

## MAKING CONNECTIONS: INTEGRATING CHRISTIANITY AND ECONOMICS

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*Professor Surdyk shares opinions of several writers of Christian involvement in economic issues. She also details her efforts to integrate biblical principles with seven aspects of economics and gives an honest appraisal of possible inhibitions to discussing faith issues in the classroom.*

Business faculty at Christian colleges have a unique opportunity to help students develop in the Christian faith in ways that will help them influence society for good. One way to do this is to integrate what we teach in classes with the cognitive content of the faith. In my years as a professor at a Christian college, I have been working to define my view of faith-learning integration and to develop specific ways of integrating Christianity in my undergraduate economics classes. This is an ongoing process for me. I'm hoping that by sharing some of what I do it will encourage me to do more and will be informative to others as well.

I view faith-learning integration primarily as letting my relationship with God and the study of the Scriptures help me see economic issues as God does. I also consider the question, Why should Christians study economics? I believe that since so many of the world's problems have an economic dimension, Christians who understand economics can help solve those problems. Therefore, faith-learning integration for me also means doing my best to educate my students in economic theories and to challenge them to think about ways economic policies can be designed and implemented to best address economic problems. Thus, on the first day of class I explain to my students that the primary purpose of economics from a Christian standpoint is "to discover and refine just and loving means of creating, distributing, and consuming wealth to overcome poverty and to increase the material and spiritual prosperity of man" (Beisner and Borgquist, p. 3-3).

I tell my students that just as medical doctors must understand how the human body works in order to heal it when it is broken, Christian people with a heart for the needy and oppressed should understand how the economy works so they can begin to effectively bring about redemptive changes in society.

William Hasker (1992) says that integration is concerned with "the relationships which inherently exist between the content of the faith and the subject matter of this or that discipline" (p. 235). Likewise, David Wolfe (1987) states that, "Genuine integration occurs when an assumption or concern can be shown to be internally shared by (integral to) both the Judeo-Christian vision and an academic discipline" (p. 5).

Indeed, on a practical level, the integration process has caused me to see the connections between Christianity and economics. The process is not forced-I don't try to manufacture the connections, nor do I necessarily "reinvent the wheel." Rather, as I study the Bible and the writings of other Christians on various economic topics, these connections naturally arise. The work requires solid biblical knowledge as well as solid economic knowledge, and of utmost importance is my relationship with God. Indeed, if I'm not involved in prayer, meditation, Bible

study, and Christian fellowship, my work becomes merely an intellectual task and I am less effective at communicating God's truths to my students.

In my studies, I have found four key economic themes in the Scriptures: namely, that God (1) is on the side of the poor and oppressed, (2) wants His people to be generous, helping the needy, (3) wants His people to fight economic injustice, and (4) desires that we rely on Him rather than on material possessions. I strive, then, to convey these principles to students, and I consider with them the implications and results when economic theory is put into practice. Specifically, I strive “to offer principles and truths that, when implemented as policies, programs, and individual behavior, will conform...to the norms of Scripture” (Beisner and Borgquist, p. 3-3).

Some may ask whether economic principles of Scripture are even relevant to Christians today. Well, I tend to agree with authors such as Ronald Sider (1990) who assert that Christians *are* to follow the basic biblical principles taught in the Old and New Testaments but not necessarily the specific details. Also, Mason and Schaefer (1990), in discussing the society of early Israel, note that “modern societies can learn from this very early society-especially given the widely conceded high moral character of many of its ways” (p. 48). They go on to explain that a just and righteous society would have the following attributes:

- (1) a special concern for those who are in need because of circumstances beyond their control
- (2) protecting the freedom and preserving the economic viability of the extended family through the assignment of property rights primarily to private hands
- (3) stressing the importance of work, as expressed in the “creation mandate” to subdue and conquer
- (4) the honoring of contracts and commitments
- (5) the creation of economic conditions which promote justice and generate more jobs and higher incomes and thus alleviate poverty (p. 54-55).

So where do we learn about biblical perspectives on economics? First, we learn from the Sabbatical and Jubilee year concepts that God owns everything, we are His stewards, and private ownership is acceptable, but that God abhors great disparities in wealth and poverty. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 15, Leviticus 25, and Isaiah 10: 1-4.) We also learn that God wills justice, not merely charity, for the marginalized in Scriptures such as Amos 2:6-8, Micah 6:8, Psalm 112:1-5, and James 5:1-6. Second, we learn from Jesus' ministry that when his followers seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, their physical needs will be met as well (Matthew 6:25-33), and that the cost of being a follower of His includes having no permanent residence (Matthew 8:18-20). Finally, we learn from the early Christians that redeemed economic relationships are characterized by sharing all we have with one another voluntarily as needed (Acts 4:32-36). In short, Christian fellowship should involve material sharing and self-sacrifice, and we are to depend on God and on fellow believers rather than on material possessions. Not that it's wrong to own things-indeed everything created by God is good (1 Timothy 4:4), but if we rely on possessions rather than on God, and if we are unwilling to sacrifice for the sake of a needy neighbor, the love of God is not in us! (1 John 3:16-18) Below I describe seven specific areas where I have thought to connect biblical principles in classes.

(1) I discuss Adam Smith's notion that self-interest behavior virtually always leads to what is best for society as a whole, but I also assert that in light of man's fallen state and selfish tendencies we may consider other viewpoints. For instance, Sider argues that economic self-interest can cause us to ignore the models of sharing and generosity among early Christians as described in Acts 4 (p. 76). Thus, I teach not only Smith's ideas of the "best" economic system but also that modeled in the Bible, which emphasizes the broad norm of a just and righteous society.

(2) I address the debate whether democratic capitalism (or any other political or economic system) is proclaimed in the Scriptures, as discussed, for instance, in Gay (1992). I discuss the need to determine what the purposes of the economic system ought to be, and on various ways of fulfilling those purposes. I may ask, Are needs of the poor better met by encouraging private enterprise, by reforming public welfare programs, or by some mix of these strategies? Sider argues that rather than promoting capitalism, communism, or any other system, Scripture teaches that God is on the side of the poor, that private ownership of property is fine, but that God hates economic exploitation and great extremes in wealth and poverty (p. 61).

(3) I emphasize that while profit maximization is the dominant motivating goal for most business decisions, a "profits at all costs" attitude likely will compromise biblical principles. I ask students to consider worthy business goals that reflect godly priorities, and we discuss concepts such as the advancement of justice and fairness, stewardship of resources (including natural resources), caring for the poor, creating a healthy working environment for employees, and having respect for all individuals.

(4) Following discussions of the federal debt (\$4.9 trillion and growing!), I discuss consumer and business debt in the U.S. and then bring up biblical perspectives of personal debt. I note that while Scripture does not forbid taking on debt, it does contain numerous warnings about it. For instance, I quote Proverbs 22:7 that goes so far as to say, "the borrower is slave to the lender." (See also Proverbs 22:26-27.) Students and I discuss the reasons why so much consumer debt has accumulated in the U.S., such as the fact that many people are impatient and make a habit of spending beyond their means to buy unnecessary luxuries. By contrast, I note that the Bible teaches that we should live within our means, be content with what God provides us, and avoid the inevitable pitfalls that await those who succumb to the desires of the world for wealth and possessions. (I quote, for example, Luke 12:22-31 and 1 Timothy 6:6-10.) I also share advantages of being debt-free, including the fact that it frees our resources to give to the poor or to lend to a friend in crisis. I even give students guidelines for building a personal budget so they can begin to develop financial discipline.

(5) In discussions about Less Developed Countries (LDCs) I ask students to consider the Christian response to poverty (or lack thereof). I read Scriptures such as 1 John 1:5-6, 1 John 3:16-18, Matthew 25:31-46, and Deuteronomy 15:11. I also ask probing questions such as, Why do so many North American Christians become richer and richer while our neighbors suffer so? and What sort of message are we sending to our non-Christian neighbors? I have found some useful background material on this topic in Sider's book. For instance, he cites Scriptures that show God's concern for the marginalized, and he argues this is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor (p. 46). He also asserts that we should practice self-denial to aid the needy.

Even if people do not fully agree with all of Sider's arguments, they cannot deny the validity of much of what he says!

(6) In discussions of international trade and the Third World debt crisis I may discuss how trade barriers and creditors' policies may affect LDCs and particularly the poor in those countries. On the domestic front, discussions of welfare reform and other government transfer programs naturally lead to discussions about poverty and institutional injustices.

(7) In discussions of labor supply decisions and unemployment, I discuss biblical views of work as follows: (i) We are co-creators with God, His stewards on earth, helping cultivate and preserve it (Gen. 2:15), (ii) God hates laziness (Proverbs 10:4, Proverbs 18:9, II Thessalonians 3:10), (iii) our perspectives, and I also know that most students expect their education to involve discussions of faith issues. And while I cannot be sure that my students will respond positively, if I don't try, my students may leave college with the idea that there are no connections between Christianity and the day-to-day business of life. As Hasker asserts, "To love God with all our minds requires that we try to think in a single, unified pattern all the truth he has enabled us to grasp" (p. 238). Thus, I owe it to my students to integrate faith and learning.

I realize that my effectiveness will depend on what I do and say *outside* the classroom as well as *in* the classroom, so I must be willing to give of myself to both my students and to my community. I must practice what I preach! Some of my most significant experiences of faith-learning integration have occurred outside the classroom in one-on-one conversations with students. In those contexts students are more likely to be open and inquisitive and I am able to delve deeper into subjects with them, sharing from personal experience. Overall, I've learned that I must be available to students, extend grace to them when necessary, challenge them sufficiently, and do all I can to see that they are learning.

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