

# Economic Life: A Confession<sup>\*</sup>

**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

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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  
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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 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 unrealistic. 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 also 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, 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 God's 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." (I 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.

## **Lack of time**

I would like to illustrate the foregoing with an example you might not expect; namely, our growing lack of time. This confronts us with a remarkable phenomenon. When you read literature on economics, written thirty to forty years ago, you will notice that the economists of those days predicted that in the society of the future the amount of available leisure time would increase at about the same rate as material abundance.

It is curious, therefore, that today's society seems plagued by a shortage of time. Modern man is always hurried and his life is often a rat race. Despite a much shorter workweek, he suffers from an increasing lack of time. How can we explain this? A few years ago, the Swedish economist Staffan Linder addressed himself to this problem in a book with the striking title *The Harried Leisure Class*. He explained that economists of earlier days made a major error in their calculations by failing to realize that the very purchase, maintenance and use of goods are also time-consuming. Every consumption article must not only be purchased, but must also be maintained and replaced. Naturally, the time required for this per item is quite minimal, but the total amount of time thus spent on the many consumption goods a wealthy society can afford becomes very substantial.

Certain aspects of this economic time problem on first sight seem rather innocuous and even humorous. At parties people at times pretend to solve this time dilemma by simultaneously

smoking a cigar, holding a glass of sherry and swallowing a handful of peanuts. Such people have found a method of consuming several things within a single unit of time.

The matter is much more serious, however. An increasingly important part of our national production is being claimed for the manufacture of time-saving devices. One could enumerate a long list of such products, ranging from vacuum cleaners to automatic dishwashers. They are advertised as time savers, to enable us to spend more time with our children. But in order to afford these time savers, we must earn more and therefore work a little longer or take on extra jobs. Needless to say, this requires at least part of the time we are trying to save.

The situation appears even more pressing when we consider how modern advertising exploits our lack of time. We no longer have the time to compare products and evaluate them on the basis of their quality. Thirty years ago advertisements contained extensive descriptions of the advantages of a product on the assumption that these were read with care. Today we do not have the time for that. We race through stores quickly grabbing the things we think we need. Advertising exploits this by no longer being informative about the quality of goods; instead, it has become suggestive. Everything is usually reduced to the allusion that more happiness will be ours if only we buy the advertised product. Consequently, because of our lack of time, we make ourselves vulnerable to the increasingly penetrating influence of modern advertising which thus becomes a threat to our national health. We have obviously not yet discovered the relevance to modern advertising of Paul's warning not to "gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16; R.S.V.)

There is still another serious complication, for we no longer have enough time for the proper maintenance of our possessions. Years ago, for instance, we carefully oiled our skates for storage during the summer months. Nowadays we usually don't do this anymore. Throw-away products have become the vogue, ranging from diapers to dresses. Empty bottles and similar items are often nonrefundable. It is simply assumed that a product, once bought, need not be kept or maintained. From time to time newspaper articles even report on future throw-away automobiles. This shows how our lack of time contributes to our indiscriminate use of the scarce resources of the earth.

Finally, one remark about one of the most tragic consequences of our lack of time. I am thinking here of the growing loneliness we witness all around us. More and more people no longer have the time for a personal conversation and for genuine fellowship with others. The reason frequently is that they are too busy looking after their possessions, keeping up the garden, preparing for a vacation, and so on. This only confirms that the time we reserve for our belongings goes at the expense of the time available for our neighbour.

Keeping all this in mind, the question arises whether an annual increase in our income of five or more percent really leads to greater bliss. Doesn't our growing affluence, in fact, result in greater loss of time, fellowship and happiness? Would it not be wise to reckon with an "ethic of time spending" whenever we make a purchase? I am not raising these questions to foster austerity for the sake of austerity, but to make us more sensitive to the reality that every purchase will claim part of our precious time. In any event, there is ample reason to be on our guard against the urge to continually raise our standard of living.

## **Ownership**

My main point is that we must respond to God, not only in marriage and politics, but also in our social and economic life, for response lies at the heart of the christian concept of

stewardship. I will try to clarify this further with two illustrations. The first one pertains to property relationships, the second to our concept of work.

A much debated subject is the issue of individual versus collective ownership. Much more important, however, is the question how private property is being used. Decisive in this matter is the way in which ownership functions in our society, whether it expresses man's response to God and whether it is placed in the service of God and neighbour. Sadly enough, private ownership is frequently such an egocentric and exclusively individualistic institution that a stewardly response is hardly possible. Public (or state) ownership, too, is very often nothing but an end in itself, thus preventing a societal response.

A good example of ownership which unfolds as a stewardly response can be found in the Old Testament. The legislation of ancient Israel awarded a farmer a piece of land which would forever belong to him and his posterity. Even the market mechanism could not undo this, for in the year of jubilee (every fiftieth year) all property which had been sold of necessity was restored to the original owner (or his family). The year of jubilee was the year of reconciliation, and such reconciliation was not restricted to the soul. Note that the Bible speaks in sober economic terms about slaves who, because of debts, had been forced to sell themselves and their land, but who during the year of jubilee were given back their freedom and their property so as to enable them to start life anew, with a clean slate and without debts.

Try and compare that to our society which divides people in groups of "haves" and "have-nots," and in which it is so difficult to realize healing and restoration of human life, in economic as well as other terms.

Old Testament Israel, whose law promised restitution of freedom and property to every slave, also had the beautiful legal stipulation that a farmer was not allowed to mow the grain at the edge of his field because that portion had to be left for the poor and the passersby. Further, anyone was permitted to enter a vineyard or orchard and take whatever he needed. One was even allowed to take it home, though not by the carload so to speak. We are very much inclined to view such rules and regulations as infringements of private property. However, I don't think it has anything to do with restriction of property rights. What we encounter here is the necessary unfolding of private property as a stewardly response. It simply remains personal or family property, but is spontaneously shared to an acceptable extent by one's neighbour.

Usually we consider our possessions strictly and solely our own and we do not tolerate an infringement of our imagined absolute rights. I have my own television or automobile or cottage and my neighbour has his. Possessions are thus frequently an obstacle to real fellowship among people. They divide rather than unite. Television has become the modern substitute for human interaction; it merely stands in front of you and speaks *to* you.

Whereas in our society goods often bring about a separation between people, in the biblical view of society property facilitates fellowship and serves the community. Hence the strong emphasis in the Bible on hospitality, for hospitality means making your house and your goods available to others. I believe that the question of the unfolding of property is much more important than the question whether ownership should be individual or collective. We get very excited about the latter issue, but it is essential to realize that in both public and private ownership the response to God and neighbour can be and often is sadly lacking. Genuine response expresses itself in sensitivity to the needs of others and in sharing with one another. Here the example of the early christian church is most relevant.

## Work

We can also get quite heated about the issue how much a worker should earn and the distribution of our gross national income. We seem much less interested in the question dealing with the meaning and focus of work. Nevertheless, the latter is closely related to the matter of human response in society. Are we still able to respond to our Lord and to our neighbour in our work?

Permit me to elaborate somewhat on what I believe to be a biblical, normative picture of human labour. In my view it is characterized by three distinct elements.

The first element is creativity. God created the earth in such a manner that creation reveals something of Him. According to Paul's letter to the Romans, -we can discover something about God in the work of His hands. Man is created in God's image. This implies that man has a fundamental need to express himself in the work of his hands. To put it differently, man wants the result of his work to show: "this is what I have made, not someone else!" His desire for creativity belongs to his very humanness, for it reflects his status as imagebearer of God the Creator.

The second element is cooperation. In the Bible work is not something that can be isolated from our fellowship with others; it is never done solely for one's own benefit. In a beautiful passage in his Institutes Calvin elaborates that God did not create people differently to show that they are unequal, but to indicate that they need one another. Biblically speaking, work is an effort in which people help and serve each other with their various talents; therefore, every form of work has a distinct social aspect.

Finally, the third biblical element is the close connection between peace and work. God first gives peace (shalom); only within this context does our work become truly meaningful. Think of the Decalogue in which God first says "Remember the sabbath day" and then continues with "six days you shall labour and do all your work." His shalom precedes our work and gives meaning to that work. Thus, after a day's work, the Israeli farmer could sit in peace under his olive tree in front of his house, looking out over his fields in the knowledge that God the Lord cares for the land. Then the next day he could continue his work without worry or anxiety about whether it would bear fruit.

With respect to these three elements - creativity, the social aspect of our work, and shalom - our society, by and large, has reversed the biblical sequence. We are inclined to arrange our production processes in such a manner that they leave little or no room for creativity. The monotonous and endless repetition so typical of our modern factories, makes it virtually impossible for workers to express themselves in their work. In my view this is contrary to the biblical "response structure" of work, for in this manner the worker cannot respond genuinely to God and neighbour. In many of our production processes the only thing that moves is the conveyor belt. Thus contact and direct cooperation between workers has been all but eliminated and is replaced by a mechanical substitute which carries out the required movement of the work from one person to the next, with the result that everyone is isolated and occupied only with his own small function. This structure degrades work because the social element has been removed from it. Further, we have reversed the order of shalom and work. We believe that peace and happiness will result from our work. Precisely this belief has dominated western society since the Renaissance. It is therefore not so surprising that work remains part and parcel of our pursuit of something which, like a mirage, always eludes us. In our work we are presumed to be travelling on the road to happiness. But work itself presupposes shalom, and if that shalom does not come first, then our work is bound to turn

into a rat race. Psalm 127 says: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labours, for He gives to his beloved even in his sleep." (N.A.S.B.) Work without creativity, without social contact and without shalom is a closed activity, for it does not unfold to God and neighbour and therefore lacks the characteristics of stewardship. As an economist I conclude from the above that, rather than concentrate on the continued accumulation of consumption goods, we must direct our attention and efforts toward production. Not, however, to increase productivity still more, but to create meaningful technical and economic possibilities for truly responsible work. Wherever industries and work are valued only in the measure that they generate profits and wages, work has been debased in much the same manner as power and sexuality when they are deprived of their response element. Response to God and neighbour is an essential element of authentic work. Only when work has room for this does it fit the creation order.

## **Conclusion**

Conservatives and socialists alike never tire of debating questions about private and public ownership or the distribution of income. Much more important, however, is the question dealing with the direction of society. Is that direction one of unfolding and opening up of human opportunities and freedom, or are all things cut off and reduced to ends in themselves? The overriding issue of our day and age is whether society will respond to the Lord and fellowman with respect to ownership, work and the utilization of time. In this connection it is of crucial importance to see that the Word of God came into the world in human form to bring redemption and restoration. Christ on the cross did much more than save souls. Paul speaks of cosmic powers that were nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14 & 15). Cosmic powers are those influences, including many demonic ones, which we tend to deify and which, in turn, take possession of us. Redemption in Christ is of cardinal importance in this context, for He is not only the Word, but also the Response, i.e., our response to God. For that reason He is also able to liberate us from all enslaving influences. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and therefore the Core of our new lifestyle. He is also able to rescue us from our truncated view of consumption, industrial relations and ownership. Not to make us unhappy, but to give us His shalom in our personal lives and in our relationship with others.