

PRODUCTIVITY AND OPPORTUNITY

A productive economy lifts people out of poverty and generally helps people flourish.



Christian thought leaders have been growing increasingly suspicious of economic growth. Some have openly denounced economic growth as intrinsically hostile to the Gospel and moral character. Most have not taken things quite that far, because it takes a very special kind of dedication to preach that we should love our neighbors while hoping our neighbors lose their jobs. However, too many Christian educators distance themselves from the virtue of productivity. This has had a pervasive impact on the training of Christian leaders.

Many Christian intellectuals today fail to recognize that respect for human dignity is actually the basis of the equality of rights and open access to choices that characterize the entrepreneurial economy. What they see is a civilization increasingly fragmented and losing cultural integrity – “integrity” in the literal sense of fitting together. They are observing a real problem, but they mistake the cause and overlook the most promising solution. Work actually creates community among people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs. That same diversity – especially in the form of religious freedom – can make it challenging for society to enforce moral standards in the public square. But the only hope for overcoming this fragmentation is to create community, and nothing does that more effectively than work and entrepreneurship.

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As we saw in Element 1, human beings and their communities are made to do creative work that contributes to the common good and helps the world flourish for God’s glory. This is the central purpose of human life in the biblical narrative, literally from Genesis 1 (“fill the earth and subdue it”) to Revelation 22 (“they will reign forever and ever”). Of course we should never idolize economic growth as if it were an unconditional good, and the danger of cultural fragmentation is real

and serious. But that is not the question that faces us today. The question is whether it is the church’s job to sit on the cultural sidelines, sneering at our neighbors’ concern for growth, or to join with our neighbors in working for the flourishing of the world.

In fact, it is only by entering into the economy to help it grow that the church can point people away from “the deceitfulness of riches” and back to the true purpose of work and economic exchange. Only when we join our neighbors in working for economic growth can we help them rediscover what that growth really consists of. Economies do not ultimately grow in terms of money but in terms of value. Money would have no basis without value (see Element 4). Any civilization that prioritizes money-making over value creation will quickly reach economic collapse. Late medieval Spain and mercantilist Britain learned this lesson the

hard way, and our own civilization is in the process of learning it again. We can help it find the better path.

Above all, the church cannot serve those in the most need without embracing economic growth. At home and around the world, measurable economic outcomes for the poor tend to go up or down at about the same rate as the economy at large. And the church can and should act intentionally to encourage entrepreneurship and growth in the most distressed neighborhoods. It will be no good helping our neighbors rediscover the virtue of productive work (see Elements 3 and 7) if there are no businesses in their neighborhoods. John Perkins, founder of the Christian Community Development Association, has said that “people need two things: Jesus and a job.” How can we love our neighbors if we help them find one but not the other?