

A BIBLE STUDY ON ECONOMY

Few would question the important role that Christianity should have in the home and the family. Many plaques hang on kitchen walls stating that. But how many plaques hang on the walls of corporations?

In our "modern" era of capitalism, a separation has risen between religion and economics that appears to be a Biblical heresy. Yet God's grand plan (Ephesians 1:10) is a global household laws plan, an economic plan no less. The church has often translated its Bible by accepting society's "religious" language (steward, minister) instead of using society's "secular" language (economist, manager). We need to resist being squeezed into the world's mold (Romans 12:1-2) by being separated from the economy.

1. Read each passage in the New Testament using "household rules" (see below). How are the words translated in your version? Is there a separation of theology and economics?
2. Read Ephesians 1:3-10; 3:8-10. In 1:10 and 3:9 translate them using various words suggested in the second oikonomos note below. What is God's plan/economy?
3. Read Colossians 1:24-26; I Peter 4:7-11. Was Paul a steward, a minister or an economist? Are you an economist? A steward? A minister? Are they different?

Notes: oikonomos (household rules) is used in the following New Testament passages Luke 12:42; 16:1-8 (many times); I Cor 4:1,2; 9:17; Colossians 1:25; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2,9; Timothy 1:4; Galatians 4:2; Romans 16:23; Titus 1:7; I Peter 4:10.

Oikonomos comes from two words - oikos (household or house) and nomos (law or rules); so it means literally household rules. The contemporary words economy and economist are direct translation from it. The word ecumenical comes from oikoumene (household living). The King James Version translated the word as steward/stewardship. Modern translators also use minister/manager/management/plan/office. To make the word nomos relevant it should be translated economy/economist/economic plan when used comprehensively.

A BIBLE STUDY ON LABORERS

For this Bible study we use the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mark 12:1-12). The parable is often called the Parable of Wicked Husbandmen (note the interpretation). It might be called the Parable of the Exploited Vineyard Workers (also an interpretation)!

Parables are very hard to understand. After all they were used within politically crisis-ridden situations. Their meaning was very subtle. In this one the Jewish establishment knew the meaning though! (see v. 12) Parables have been interpreted allegorically as in this one. They also have been interpreted from an artistic, culture, myth, and/or sociological perspective.

Traditionally this parable has been interpreted solely as a divine allegory with God the owner and the beloved son as Jesus who died for our sins. There is good basis for this interpretation. But we need not stop with this interpretation. We need to look at the sociological context of this story. Is it not even more meaningful to understand this parable as a big squeeze? God squeezes the owners (chief priests, scribes and elders) from above. And the laborers squeeze from the bottom. Without the political realism, why would the leaders be so upset with Jesus that they want to kill him?

1. Read Mark 12:1-4 and Isaiah 5:1-10. Can this parable be treated as a justice issue (see Is 5:7-10)? Or is it about God as owner? Or about both?
2. Read Mark 12:5-8. What is happening here? Mark mentions more killings than Matthew (21:33-46) or Luke (20:9-19). Should the laborers get the property? What rights do contemporary workers have to ownership?
3. Read Mark 12:9-12. Why did the Jewish leaders think the parable was about them? Were they right? Is it about today's owners?

"The Parable of the Defiant Tenants reflects the social background of Jewish Galilee in the first century, with its great landed estates and the inevitable tension between the absentee-owners and the dispossessed, land-hungry peasantry who cultivated the land as tenant-farmers." ...

"Detailed analysis of the imagery of the parable has shown that from this point of view Ch 12:1-9 is a genuine parable, and not an allegory. It belongs to the general category of judgment parable; it is a dramatic presentation of a life situation which invites a judgment from the hearers." (THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK, William L. Lane, Eerdmans, 1974, p. 416.)

A BIBLE STUDY UNIONS

In recent years organized labor has been regularly criticized by our Presidents and our media. It appears that American business, upon facing greater international competition, has increased pressure and attack upon unions. Even the highest paid industrial workers face threats to their incomes which have often reached 20% above the medium income of all Americans.

Christians need to consider whether they believe that organized unions are in consort with their faith and practice. Biblical times did not have international trade unions or AFL-CIO councils at the national and local levels. Still there is much to be found in the Bible to assist Christians to evaluate unionism.

Read Genesis 1:26-28. Do you agree that this creation passage teaches that workers should rule over capital (wealth, factories, equipment, etc.)? (See below on Pope John Paul's teachings)

Read Exodus 1:8-14; 2:11-12; and 15:26-29. Was the basic issue of the Israelites a labor problem? Was Moses' action and God's appropriate then? Today? The Israelites organized, should we also organize? If not unions, how should we organize?

Read Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Does this mean that in remembrance of slavery, Israel should have a full employment society, 5 days at job and 1 at home? How about American society?

"When humanity ... hears the words: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,' even though these words do not refer directly and explicitly to work; beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for humanity to carry out in the world. ... However true it may be that humanity is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is 'for humanity' and not humanity for 'work.' ... In the modern period ... the Christian truth about work had to oppose the various trends of materialistic, and economic thought. ... a reversal of the order laid down from the beginning by the words of the Book of Genesis. Humanity is treated as an instrument of production whereas they ... ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator.... In view of this situation we must first of all recall a principle that has always been taught by the Church: the principle of the priority of labor over capital (Laborem Exercens #4, 6, 7, 12, 1981)

A BIBLE STUDY ON CLASS

Gerhard Lenski (POWER AND PRIVILEGE) spells out the clear class lines found in agrarian societies such as Biblical Israel. From top to bottom they included the ruler, the governing class, the merchants, the retainers (stewards/managers), the priests, the peasants, the artisans, the unclean and degraded, and the expendables. In Luke 16 we are able to discover most of these classes. Then we are called to wrestle with what the parable says about it all! This passage has been historically very unpopular with the established order and therefore most difficult for scholars to explain.

1. Read Luke 16: 1-15. Scholars have had trouble determining the end of the parable (anyplace from verse 8 onward). Where would you end the parable and what difference would it make'?
2. List as many classes as you can in this parable. What does Jesus teach in the parable about them'?
3. The parable has been popularly called the "parable of the dishonest steward". In verse 8 the literal translation is the steward of injustice (or unrighteousness). How do you name the parable'?

"Clearly the most probable cultural setting for the parable is that of a landed estate with a manager who had authority to carry out the business of the estate. The debtors were most likely renters, hakirin, who had agreed to pay a fixed amount of produce for the yearly rent. The steward was no doubt making extras 'under the table,' but these amounts were not reflected in the signed bills." {POET AND PEASANT by Kenneth E. Bailey, p.94}

"The worldly-wise steward has shrewdly appraised the situation that confronts and threatens him and has moved quickly to situate himself to best advantage for the future. Would that those who know the truth of the Christian gospel could see things so sharply and as effectively align their actions to the situation that confronts them." (WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY, John Nolland, Word Books, Vol 35B, 1993, p. 796.)