believe in* are reserved for our confession of faith in the Trinitarian God Himself; we *believe* the Christian Church and eternal life, but we *believe in* God. And yet the CCF declaration tells us to believe *in* the Bible and the private property system. In a word – horrible!

If we take the second commandment seriously, we’ll see that it mandates us to take an approach to Christian economics that is diametrically opposed to that taken by the Christian Freedom Foundation and *Christian Economics* magazine. Our approach, if it is to be at all Christian, has to begin its development in the light of God’s Word alone. From the very beginning we have to thoroughly examine *if* and how *far* a strongly limited governmental task in socio-economic affairs and the maintenance of a free market system in all its aspects, is really in accord with God’s Word—a Word which is able to renew not only our own lives, but also the systems of human society.

To answer these penetrating questions there’s an urgent need for real Christian reflection. However, I can’t avoid the strong and growing impression that the main cause of the many troubles in present western societies is exactly this: the search for an increasing individual saturation with market goods under a vigorous free market system has become *far more* than only one aspect of human development—this search has grown into the dominating *religion* of man and society. Racial problems, environmental pollution, patent deficiencies in essential public expenditures in the social sector – they all point to an incongruous overdevelopment in the sector which produces the market goods and an *underdevelopment* in nearly all other sectors of human life. These results are the consequences not of the *system*, but of the *idolatry* of the free market – the worship of the free market as an end in itself.

Please read over the confession of *Christian Economics* again. I hope that you’ll agree with me that it’s nothing but the sublimation of an attempt to create an impossible synthesis: linking the *service* of Christ and the *service* of Mammon.

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