

Preaching on Economics

Douglas W. Oldenburg

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Several years ago, I became convinced that, with the single exception of avoiding nuclear war, the great moral issues facing the human community and the Church of Jesus Christ were focused on economics. I felt that the Bible had a lot to say about economic issues, but that the church and its pastors (including myself) were poorly prepared to relate the biblical witness to the economic issues of our time. I increasingly became persuaded that faithful ministry in our day and in the foreseeable future required pastors to know more about economics and how to relate the biblical material to those critical issues.

In view of those convictions, I requested and received from my session a five month sabbatical to study "Christian Faith and Economics." There were some elders who felt that such a study was irrelevant to a pastor's work, but the majority affirmed my conviction and desire to try faithfully to bridge the gap between the biblical faith and the world of economics. Many felt that ministers are extremely naive regarding economic issues, and they applauded my desire to become more informed. Although a few expressed the hope I would become convinced that capitalism was *the* Christian economic system, most were genuinely eager to hear the results of my study. Following my sabbatic, I engaged in a series of Sunday evening programs with my congregation in which I shared my reflections, after which a business person and another clergy person gave responses. Although I subsequently preached a number of sermons on economic issues and found those concerns surfacing in many of my sermons, I consciously tried to avoid being a "one track" preacher. It is obvious that economic matters do not comprise the whole of the gospel.

My experience in "preaching on economics" has taught me the importance of the following:

(1) *The sermon must be biblically based.* I am confident that most readers of this journal are convinced that every sermon should be rooted in Scripture, but it is absolutely critical in preaching on economics. The only way one can be reasonably sure one is not preaching one's own economic ideology or agenda is to be sure that the sermon is grounded in God's Word. That does not mean, of course, that sermons must be filled with "proof texts," but it does mean that the Bible and the theology that flows from Scripture must be the source of our preaching. Most Christians—especially those nurtured in the Reformed tradition—will not listen very long to sermons that are not firmly based in Scripture, and they shouldn't. That is especially true when preaching on economics.

Anyone who has read the Bible seriously knows that it is filled with texts related to economics. It was a critical issue for the biblical writers in their day as it is for us. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament provide ample texts for faithful biblical preaching on economics. Such texts, of course, must be analyzed and understood within their cultural and historical contexts, and

we must avoid expecting the Bible to tell us precisely how an economic system must be organized or provide us with specific technical answers to our complex economic problems. We will gladly learn from those who are experts in economics and competent to deal with the many difficult issues involved.

But the Bible does give us a critically important perspective, a perch, a vantage point, a way of looking at economic issues and a vision of economic justice. It provides us with criteria for evaluating economic systems and policies. The Bible can suggest certain value presumptions in economics and insist that deviations from such presumptions must bear the burden of proof. It can offer tools for economic reflection and guidance for economic decisions. It resonates on almost every page with themes which faithful, biblical preaching must reflect, such as the following: the stewardship of creation, the priority of the poor, a passion for economic justice, a polemic against idolatry, the importance of community, the unity of the human family, the dangers of wealth and greed, the sharing of one's resources with those in need, and a concern for the whole person. Every preacher faithful to the biblical witness will include such economically related themes in her/his schedule of preaching.

(2) *The preacher must do her/his homework.* To preach effectively on economic issues does not mean one has to become a professional economist or spend long hours pouring over esoteric economic texts. But it does mean understanding enough about the way our economic system operates to identify the moral issues involved. A number of books have been written in recent years to help the preacher understand the rudiments of economic systems and policies and the underlying moral issues at stake. (Cf. Walter Owensby, *Economics for Prophets* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1988); and J. Philips Wogaman, *Economics and Ethics, A Christian Inquiry* (Fortress Press, 1986). Most mainline Protestant denominations and the American Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church have prepared major statements on economics within the past few years (cf.: "Christian Faith and Economic Justice," PCUSA, 1984; and "Economic Justice for All," American Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, 1986). There is a rich reservoir of resources today to help the preacher understand current economic issues and how the biblical faith relates to them. They are indispensable for effective and responsible preaching.

It is also important that our homework include the collection of articles in magazines, newspapers, and religious publications which deal with these issues. I have found it virtually indispensable to have a file on many facets of economic issues into which I place helpful articles. They provide important data and information which enrich my sermons and give them more credibility.

There is another source of valuable information and learning which we often overlook: those men and women in our congregation who spend their lives in business and financial corporations. Having lunch with a selected individual or group once a month provides not only an opportunity for learning about the "economic world" with all its moral dilemmas and pressures, but also an opportunity to be a pastor and friend to those who often feel lonely or lost in the cold corporate world or neglected by the church. Such genuine pastoral care also makes them more open to the message on Sunday morning which may challenge their complacency and some of their cherished assump-

tions. I have found that those persons also provide an important critique and corrective to my preaching on economics.

It is imperative, however, that our homework include contact with and learning from those who suffer from harsh economic realities. Knowing the statistics about poverty, hunger, and unemployment is important, but it is even more important to learn from those who are poor, hungry, and unemployed. Learning from the “technical experts” in economics is necessary, but learning from the “experiential experts” is of even greater value. One’s passion about the issues does not usually come from cold economic theory or data as much as it comes from personal contact with the human faces who suffer. Seeing a little child die in her mother’s arms from malnutrition in Haiti had a burning impact on my life—and preaching.

(3) *The preacher’s attitude is critical.* Preaching on economic issues often creates a defensiveness within many of our listeners in the pew. The biblical word regarding economic justice, God’s special concern for the poor, the dangers of wealth, the need for structural change, is difficult to hear for those of us who are among the prosperous of the world. It always makes us uncomfortable and we resist it. When one raises questions about capitalism and our obsession with money, one is dealing with the “gods” of our culture, and many people will become defensive and very critical of the preacher.

That natural defensiveness is made more rigid if the preacher has an arrogant, know-it-all, dogmatic attitude. Either the listener in the pew will quickly “turn us off,” become more entrenched in his/her convictions, create destructive conflict within the congregation, become a church dropout, or respond in a combination of these ways. The preacher may have the inner satisfaction that she/he courageously proclaimed the Word, but the results of this attitude would be quite negative.

Effective communication, openness to consider disturbing ideas, and significant change are far more likely to occur if the preacher simply and honestly acknowledges what is, indeed, fact: we are not economists with any expertise in the discipline, we do not have an exclusive handle on God’s truth, we do not have all the answers to the complex problems that confront us, we need to learn from those in the congregation, we invite their comments and correctives to the sermon, and we promise to listen to them as attentively as we invite them to listen to us. In other words, a healthy dose of humility when preaching on economic issues (or any issue) is appropriate for the preacher and serves to lower the natural knee-jerk defensiveness of those in the pew.

It is also important that we acknowledge the complexity of issues and that most economic policies have both a positive and negative side, requiring difficult trade-offs between competing values. Many Americans, for example, simply cannot hear any criticism of capitalism unless they are first convinced the critic also appreciates the values of our system. On the other hand, some cannot hear a speaker extol the value of the system unless they know that he/she also understands its negative, painful downside. From the Christian perspective, a “lover’s quarrel” seems appropriate.

(4) *“How” something is said is almost as important as “what.”* Every preacher knows the mystery and magic of words. There are countless ways of

saying the same thing. One of the exciting challenges of preparing a sermon is to find the most effective combination of words to communicate what you intend. Therefore, many of us find it almost imperative to write out our sermons, reshaping sentences and paragraphs, trying different words and phrases, reading it aloud to hear how it sounds, and often reading it to someone else in order to receive constructive criticism. Such a discipline is especially important when preaching on issues that are likely to create controversy and inflame passions.

On several occasions in my pastorates when I felt compelled to preach on some economic or political issue that would almost certainly ignite criticism and conflict, I would go to someone whom I respected (usually a member of my congregation) about two or three weeks before I planned to preach the sermon, share my concerns and convictions, and ask for help in my struggle to see how the Bible addressed the issue. I would then write a draft of my sermon, share it with this person, and meet again to receive his/her critique and correctives. These friends helped me immeasurably to say things more clearly, to say what I intended to say, and to say it in such a way that people would listen and be open to the biblical Word. I remain deeply indebted to them for their valuable contributions to my sermons on economic issues.

(5) *Raising consciousness, advocating biblical values, and proclaiming God's call to repentance is usually more appropriate for the preacher than supporting or opposing specific policies.* Somewhere I have heard an account of a debate regarding economic issues between former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, and William Sloan Coffin, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. In a moment of frustration, Dr. Kissinger asked Dr. Coffin, "Just what do you want us to do?" Dr. Coffin replied: "As a clergyman, sir, my task is to proclaim God's Word: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream,' and your job is to figure out the irrigation system."

I am sure there are many times when faithfulness to the Lordship of Christ requires the minister to support or oppose specific social policies in her/his own life and witness, and there are doubtless times when faithfulness to God's Word requires the preacher to "take a stand" in the pulpit on specific public policies. But most of us simply do not have the expertise to "figure out the irrigation system" with all its complexity. Our calling is first of all to let God's Word raise consciousness within our listeners regarding harsh economic realities, and to develop within them a sense of "moral outrage," and a deeper commitment to be advocates of the poor, stewards of creation, and champions of justice. Major studies have concluded that poverty in the United States could be eliminated if we only had the "will" to do it. The preacher's task is to proclaim the gospel in such a way that we will create that determination, that moral and spiritual commitment, that "will" to do it.

I was surprised to discover in my study of economics that the secular literature of those who worry most about our global well-being and world poverty shows a remarkable consensus at one point. Although there are differences among them regarding their diagnosis of the present, prognosis of the future, and the need for major changes in national and international economic systems, they are generally agreed that the greatest need today is for another kind

of change—a change of the human heart and mind, a change in perception, a change in core values, and a change in basic cultural assumptions and beliefs. Many also have concluded that although external pressures (population growth, environmental problems, poverty and hunger increases) are pushing us toward this new perspective, the only power able to pull us out of our old mind-set and give us a new vision is the spiritual power of religion. One secular study concluded:

What is needed is a total change within people themselves The starting point must be in the hearts and minds of men and women, their perception of reality and of their own mission in life The future prospects of the human species depend upon internalizing an essentially religious perspective, sufficient to transform secular outlooks that now dominate the destiny of the planet Hope, now more than ever . . . depends on renourishing religious sensibilities.¹

That is the task of the preacher! Of course, it's not a new theme for the Judeo-Christian community. It is thoroughly biblical (cf. Ezekiel 18:30-32, Romans 12:1-2). It is essentially a call to repentance (Greek: "metanoia"—"meta" indicating a change, and "noia" referring to the mind or the whole self in its way of knowing and perceiving). Perhaps, nothing is more crucial for the well-being of our world and the establishment of economic justice than to proclaim God's call to repentance!

(6) *Every sermon on economics should contain the "good news" of the gospel.* It is tempting for some of us to focus almost exclusively on the bad news when preaching on economics: the horrible growth of hunger in the world, the horrendous and growing gulf between the rich and the poor in our nation and around the world, our national disgrace of increasing poverty and homelessness in the midst of our affluence, the way our current economic systems and policies hurt and oppress many people, the frightening pollution of God's good earth, the greed and selfishness and apathy and materialism that proliferate the problems, and the list goes on. Anyone who takes seriously the condition of the world today can recite easily a long litany of "bad news," and the biblical Word calls us to take seriously those painful realities around us.

But the gospel is a word of "good news." It's the good news of God's grace that forgives and sets us free from our prisons of selfishness, greed, and apathy. It's the good news that such freedom brings the fullness and abundance of life for which we all yearn. It's the good news that we are not alone in our struggle for peace and justice, but joined by sisters and brothers around the world with common commitments and concerns.

The more one grapples with the enormous scope and complexity of our world's economic problems today and their potential danger to humankind, the more one is tempted to throw up one's hands and succumb to apathy and capitulate to despair. I believe there is today a growing sense of impotence in the human spirit, a growing distrust of those who promise to change things, a growing fear that our problems may finally be insolvable, and a growing acquiescence to the way things are. I sense that depressing spirit not only in those who sit in our pews, but also in those who preach from our pulpits. If that is

anywhere near the mood of our day, then a recovery of the good news of authentic Christian hope is urgently needed.

Christian hope is that ultimate confidence that God will finally complete what God began in creation and revealed in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of sin forces us to be realistic about the human situation and the possibilities of change, but our doctrine of a living and sovereign God who raised Jesus from the dead means that the future is always open. To conclude that all change is impossible is to push God out of history and forget that redemption and resurrection are the final words of the gospel. It is certainly a mistake to underestimate the power of sin, but it is even a greater mistake to underestimate the power of God. Christian hope does not look for perfect solutions to our economic problems today, but for partial solutions and struggles for "victories over evil which are possible now" (Declaration of Faith, Chapter X).

Sermons on economics must include some specific handles which will enable people to struggle for those victories. Without denying the enormous scope and complexity of the problems, the preacher must proclaim the good news that by God's grace and power change is possible, both within the human spirit and around the world. Each of us can bite off a piece of the whole and make a difference: asking for God's Spirit to transform more fully our own hearts and minds, writing letters to government officials, becoming involved in the political arena, being more sensitive to the human dimensions of business decisions and ethically responsible in all our dealings, appearing before budget hearings as advocates for the poor, reducing life-styles and increasing contributions to agencies that help the poor and work for justice, engaging in ministries of compassion to those in need. God does not call all of us to respond to the Word in the same way, but all of us are called to do whatever we can to make a difference in nudging this world toward becoming what God created it to be—a world of peace and justice. Sermons on economics should help people get a handle on their calling.

Preaching on economics must be done faithfully and responsibly, courageously and carefully, prophetically and pastorally. But it must be done!

NOTE

¹ Author unknown.