



## Love as the Bottom Line?

Several years ago, I was involved with a group of scientists and theologians in a seminar on the nature of the human sponsored by the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. After one of our evening meetings, a professor of economics at the university remarked, “Every night we economists go home amazed that you let us get away with it”—“it” being the evaluation of everything, including the human, according to the “bottom line.”

Novelist and lawyer Scott Turow made a similar point about the imperialism of the rigid economic analysis of public affairs and human life that he experienced in a required economics course at Harvard Law School:

Much of what we’re taught about economics seems to disguise some of the crueler assumptions of the free enterprise system, and I often feel that econ is no more than a subtle way to get us to buy in on a businessman’s vision of the world. What do you say about a system which presumes that everyone acts out of self-interest?\*

Both Turow and my colleague at the University of Minnesota were reacting against a radical understanding of the human as nothing more than *homo economicus*. To their credit, neither of the economists writing in this issue wants to see the human solely in these terms either, but both admit that self-interest does rise high among the principles on which our market economy is based. Are we thereby condemned to live forever in a dog-eat-dog world?

Another colleague (then at Augustana College in Sioux Falls), back when I was a parish pastor, used to suggest that, true, self-interest motivated most of human life in the public arena, but he contended that it could be possible to develop an “enlightened self-interest” that would at least soften the edges of our life together. Nevertheless, helping the other out of enlightened self-interest is still fundamentally egocentric: I assist you because in the long run it helps me (and, apparently, for no other reason). But, can we get beyond that? We are certainly not yet at the point of denying ourselves for the sake of the other, which seems to be close to the heart of the Christian message.

Lutheran colleagues will remind me that we are talking about the kingdom on the left, here, governed by God’s law (not the gospel), where rewards and punishments, restraints and incentives hold sway because they are meant to. “Read Deu-

\*Scott Turow, *One L* (1977; New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988) 224.

teronomy!” they might suggest. Okay, *do* read Deuteronomy, but there we learn, for example, that Israel was to care for the aliens in their midst because they themselves were once aliens in Egypt (Deut 24:18, 22), not because it will do them any particular present good. Is that still merely self-interest? The law-gospel, two-kingdom distinction often serves us remarkably well, but all such hermeneutical principles are sometimes neater than the Bible itself. It’s harder there to keep a rigid separation between acting for my sake in the world of law and acting for your sake in the world of the gospel. (And are we not acting for God’s sake in both?) Hard-nosed realists will tell us that bleeding-heart policies won’t get the job done in the real world, but neither will a rigid bottom-line approach to everything in sight, imposed by folks whose hearts never do seem to bleed for the consequences of their “tough-but-necessary” policies on human beings created in the image of God and for whom Christ died.

For Luther, properly dividing law and gospel is the mark of the true theologian and pastor; but such proper division does not mean separating God’s world and God’s people into two arenas cut off from one another by an ideological wall. God is one; God’s world is one; God’s people are one (that is, without a neat distinction between their material and their spiritual lives). The purpose of this journal is to bring “word” and “world” into conversation, not to keep them apart.

We have sort of figured out that, as followers of Jesus, it’s bad form (read “sin”) to pass by on the other side when another is in need. We have a harder time figuring out whether that applies to our political and economic life. As I read the Bible, it doesn’t appear that Jesus and the prophets had so much difficulty with that.

In Psalm 6, the pray-er in distress appeals for help because “I am languishing” (that is, because of who I am and what I need) and also because “of your steadfast love” (that is, because of who God is and what God has promised). Today’s believer, hearing the plea of the one in need, responds similarly, I hope—not merely out of self-interest, but because of who the other is and because of who God is.

The Bible tells us that we are called to love one another (under the law and under the gospel). For Christians, *that* seems to be the bottom line. Figuring out how to do it in the economic realm falls to the vocation of the economist: no easy job, I’m sure, and probably no easy accord to be reached among economists themselves or between economists and theologians; but a healthy conversation might serve us all.

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