

STEWARDSHIP AND FLOURISHING

Economies flourish when people have integrity and trust each other.

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ELEMENT

Everyone wants to know what will make the economy grow. What an opportunity for Christians to speak to our neighbors! How would it change public perceptions of the Gospel if Christians became known as the people who do fruitful work and have wisdom about business and economics?

For a long time, our culture understood that economic flourishing comes mainly from good behavior – people doing what is right instead of what satisfies their natural desires. We knew that honesty, diligence, self-control, generosity, and other virtues are not only good in themselves. They also increase productivity, savings, investment, entrepreneurship, and other vital economic activities, while reducing the burdens of fraud, waste, corruption, and cronyism (Proverbs 11:14).

If the Christian claims about God and his relationship to the world are true, it must be the case that faith and right living will generally tend to promote all types of flourishing, including economic.

For a century, our civilization has been moving away from this understanding. We are willing to try every scheme and gimmick clever people can devise, as long as it doesn't involve telling the public that they must learn to say "no" to their desires. Economic ideologies promise that prosperity will follow automatically if we enact the right policies. As T. S. Eliot observed, we are "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."

Some of these plans and policies are much better than others. But none of them can succeed as long as moral character is in decline. And in the absence of a moral public, every plan or policy we enact becomes a tool of exploitation by the powerful (Proverbs 1:19).

Economic exchange depends on trust. To buy or sell, or engage in any other exchange, requires the parties

to trust each other. In a climate of bad character, exchange starts to shut down.

A cultural climate that encourages stewardship for flourishing is necessary to sustain the modern economy with its breathtaking economic growth. Where people know that their neighbors generally embrace the call to be good stewards and work for the flourishing of all, they trust each other. As a result, workers roll up their sleeves, marketplaces bustle, and new businesses spring up.

There is no hope for economic renewal until we rediscover goodness and commit to goodness. That is the bad news. The good news is that God is real and he offers real hope, not only for individuals but for communities. Because God is holy, the hope he offers includes, though it is not

limited to, a restoration of our goodness by his power (Romans 5:1-5; I Peter 1:14-16). Through the Gospel that the church bears witness to, a rediscovery of goodness is always available.

God does not promise that faith or ethical living will automatically produce wealth (Job 35:1-8; Mark 8:35). Humans are not to work constantly, but must make space for activities like rest, contemplation, and appreciation (Exodus 23:12; Psalm 34:8). But if the Christian claims about God and his relationship to the world are true, it must be the case that faith and right living will *generally* tend to promote all types of flourishing, including economic (Jeremiah 29:7; Proverbs 11:10). History resoundingly confirms this. If the church offers this gift to our communities, we can confirm it again.