Protagonist Corner
The Gospel of Prosperity...Again

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The enduring question of how Christians are rightly to regard and relate to material wealth in their own lives and in the life of the world they inhabit receives distinctly different answers in the hands of contemporary Christian thinkers. What is striking about some of these different answers is that they agree very profoundly about how Christians in the early centuries of the Church addressed the relationship.

In his important study of these matters in the early Church, Justo González cites manifold examples of how these early Christians relentlessly arrived at the conclusion that the "purpose of wealth is to meet human need."[1] In a similar vein, John Schneider more briefly reviews the same era of the Church's life and concludes:

> The common judgment was that proper usage was determined by order of need, so that evil lurked not in the mere having of things but in the selfishness that came with enjoyment of that which was clearly superfluous to meeting one's own real needs. The excess of wealth must not be so *abused* but instead *used* to meet the most pressing needs of others, especially the poor.[2]

But this consensus on the witness of early Christians about faith and wealth masks a large divide concerning the use that contemporary Christians might make of their witness.

González notes the fact that the early Christians whose thinking he has carefully traced lived in a world typified by massive contrasts between rich and poor. He sees a clear parallel to our world that is "populated by a few who have millions and by millions who have nothing." After further noting that for our early Christian forbears these issues "were indissolubly connected with the meaning of salvation," González offers a concluding challenge:

> Has the world changed so much that what they had to say is no longer relevant? I believe not. Has our commitment waned to such an extent that we can no longer take seriously the questions they pose to our use of the world's resources? I hope not.[3]

By contrast, Schneider argues that this consensus, as wise and good as it may have been, is largely a "product of its time." The time, he believes, was one in which "a very small minority of people were rich in relative terms (and had more than they needed), and the vast majority were either poor or facing poverty (did not have, or barely had, enough to live on) as a constant danger."[4] He further believes that modern market economies present an altogether different situation in which "the vast majority of ordinary people have become rich by any literal or historic measure, while the small (by comparison) minority are materially poor."[5] Thus a new ethic and spirituality needs to be formed in contrast to that of early Christianity that recognizes that "a new species of acquisition has been born that not only does not naturally oppress other human beings but actually liberates them."[6]

The new ethic and spirituality that Schneider sees as necessary for Christians in the changed environment of modern market economies is one that reclaims acquisition and enjoyment as desirable goals. Although Schneider acknowledges that "the entire weight of historic Christian tradition seems to be against the integration of faith with the habits of acquisition and enjoyment," he argues "we must have a distinctly Christian way to affirm the economic habits of acquisition and enjoyment of affluence as they necessarily exist within the culture of modern capitalism."[7]

The striking contrast between the ways in which González and Schneider assess the relevance of the early Christian witness to our contemporary question of faith and wealth presents a number of challenges for preachers. For one thing, it presents a major interpretative challenge concerning the early Church's reading of Scripture itself. That is, the decision to credit or discredit the early Church's witness on faith and wealth is also a decision to credit or discredit its reading of the Bible, especially of the Gospels. The mere fact of this interpretative challenge does not yield a definitive answer as to which approach is most faithful to Scripture. But, for example, a preacher needs to be aware that moving on Schneider's trajectory involves a readiness to say that the plain sense of not only tradition, but also Scripture, needs to be set aside. Schneider believes he has good and sufficient theological reasons for doing so. A preacher who joins him will want to believe she or he has the same.

Perhaps the comprehensive challenge that the contrast between these two approaches to the wisdom of Scripture and tradition on matters of faith and wealth represents for a preacher is the necessity to get well beyond sloganeering on the topic in preaching. It is easy enough for a preacher to pillory popular versions of the "Gospel of Prosperity" on the one hand, or caricatures of anti-consumerism on the other. Yet the face-off between González and Schneider makes obvious the fact that serious theological judgments are being formulated at a level that simple slogans will not touch. Thus preachers need to be willing to explore, for example, Schneider's judgment that there is no moral difference between deriving pleasure from the "nearly perfect performance" of a luxury automobile and deriving pleasure from owning pieces of fine art or reading great books.[8] Instead of responding with generalities about the evils of consumerism, deep exploration by a preacher might notice that ownership of the luxury vehicle seems more necessary to its generation of pleasure than in the case of either a piece of fine art or great book. There is a fundamental difference between an automobile showroom and museums or libraries. (We are welcomed into the former for the purpose of making a transaction, but into the latter simply to enjoy what is there.)

What is perhaps the single most critical difference in perspective between the challenge that González presents and the comfort that Schneider offers concerns how each regards the gap between those "who have millions and the millions who have nothing." For González, this phenomenon serves as a sobering recall to the moral wisdom of Christian forbears who saw such economic disparity as a call to community and solidarity with those who live in misery. For Schneider, the same phenomenon is a call more emphatically to embrace capitalism's emphasis on acquisition and enjoyment in the confidence there is no significant relationship between the wealth of the one ("those who have millions") and the poverty of the other (millions who have nothing). Embracing Dinesh D'Souza's "new way of thinking about inequality," Schneider argues (again, with D'Souza) that capitalism creates wealth that did not exist before.[9] Both seem to imagine that such creation is *ex nihilo*, forgetting theologically that such capacity belongs only to God and forgetting empirically that created wealth frequently is based on extracting natural resources (that no human had a hand in fashioning) in a manner that participates in as much destruction as creation.

When all is said and done, preachers in the next era of the Church's struggle with the right relation between faith and wealth have an increasingly complex task before them if they are effectively to address the kind of prosperity the Gospel promises. They need to understand the theological substance of Scripture and tradition afresh, including especially the theological suspicion of conclusions that make any of us prematurely comfortable with our advantages in relation to a majority of the world's people. Moreover, preachers need to ponder the dynamics of economic processes and exercise the same theological suspicion toward accounts that allege market economies are creating for (all of) us the best world possible.

Notes

[1] Justo L. González, *Faith & Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 228.
[2] John R. Schneider, "On New Things," in Rodney Clapp ed., *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), 133.
[3] González, Ibid., 233.
[4] Schneider, Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 134.
[6] Ibid., 135.
[7] John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 26.
[8] Ibid., 38.
[9] Ibid., 34.