

RESPONSIBLE ACTION

In general, economies flourish when goodwill is universal and global, but control is local and personal knowledge guides decisions.

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ELEMENT

“Who is my neighbor?” is a familiar question to

Christians. Jesus thinks it is a question of some importance (Luke 10:25-37). But the modern world forces us to ask it in new ways. One of the most important catalysts of the entrepreneurial economy was a gradual shift toward viewing cultural “others” as having equal dignity in God’s image. In a traditional economy, transactions were mostly limited to tiny, homogeneous groups – outsiders were not trusted.

Today, with the global expansion of markets and trade, we trust thousands of strangers around the world as co-workers and partners in exchange. The Christian virtue of *philoxenos* was central to this shift. That word may be translated “hospitality,” but our current sense of hospitality is insufficient to capture the high calling of *philoxenos*. It meant much more than having people over to your house and showing them a gracious and well-appointed time; it meant the wild adventure of *loving strangers*.

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Today, our culture badly needs a renewal of this virtue. The idea of economics as a zero-sum game, in which the success of one person or nation must involve loss for others, pits people against one another. People increasingly fear and resent the success of others. This fear and resentment manifest themselves as division and envy at home, and nationalistic rivalry on the world stage.

Christians can be front and center resisting these trends, calling our culture back to the love of strangers – the universal goodwill – that first made the modern economy possible. When our neighbors think China is a billion people out to steal their jobs, Christians can help them think of China as a billion customers we could be serving. When we love and serve, everybody wins.

At the same time, technological progress challenges us to ask “who is my neighbor?” in another sense. We can now reach around the world and have an impact on people anywhere. This has opened many opportunities for service, but it also has created new challenges. Can we help people effectively if we do not know them? How much real relationship is possible without proximity?

It is not always genuinely helpful for rich Westerners to helicopter into distant lands with crates of money and resources. One-way aid can break down local bonds of interdependence. It can crowd out local economic development, perpetuating dependency on aid. It creates a hierarchy between patron and client. It often feeds corruption and keeps unjust authorities in power.

We rightly feel a duty of goodwill toward those in need around the world. But universal goodwill must be integrated with

a serious consideration of the limitations of space and community. Otherwise it leads towards technocratic, paternalistic, centrally controlled systems that take away the space people need to be stewards of their own lives. All the people God brings into our lives are our neighbors. But notice that the Good Samaritan helped a man he found on the road; he didn’t travel to every city in Judea with bags of cash.

It is harder to encourage genuine economic development than it is to hand out money, but in the end economic development is the only thing that will truly help. It is also the only way we can truly encounter people as equals and fellow stewards, rather than as clients and dependents. Where long-term, one-way aid reinforces existing power hierarchies, the Gospel upends such hierarchies, liberating all people to flourish and calling them all into authentic relationship as equals in love.