What a Difference a Day Makes

“What a difference a day makes.” If you’re old enough, you can hear Dinah Washington’s smooth voice behind the words—words which recent events prove once again to be remarkably insightful, not only in matters of the heart but also in issues of “Economics and Justice.”

What a difference a day makes! When Michael Novak prepared the final draft of the manuscript for his essay in this issue, “Wealth and Virtue,” he noted that it was to be delivered in Leningrad, U.S.S.R.; however, by the time he delivered the address a few days later, he found himself in St. Petersburg, Russia.

When the editorial board of Word & World met two years ago to decide on the theme for this issue, they knew that October 1992 would mark the 75th anniversary of the Great October Revolution of 1917; further, they already knew the celebration would find the Soviet Union and the communist experiment in some disarray. They would hardly have predicted, however, that the U.S.S.R. would never see its diamond jubilee, that its leader Mikhail Gorbachev would resign the presidency on December 25, 1991, announcing that the Soviet Union no longer existed.

What will this mean for the Christian conversation about economics and justice? For some, the great hope for a just and egalitarian economy is gone; for others, the great enemy of economic and civil liberty is gone. Now what? Neither nostalgia nor triumphalism will suffice. Surely, it is good to see the reaffirmation of the fact that the human spirit will not forever abide oppression—perhaps even a sign that God stands forever opposed to tyranny. But if God stands opposed to tyranny, then all economic systems need continually to be reexamined and pushed toward greater justice for each individual and for human beings together in community.

What a difference a day makes. As they called for justice now, the biblical prophets looked forward to a final day, the great and terrible day of the Lord, when at last justice would prevail. That too was both good news and bad news. The justice which sets you free might threaten my power and sear my soul. The freedom brought by grace might upset our bureaucratic tinkering and challenge our legalisms.

God’s day will come in its own time. Meanwhile, God has given us in the Bible pictures of what that day will look like—pictures of overflowing economic abundance available to people living in union with God and in harmony with creation in a world of individual and communal justice and liberty. Recent events have shown us that incredible change is possible—even without great bloodshed. Presumably it would not be a bad idea, within the acknowledged limitations of the present human condition, to direct our efforts toward change in the direction of the biblical pictures.

This issue opens with two perspective pieces, offering quite different views of a moral economic order. Speaking (of all places!) in St. Petersburg, Russia, Michael Novak presents a
case for capitalism. It is finally not enough, he says, to show that an economic system works; it must also be seen to be morally admirable. Novak does not shrink from making moral claims for the capitalist enterprise. Winston Persaud joins the renewed conversation in the United States about the common good, asking that such a conversation take place in a global perspective, aware that what is good for some may not be good for all. He calls upon Christians to think about these issues both as citizens and as people of God.

Two articles from a biblical perspective follow. Richard Nyssse reminds us that biblical discourse on economic matters is not just one form among many; its claims about God are integral to its economic argument. David Fredrickson offers a convincing historical analysis of the issue of free speech in the Greco-Roman world, arguing that the question was important for St. Paul and that the results are significant for the contemporary church’s self-understanding.

The next pair of articles speak from an ecumenical perspective. As the departing General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Emilio Castro uses his intimate knowledge of the ecumenical debate on economic issues to trace its historical development and to suggest some fundamental criteria to shape the present Christian response. Charles R. Strain works from John Paul II’s Centesimus Annus to define a way of thinking about and doing economics that he believes could build a moral consensus among “politically conservative, liberal, and radical Jews and Christians”—a bold proposal, but a strong article!

Two more articles think about freedom and justice from the American perspective. “What is equality?” asks Jack Schwandt. Trying to sort out the similarities and differences between political equality on the one hand and social and economic equality on the other, he listens to the voices of Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and Ruby Turpin (a Flannery O’Connor character). Schwandt’s ruminations will give rise to our own, as they should. Walter Sundberg reviews the origins of the separation of religion and politics, citing Thomas Jefferson to remind us that human beings were not “born with saddles on their backs” and will never wear them lightly. Thus, especially in the United States, neither sacred politics nor a hierarchical church will work as a solution to the real problems in church and state.

The final two articles examine particular issues of economics and justice. Randy Nelson analyzes the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement, raising questions about its assumptions about justice and freedom. He proposes ways for Christians to think about and address such economic issues. Finally, Carol Schersten LaHurd and Ryan A. LaHurd provide helpful background material for understanding the complex economic and political realities in the Middle East. They find hope for the future in the shared religious and moral interests of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In the Resources section, appropriate to the theme, Meg Madson and Mary Knutsen go Face to Face on the question of the use of quotas in church governance. James Arne Nestingen discusses the Matthean Advent Gospels in Texts in Context.

F.J.G.