

RADICAL CHRISTIAN VOICES & PRACTICE

Essays in Honour of Christopher Rowland



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From Capital to Community: Discipleship
as Defection in Jesus' Parable about a
'manager of injustice' (Luke 16:1–13)

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CAPITALISM IN CRISIS: THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT ECONOMIC NARRATIVE

In the autumn 2003 issue of *Business Ethics Magazine*, a thoughtful opinion piece appeared by journalist William Greider, previewing his book *The soul of capitalism: Opening paths to a moral economy*. He wrote:

The operating principles of capitalism have become dangerously obsolete. The house of economics is due for major renovation, if not a complete tear-down . . . Above all, we need a new narrative of American capitalism . . . The economy of more has turned upon itself, tearing the social fabric and weakening family and community life, piling up discontents alongside the growing plenty. We need a new story . . .

As it presently functions, capitalism encourages human pathologies—embodying irresponsibility as a central requirement in its operating routines. But a new narrative beyond more is beginning to emerge organically within capitalism. Central to this story is the fact that people themselves can make change, despite the inertia of government and the overbearing power of established economic interests. Pioneers in many sectors are showing the way to dismantle or reengineer the status quo. (2003, pp. 9–11)

Greider's analysis was prescient. The crisis of our financial markets beginning in 2008 has only deepened the contrasting trends he identified. On one hand, disillusionment and anxiety are deepening; on the other, creative alternatives are proliferating.

This chapter arises from my thirty years of organizing, advocacy, and education as part of social movements to 'dismantle or re-engineer' the

economic status quo. Such commitments are of course shared by Christopher Rowland, who has been an important resource for us in this work. In particular, my perspective is shaped by the experience of the Jubilee 2000 global campaign for debt relief—one of the most significant grassroots initiatives on behalf of economic justice in the last quarter century. Yet the crisis of Third World structural indebtedness we were addressing then has only expanded, having now also brought First World economies to their knees.

The challenges we face are far more profound than the public conversation is allowing for. The crisis we face is civilizational, calling for deeper engagement than mere policy tinkering or reform around the edges. Greider is right—the economic story into which we have been socialized, and around which our culture is organized, is deeply flawed. We need a new narrative.

For Christians this represents what we might call an 'evangelical opening'. After all, as Douglas John Hall (1989) argues, 'theology... begins with the experience of disillusionment':

If the disciple community were willing and able to cease lending its support to the modern illusion; if instead it were to concentrate its considerable powers of analysis and understanding upon the experience of a society which has become disillusioned with the promises of modernity, then I believe a truly creative theology could occur in our context, in a way that is sorely needed. (Hall, 1989, p. 195)

Since the triumph of Enlightenment secularism, managerial capitalism has tended to ignore (or co-opt) the resources offered by our theological and moral traditions. Today, however, more people are realizing that this crisis demands that we revisit the foundations of our social vision. Our churches have for too long read the gospel as if we did not participate in an economy and participated in the economy as if there were no gospel (to paraphrase Jesuit ethicist John Haughey, 1997). But this is changing, and increasingly there are Christians who see economics as a 'confessional issue'.

People of the Book have a lot to bring to the conversation about a new economic story—wisdom older than the shifting fantasies of turbo capitalism. For example, there is an ancient tale found in Numbers 11 concerning the manna that sustained Israel in the wilderness. In this alternative telling of the (more widely known) version found in Exodus 16, the people begin compulsively over-consuming the gift Yahweh has provided. As a result, they die of a plague of 'too-muchness'. To commemorate this terrible lesson, the place is renamed *Kibroth-Hattaavah*: 'the graves of greed' (Num. 11:34).

Surely this wise old parable speaks to our condition in the First World today. The United States and Great Britain both historically took fateful turns toward empire, relentlessly exploiting people and nature in order to amass great wealth and power. In the process, we have, like Israel of old, over-consumed the gift of God. The first to die from this plague were, of course, indigenous people, whose lands and resources were stolen to feed our insatiable appetites. And this plague

continues to kill all those at home and abroad who do not have enough because we have too much. But 'affluenza' also destroys the privileged through epidemic multiple addictions and spiritually bankrupt materialism (on this see Myers, 2001a). Moreover, our way of life has brought the ecosystem to the brink of collapse. We all must now reckon with the graves of greed.

Of course the global economic realities we are facing are difficult and complex. The danger of *overemphasizing* these complexities, however, is that regular citizens can become overwhelmed and disempowered, feeling as though they are mere spectators in a cosmic drama they can neither comprehend nor engage. This is indeed the perception of most folk today in both church and society, which is why the economic and ecological pillaging has continued unchecked. In the midst of current debates it is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. If we are to change the story, then, we will need to remind ourselves that there is a time to make complicated things simple. Not *simplistic*, as in the economic fairy tales we get from politicians and the media, but *intelligible* enough to inspire 'cultural action for transformation'. This is the vocation of popular education as inspired by Paulo Freire (1973).

Amidst the current economic obfuscations trumpeted by the priests of High Capitalism, Christians need to practice the Quaker discipline of 'speaking plainly'. Here is my attempt to diagnose our historic crisis: *what is flawed about the dominant economic story is that it has slowly but surely mutated economic exchange from something that serves and sustains social relationships to something that now demands the sacrifice of social (and ecological) relationships. Capital has replaced community as the centre of our economic story. This trend threatens to destroy both social relations and ecological viability; as such, it is unsustainable and must be stopped and reversed.*

TWO ECONOMIES

This summary assertion is obviously a broad generalization, but I find it a useful focalizer. Moreover, it is grounded in the conclusions of many thoughtful economic philosophers over the last century, just four of whom I will mention here.

Ferdinand Tonnies

Modern capitalism achieved hegemony in the nineteenth century through processes of industrialization and urbanization that resulted in unprecedented social displacement and environmental destruction. One of the many

European intellectuals trying to understand this 'brave new world' (along with Marx, Weber, and others) was the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (2010). Tönnies's way of articulating the dilemma continues to be instructive. In 1887 Tönnies made a basic distinction between what he called the 'integrating' force of traditional *Gemeinschaft* (community)—kinship, ethnicity, religion, and even locality—and the disintegrating, instrumentalist forces of *Gesellschaft* (capitalist society). He defined *Gemeinschaft* as everything that holds human relationships together despite all that would pull them apart. *Gesellschaft*, in turn, represented everything that would pull human relationships apart despite all that holds them together. Tönnies saw that the modern market economy, and the forms of state apparatus that were developed to facilitate it, were steadily unravelling the fabric of older, more traditional ways of economic exchange that were fundamentally relational.

Karl Polanyi

A similar distinction was later elaborated by the Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi (2001). In his 1944 watershed work *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our times*, Polanyi traced how market society has steadily displaced other 'redistributive and reciprocative' social orders that characterized earlier human history. Modernity, he contended, is defined by the struggle between the forces of the 'self-regulated market' and what he called the 'counter movement of social protectionism'.

This fundamental distinction helps us keep the complicated thing simple enough to engage. More recently, Montana politician Daniel Kemmis, in his important *Community and the politics of place*, described the struggle as the difference 'between a totally placeless, abstract market . . . [and] a place-centered market offering nurture and support for locally owned enterprises' (1992, p. 95). We might illustrate this by the difference between a local farmer's market and online shopping. Both are sites of economic exchange, but in the former social relations are still paramount, while in the latter they have been entirely erased.

As Tönnies and Polanyi argue, the two divergent historical forces of Community and Capital have been making competing claims on human hearts, minds, and lives for a very long time. Neither of them could have anticipated the ecological dimensions of this crisis, but two more contemporary economic philosophers do make this connection.

Wendell Berry

In his essay 'Two economies', Wendell Berry (1987, pp. 54–75) refers to Creation (i.e. nature) in terms of a 'Great Economy'—the all-encompassing,

integrated, and functioning biosphere that 'includes principles and patterns by which values or powers or necessities are parceled out and exchanged' (1987, pp. 56–7). Human systems, on the other hand, are 'little economies' that depend upon and operate within the Great Economy. The problem is that our industrial order, with its penchant for control and its lack of limits,

does not see itself as a little economy; it sees itself as the *only* economy. It makes itself thus exclusive by the simple expedient of valuing only what it can use—that is, only what it can regard as raw material to be transformed mechanically into something else . . . The industrial economy is based on invasion and pillage of the Great Economy . . . By using up such goods as topsoil, fossil fuel, and fossil water—we incur a debt to the future that we cannot repay . . . what we call use, the future will call 'theft'. (Berry, 1987, pp. 56–7)

In contrast, the Great Economy demands responsibility and stewardship based upon a consciousness of our profound interdependence with each other and the whole natural order. 'The loser's losses finally afflict the winner' in this system, so 'the ideal must be the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption, which both defines and requires neighborly love' (Berry, 1987, pp. 56–7).

Hazel Henderson

Ecological and feminist economist Hazel Henderson succinctly summarizes the points made by Tönnies, Polanyi, and Berry. Her well-known model of the 'economic cake' argues that most economic calculations of worth (such as a nation's GDP) give monetary value only to private and public sector goods and services (2005; see Figure 3.1 below). They ignore what she calls 'the love economy' (similar to what Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft*): all the non-monetized expressions of household and neighbourhood mutual aid and cooperation upon which the market economy is predicated (imagine trying to sustain a workforce without family and local community). Henderson also recognized that this 'social cooperative' economy is, in turn, predicated upon Mother Nature (Berry's 'Great Economy'). But orthodox economics imputes no intrinsic value to these two layers of the cake, content instead to skim off the icing of private profit. Henderson captures why our dominant economic story is fatally flawed: it ignores the foundational layers of the cake.

To make our complicated crisis simple, then, we can reasonably assert that work for future economic sustainability and justice must begin by revaluing the whole cake, beginning from the bottom up. If this is true, then the task of people of faith is to engage ever more consciously and tenaciously in the struggle to recover, nurture, and advocate for *Gemeinschaft* in the midst of the ever more insatiable, predatory power of *Gesellschaft*.

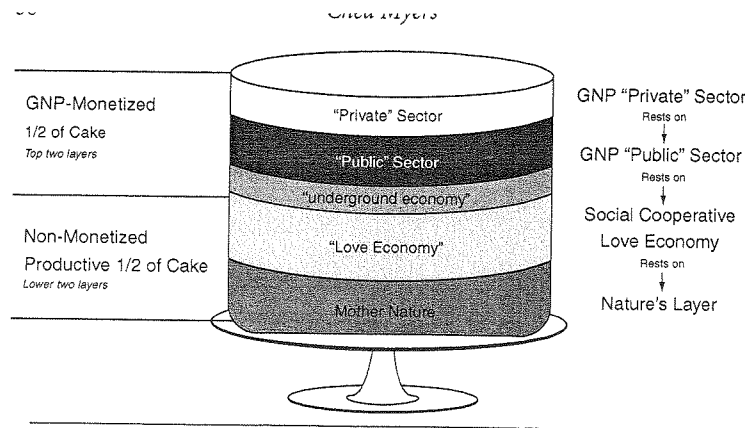


Fig. 3.1. Total productive system of an industrial society. Reproduced with permission from Henderson, 2005.

In our struggle to reverse the Great Transformation about which Polanyi lamented, the Bible can be a key ally. As we search for resources to hold community together in the face of everything pulling it apart, scripture can help us forge a new (or rather, recover an old) story about economics. For the last fifteen years I have been exploring how to reread the Bible economically in order to read the economy biblically. I have developed such readings into a theology and practices of what I call 'the biblical vision of Sabbath Economics'—which broadly corresponds to Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* or Henderson's 'love economy' (see Myers, 2001b). In the spirit of this ongoing project, let me turn to one core sample of Sabbath Economics as expressed in one of Luke's notoriously perplexing parables, which addresses exactly the themes just outlined.

JESUS' PARABLES AND SOCIAL IMAGINATION: LUKE 16

The parables of Jesus as preserved in the synoptic gospels represent the very oldest traditions in the New Testament. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), our churches handle these stories timidly, and often not at all. Perhaps we intuit that there is something so subversive about these tales that they are better kept safely at the margins of our consciousness. Parables might be quaint and poetic, but hardly relevant for Christian discipleship.

Churches that *do* attend to the parables tend to spiritualize them relentlessly, typically preaching them as 'earthly stories with heavenly meanings'. Thus

stories about landless peasants and rich landowners, lords and slaves, or lepers and lawyers are lifted out of their social and historical context and reshaped into 'folksy' theological or moralistic fables bereft of any political or economic edge—or consequence. But once the socio-cultural context indigenous to the story has been ignored or suppressed, the story is easier to recontextualize in terms of our own unconscious political assumptions. We impose schemas that may defy the coherence of the text itself but successfully domesticate the parable under *our* status quo. Stories meant to *challenge* our preconceptions are thus used to *legitimate* them—thus disarming the gospel's most powerful rhetorical weapons for rescuing believers from *our* domestication by that very status quo.

Parables are by design irresistibly metaphorical. However, rather than trying to understand Jesus' metaphoric narratives in their social contexts, the church has too often jumped to allegorizing the parables. Thus every 'earthly' subject of Jesus becomes a figure for a 'heavenly' topic. The Hebrew word for parable, *mashal*, comes from the root *m-sh-l*, meaning 'to be like' (Scott, 1989), and Jesus used such metaphorical images because he was on a mission to get us to see the world *differently* ('Do you have eyes, and fail to see?'; Mark 8:18). His pedagogic purpose was twofold: a) to unmask the illusions his audience had about the world and their place in it, in order to b) open their hearts and minds to what he proposed as an alternative—what he called (metaphorically) the 'kingdom of God'. We might call this today 'deconstructing' and 'reconstructing' consciousness. Jesus thus employs two kinds of parable: those that attempt to unmask the way the world *really is* (as in the parable we will look at below), and those that offer a vision of the way the world *could be* ('the kingdom of heaven may be compared to . . .').

Jesus illustrated the kingdom with everyday images precisely in order to emphasize that it was not an otherworldly vision. The genius of these stories as popular pedagogy was that they narrated recognizable scenarios in plain language that any illiterate peasant could understand: farming (Mark 4:1–9), shepherding (Matt. 18:12–14), being in debt (Luke 7:41–3), and doing hard labour (Matt. 20:1–16). These vignettes would draw the listener into their familiarity, only to throw a surprise twist in order to challenge popular assumptions about what was proprietary and what was possible: a miraculous harvest (Mark 4:8), an enemy as a friend (Luke 10:33), or unexpected vindication (Luke 18:2–8). Conversely, when we sever Jesus' metaphors from a real social world, we erase all economic or political characteristics of God's sovereignty. The 'nature' parables are particularly vulnerable to such domestication (and are thus more popular with us): a weed (Matt. 13:24–30) or fig tree (Luke 13:6) is easier to turn into a theological allegory than is a rich man consolidating assets (Luke 12:16–20) or a king going to war (Luke 14:31)—scenarios that are still all too real in our world.

We have for too long trivialized parables as arcane or platitudinous, hoping to keep aright the world they mean to turn upside down. Jesus used his stories to interrogate the most entrenched arrangements of power and privilege, whether Roman militarism or Judean elitism. Contrary to our traditional spiritualizing treatment of them, then, parables were 'earthy stories with heavy meanings', as William Herzog puts it in his *Parables as subversive speech: Jesus as pedagogue of the oppressed* (1994).

To illustrate this, I will look at a particularly vexing, yet very 'realistic' parable found in Luke 16. It is part of 'Luke's Special Section' (Luke 9:51-18:14) and consists of almost entirely unique material.¹ Here we are at the heart of the third gospel's particular concern about economic justice.

Luke 16 is neatly structured: two parables with identical opening lines bracket Jesus' teaching concerning mammon and the 'love of money':

- 16:1-8 'There was a rich man who ...' (16:1)
Parable of the 'defect-ive' *oikonomos*
- 16:9-13 Teaching on God and mammon
- 16:14-18 Attack on Pharisees as 'lovers of money'
- 16:19-31 'There was a rich man who ...' (16:19)
Parable of Lazarus and the rich man

The whole chapter is clearly a literary unit, though also firmly linked to the previous and subsequent narrative.²

Moreover, chapter 16 is closely paralleled by a sequence later in the narrative:

- 18:18-30 'for he was very rich' (18:23)
Ruler's rejection of the call to discipleship
- 18:31-4 Teaching on fate of the Human One
- 18:35-43 Healing of blind beggar outside Jericho
- 19:1-9 'he was a chief tax collector and was rich' (19:2)
Zacchaeus's embrace of discipleship in Jericho

These twin pairings, each of which could be titled 'Two rich men and a beggar', represent the centre of Luke's economic theology. Launching this sequence of realistic parables (Luke 16) and parabolic 'real stories' (18:18-19:9) is the text on which I will focus.

¹ With the exception of the saying on divorce (Luke 16:16-18 = Matt. 5:18, 31-2, and Mark 10:11-12), this chapter has no parallel with the other synoptic gospels.

² The first parable has several links to the immediately preceding parable of the Prodigal Son (15:1-32), notably the fact that the latter is also about a rescue by the 'household love economy' and the use of the verb *diaskorpizō* (15:13; see comment on 16:1 below). The Lazarus parable, in turn, anticipates Jesus' teaching about not causing 'little ones' to stumble (17:1-4).

THE 'DEFECT-IVE' MANAGER (LUKE 16:1-15): IMPROVISATIONAL RESISTANCE TO THE 'MAMMON' SYSTEM

Luke 16:1-8 is often referred to as the parable of the 'unjust' or 'dishonest' steward, subtitled as such in many versions of the New Testament. This already biases our reading, encoding the hermeneutic of moralistic capitalism, which takes the 'side' of the boss in the story and vilifies the steward. This despite the fact that in Luke's account, both the master and Jesus *commend* the steward's action! I have therefore renamed this the story of a 'Defect-ive Manager', interpreting him as someone profoundly caught between the 'two economies'. This tale might invoke for us the analogy of a middle manager in a large corporation who, just as he is about to be downsized because of sales numbers being lower than expected, improvises an act of creative resistance that ingratiate him to his clients. This 'repositions' him toward the alternative, relational economy that survives just below the surface of the capitalist market system. I propose the hero of Luke's parable as a sort of archetype for those of us who are ensnared in a toxic and oppressive economic system: his attempt to 'use capital to rebuild social relations' is an exemplary response to the conundrum outlined in the first two sections of this chapter.

The internal structure of this parable proper is, like the sequence of Luke 16 as a whole, chiasitic:

- Vv. 1-2: rich man's charges against and dismissal of the steward
- 3: steward's internal dialogue about his fate
- 4: steward's decision and rationale (focal point)
- 5-7: steward's action: writing off debt
- 8a: rich man's response to steward's action

This rhetorical composition functions to focus our attention to verse 4, which encodes the 'moral' of the story (which is then reiterated in 16:9).

The social world of this story, and of Jesus' parables in general as Herzog (1994) has described in great detail, was the dominating patron-clientism that was the cornerstone of social stratification in ancient Roman Palestine. This system is summarized by Malina and Rohrbaugh as

socially fixed relations of generalized reciprocity between social unequals in which a lower-status person in need (called a client) has his needs met by having recourse for favors to a higher-status, well-situated person (called a patron) ... The client relates to the patron as to a superior and more powerful kinsman, while the patron looks after his clients as he does his dependents. (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992, p. 74)

Witherington (1995, pp. 22-4) points out that as the hierarchical structures of the Roman Empire imposed themselves on traditional participatory institutions

around the Mediterranean world, patronage increasingly defined all social, economic, and political relations, from family to craft guilds to tribal structures. Moreover, the social safety net of the older relational ethos was increasingly eroded by the pressure of economic 'structural adjustments' throughout the *Pax Romana*, which was steadily displacing local subsistence peasant farming and fishing with managed production for export. Resulting latifundialization and landlessness, which caused the atrophy of village mutual aid, made the patronage of the 'great households' a practical necessity (see further Hanson and Oakman, 1998, pp. 63–97). The ruling elite thus cast a long and chilling shadow across the Palestinian landscape. And it is precisely such a household that is depicted in Luke's parable.

'There was a certain *plousios* . . . ' (Luke 16:1a = 16:19a). The story begins with a matter-of-fact acknowledgment that the world is ruled by the absentee landlord class. Luke's Jesus has already made his attitude to the landed rich painfully clear in an earlier parable (Luke 12:16–21; *anthrōpou tinos plousiou*), another story that radically contrasts the 'two economies' (see Myers, 2009). Like that farmer and his ever bigger barns, the estate implied here is vast, indicated by the significant amounts of wheat and oil owed by the master's debtors (16:6–7). According to Herzog's calculations (1994, pp. 240–1) these could be valued between one and three thousand *denarii* (one *denarius* was the average subsistence wage for a day's labour). While Bailey (1983, pp. 92–3) assumes that the debtors are sharecroppers working the estate, the huge amount suggests that perhaps these are whole villages owing percentages of their harvest (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992, p. 375), or perhaps merchant commodity traders competing to distribute produce to foreign markets (Herzog, 1994, pp. 249–50).

'[W]ho had a steward' (16:1b, *oikonomos*, 'house manager', whence our word economics). This man belongs to what Gerhard Lenski famously called the dependent 'retainer' class, which he described as 'officials, professional soldiers, household servants, and personal retainers, all of whom served [the ruling class] in a variety of more or less specialized capacities' (1966, pp. 243–4). This literate bureaucratic class had a tenuous existence: they had to ensure exorbitant profits for the master through merciless resource-extraction and labour exploitation, while at the same time maintaining working relations with peasant producers and competitive merchants. As Herzog puts it, such a manager was forever 'caught in the crossfire between the master's greed and excessive demands . . . and the tenants' or debtors' endless complaints' (1994, p. 244). This is where the analogy with modern middle-class, educated folks broadly applies: like the *oikonomos* of old, we are privileged people who are nevertheless subservient to an economic system that both benefits and victimizes us. While most of Jesus' parables feature peasants as their subjects, this story uniquely addresses us.

'[A]nd charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods' (16:1c). The two verbs here tell an interesting story. The first (*dieblēthē*, only here in New Testament) connotes accusations made 'with hostile intent, either falsely and slanderously . . . or justly' (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, 1957, p. 181). Herzog sees an implication that the manager is being undermined by fellow stewards, who are ever competing for increased prestige and influence in the system. The second verb (*diaskorpizōn*) normally refers to a physical or geographic scattering of people (e.g. Mark 14:27; Acts 5:37) or seed (Matt. 25:24). Only here and in the immediately preceding parable of the Prodigal Son is it translated 'squandering' (Luke 15:13), doubtlessly thanks to capitalist hermeneutics. However, there is good reason in the context of this parable to argue that the verb here implies that this manager is *already* 'skimming' and redistributing some of the 'possessions' under his control, a practice he will shortly intensify.³ Surely relevant is the fact that earlier in Luke, *diaskorpizō* appears in a key phrase of Mary's Magnificat. Jesus' mother sings about the 'proud' being 'scattered' and the 'mighty put down from their thrones' (Luke 1:51–2)—a reference to the demise of just the sort of rich landowners portrayed in this parable!

Though the charges against this manager are 'hearsay', his dismissal is summary, confirming the absolute authority of the master (Luke 16:2, perhaps faintly echoing Isaiah 22:19). The accused does not try to argue or defend himself, knowing there is no recourse or due process in this system. Instead, in a poignant internal dialogue (16:3), he focuses on the stark alternatives facing him, knowing he 'won't ever be able to work in this town again!' This soft-handed bureaucrat realizes he would not physically be able to endure the brutal exploitation that was the lot of day-labourers; on the other hand, seeking alms would obliterate what remained of his 'class' honour. Herzog rightly characterizes these options as 'death by digging or death by begging' (1994, p. 242).

As suggested by its structure, the story turns on the fired manager's conclusion in verse 4. Though his action plan is not yet revealed, he is going to do whatever it takes to 'cross over' from the economy of *Gesellschaft* to that of *Gemeinschaft*. He has determined to defect from his patron's world, in which all social relations are cannibalized in the service of accumulating wealth for the elite. His strategy is that by more seriously 'scattering' that wealth he will be able to re-enter the older village-

³ The Greek *hyparchonta* is analogous to the English 'be-longings', and is an important term in Luke's economic theology. Such possessions typically characterize large landowners (see also 12:44), and are what the proverbial 'strong man' seeks to protect (11:21). This is why disciples ultimately must 'renounce' them (14:33), and why the Pentecostal Acts community redistributes them 'according to those in need' (Acts 4:32). And in the 'happy' conclusion to the discipleship narrative in Luke, the chief tax collector Zacchaeus distributes half of his *hyparchontōn* to the poor and makes reparation to those defrauded by his considerable wealth (19:8).

based ethos of 'generalized reciprocity' and mutual aid. Its key value is *hospitality*, and his hope is that in return for his facilitation of debt relief, 'they will receive me into their *oikous*'. Having been kicked out of the Great Household, he now must bet on the older tradition of the 'love economy' for survival.

The rest of the story unfolds quickly (16:5–7), revealing the manager's subversive initiative. Presumably having a narrow window of time between his firing and the public announcement to the village, he hurries to his place of business and, still acting as the master's agent, summons his clients 'one by one', perhaps so they cannot compare notes. 'Tell me how much you owe' indicates that he no longer has the books—or is already crossing over into the older honour code. He does, however, ask for their handwriting on the revised bill. Herzog contends that the amount he writes off may be roughly equivalent to the 25–50 per cent of 'hidden interest' charged in produce contracts that represents the master's profit margin. In any case, it is a fire sale on debt, a sort of 'jubilee' moment, re-enacting the old biblical vision of release from debt (Lev. 25:36–8; Deut. 15:1–11). There are only two such amnesties narrated, as opposed to the more traditional parabolic 'rule of three' (see e.g. Luke 14:18–20; 19:16–21). That is because *this* scene is not the punchline to the story. That comes in the next verse, when the master (seemingly unaccountably) *commends* his feral manager (16:8).

The master concedes that his system is corrupt (as in the parable of the Pounds/Talents, Luke 19:22b//Matt. 25:26–9), acknowledging the one he fired as the 'manager of injustice' (*ton oikonomon tēs adikias*). But he 'gives him credit' for being 'shrewd' (*phronimōs*, probably alluding to the 'wisdom of self-preservation' as in the LXX of Prov. 30:24–8).

Herzog makes sense of this surprising reversal by showing how the manager's action put the master in a bind (1994, pp. 250–2). The debtors would praise the master for authorizing this debt amnesty, so he is a local hero; to save face he must follow through on the write-off, so as not to place the whole system in crisis.⁴ Thus the master begrudgingly admits that the manager has outwitted him. Yet the latter is still out on his ear, his fate now in the hands of the villagers who benefited from his unilateral debt-restructuring.

The point of Luke's story is clarified by Jesus' teaching that now follows. 'For the children of this age are more shrewd (*phronimōteroi*) than the children of light in dealing with their *own* generation' (16:8b). Most scholars accept that this begins Jesus' decoding of his parable (rather than concluding

⁴ One might think of the scene at the end of the film *Ocean's 13*, where master thief Danny Ocean refuses to deliver the cut of the loot promised to Terry Benedict, a casino owner who staked him to the job but then tried to double cross him. Instead, Danny publicly donates Terry's cut to charity; and in the next scene, Benedict is on the Oprah Show receiving her praise for his generosity.

the master's acknowledgment). The phrases 'this age' and 'their generation' are apocalyptic in tone, the traditional rhetoric of resistance in Jewish antiquity. They convey an indictment of the entire system of exploitation, characteristic of the world that must pass away. Yet embedded in this oppositional declaration is Jesus' acknowledgment that as long as this age persists, shrewdness (repeating the master's approbation) will be required to survive it. In this case, the manager has linked his fate to the debtor class, helping them in order to help himself. His Jubiliary gesture has rebuilt social relations: hard-pressed peasants get a measure of relief, and he secures his status among the locals so he will have a place to stay now that he has lost his job.

This brings us to the moral of the story. Jesus has spun a tale about the rapacious, predatory world of ancient commodity managing, presided over by the 'children of this age'. Luke chooses this moment to introduce a unique term, in order to underline a crucial lesson for the 'children of light' (presumably the disciples): 'Make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of injustice' (16:9a). 'Mammon', which only appears in the New Testament here and its parallel in Matthew 6:24, seems to be Jesus' dark metaphor for the economic system of domination.⁵ The absolute opposition between mammon and God articulated in the conclusion to this teaching (16:13) intensifies the apocalyptic dualism. Such rhetorical heat is Jesus' way of 'politicizing' the issue, and I believe loosely corresponds to Berry's contrast between the 'two economies' or Tonnie's *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*.

In the second part of verse 9 we see clear resonance between Jesus' exhortation and the manager's strategy at the centre of the parable:⁶

v 4: ... in order that (*hina hotan*) when I am put out of the economy they may receive me (*dexōntai me eis*) into their homes.

v 9b: ... in order that (*hina hotan*) when it fails they may receive you into (*dexōntai hymas eis*) the eternal tents.

⁵ Though not in the Hebrew Bible, the term does appear in later Jewish writings. In the Mishnah it connotes property, often as contrasted with life. In the Targum it is an epithet for dishonest gain, profit made through exploitation, spoiling a neighbour's property, or even a bribe: 'He destroys his house who gathers the mammon of injustice' (Targ. Prov. 15:27). *Mamōnās* is a transliteration of an Aramaic word that Kittel thinks stems from the Hebrew for 'that in which one trusts'; it was 'used in rabbinic writing as a term for a deposit or a "safebox" in which personal or household treasures were held'. This would make Luke 16:10–12 a pun. Kittel notes that another possible etymology could be from the 'Babylonian *man man*, a name of Margal, hence *mamōnas* = gold = filth of hell' (1967, IV, p. 388, n. 2).

⁶ Herzog concludes his otherwise brilliant treatment of this parable (1994, p. 256) by assuming that the cynical master likely retained this calculating operator. But such an imagined ending would only *strengthen* the patronage system, hardly providing what Herzog calls a glimpse of 'partial liberation'. The text nowhere implies that the manager's position was restored. Moreover, verse 9 makes it clear that his welcome into the houses of the debtors (= verse 4) is the point of the story, implying that the subject of the tale indeed 'crossed over'.

From Jesus' perspective, the question is not *whether* the unsustainable mammon system will fail (*eklipē*); only *when*. It is interesting that the eschatological resting place for those displaced by the mammon system is the hospitality of 'eternal tents' (*aiōnious skēnas*), suggesting that redemption lies in a return to Israel's primal wilderness traditions. This stands to reason, given that the vision of Sabbath Economics originated as the people's first lesson in freedom after their exodus from empire, as encoded in the story of the manna (Exod. 16; see Myers, 2001b, pp. 10–17).

We may see Jesus' extraordinary pronouncement here as an urgent appeal to improvisational 'monkeywrenching'. Like the manager being squeezed out, disciples caught and complicit in the mammon system must figure out ways to defect from it and to rehabilitate the traditional ways of manna culture. This means we will be dismissed by the dominant system as 'defect-ive', but according to Jesus, this is the *only way people like us can be 'trustworthy'*, as the following three verses argue.

Jesus' teaching concludes with a triplet on trust (in 16:10–12 the Greek *pisteuō/pistos* appears five times). At its centre is a little pun that presses the question about reliability amidst the conflict between the two economies in 16:11:

If you can't be trusted with
with the unjust 'stuff ...' (*mamōnā*),
who will entrust you
with 'things of true value' (*to alēthinon*)?

While the story as a whole commends the necessarily ambiguous attempts of the managerial class to redeploy capital on behalf of community, it concludes with an unequivocal reiteration of the incompatibility of the two economies: 'You cannot serve God and mammon' (16:13). Or, as Wendell Berry puts it, 'If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys' (1987, p. 74).

A DISCIPLESHIP OF MONEY

This parable articulates a difficult 'trialectical' truth for persons of privilege within the dominant economic system:

- 1) It is incumbent upon us to realize that the mammon system that *appears* to benefit us is in fact an end-game. We must figure out how to act creatively and concretely to use whatever economic means at our disposal to rebuild social relations with those oppressed by this system.

- 2) Our best efforts will only ever bring *partial* relief or justice in a world ruled by capital, but we must nevertheless persist, knowing that the system is ultimately unsustainable.
- 3) The ambiguity of our position (complicit) and our efforts to resist (fractional) should not delude us (as it has mainstream economic theologians) that the two economies are perhaps *not* after all absolutely incompatible. They are, and the struggle to defect from one to the other is consequential, for us and for the poor.

This subversive tale is an extraordinary call to discipleship for those stuck (as we inevitably are) in what Dorothy Day called the 'filthy rotten system'. It refuses to exonerate us from response-ability to act, however improvisationally.

In a pointed epilogue, Luke tells us that 'the lovers of money (*philargyros*) heard all this and ridiculed him' (*exemyktērizon*). 'Love of money' appears only elsewhere in 1 Timothy 6:10 and 2 Timothy 3:2, where it is roundly condemned as the proverbial 'root of all evil'. The latter verb indicates the moneyed class's profound disdain for Jesus' teaching; it comes from *myktēr*, 'nose', and thus conveys exactly our English phrase: 'they turned up their noses at him'! It occurs only once more in the New Testament—as the 'rulers' show their contempt for Jesus as he hangs on a Roman cross (Luke 23:35).

This is one of countless instances in which the Bible encodes in its characters our *own* resistances to the radically upside-down vision of the kingdom. This parable challenges us profoundly. We have been thoroughly socialized into the world of mammon, where capital routinely destroys community. Financing can move freely across borders, but desperate workers cannot; neighbourhoods are redeveloped for the rich, while driving out the poor; and government policy bails out bankers who made predatory loans, but not working-class people who lost their homes to foreclosure because of those same loans. We cannibalize social relations to accumulate money in a thousand ways, large and small, working so compulsively we cannot nurture our families, leaving beloved home places to follow a promotion, forever too busy to sustain friendships or community, and far more anxious about our net worth than the fate of the poor. Even if we do recognize the fundamental corruption of capitalism, we are half-hearted at best in our efforts to subvert or change the system.

But the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which follows on the heels of our tale (Luke 16:19–31), means to drive home how imperative it is that we deconstruct such a world. Because as Dives (Latin for 'rich') learns the hard way, socio-economic disparity creates an 'impassable gulf' that has 'cosmic consequences' (16:25–6). The chasm between the 'heaven' of abundance and the 'hell' of deprivation is structured right into the social architecture of the mammon system; if we abide by it in 'this age', how will it be transcended in the 'age to come'? This is why Luke culminates his

string of stories about rich men with two hopeful portraits of crossing over that divide. One is the discipleship of Zacchaeus (*kai autos plousios*), which involves both redistribution and reparation to the poor (Luke 19:1–10). It is immediately followed by the parable of the Pounds, which concerns another retainer who dramatically refuses to cooperate with the usury system at great personal cost (Luke 19:11–27; see my comments on Matthew's version, Myers, 2001b, pp. 41–5).

These biblical tales have the power to deconstruct and reconstruct our consciousness around money. The truth is, we are deeply entwined in capitalist culture, and thus for the foreseeable future are stuck with the money system. No amount of dissociative rhetoric or oppositional activism exonerates us from our practical responsibility to handle the money we do have subversively. We must be clear that money is neither a rational exchange mechanism nor a morally neutral tool. Rather, it is a means of either negating or affirming social relationships. Unlike poor folk, we middle-class Christians have far more of a choice about how we deploy our financial resources than we are socialized to imagine. Growing movements such as fair trade, community supported agriculture, sustainable building, and social investing demonstrate this.

We can, and must, consciously, critically, and creatively use capital to rebuild community and justice, embracing the 'defect-ive' discipleship of Jesus' beleaguered *oikonomos*. Only such practices will begin to change the economic narrative that is killing us and animate our political imaginations to embody ever more radical alternatives to the mammon system.

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