

Category: Redeeming Work: Living Wholly within God's Reign:

A Tale of Two Economies, Part Two

Phil Kenneson

God's Economy.

Continuing from the last post, we are now comparing and contrasting two different "economies" broadly understood. For many of us, simply hearing the phrase "God's economy" might strike us as odd. When we hear the word "economy," we think of such things as money, the Federal Reserve, or GDP. That's simply the way the word economy is typically used in our day.

The phrase "God's economy," however, harkens back to a broader meaning of economy. The Greek word from which we get the word economy is *oikos*. It's the same root from which we get words like ecology and eco-system. (It's worth considering how often our society pits concerns about "economy" against those of "ecology," but we should remember they have the same root.) The Greek word *oikos* means house, household or habitation. And the other part of this compound word economy comes from the Greek word *nomos*, which has to do with law or ordering. So at its root, the word economy has to do with ordering the household.

The question at the heart of an economy, therefore, is about how any particular "household" should be ordered, whether that be at the micro or macro level. All of our own households are ordered in ways that seek to insure that people in that household have what they need. There are, of course, many different ways of doing that. Likewise, a neighborhood, a church, a city, and a nation-state also have their own kinds of economies, their particular ways of "ordering the household." And of course in our day we also hear much talk about the global economy.

So a central question with which Christians must wrestle is this: when Jesus comes and announces that the reign of God is breaking in, that this new social order called the kingdom—this new way for people to live together under the good reign of God—is at hand, does this new social order have its own economy? Does the reign of God have its own way of "ordering the household," or will any economy do?

To begin examining this important question, we will first remind ourselves of how our "normal" everyday economies function, and then we will compare that to what scripture and the Christian tradition suggest about God's economy. In most cases, what appear on both lists are things we have heard most of our lives; what is most interesting is comparing the two lists, especially since most of us find ourselves operating (or aspiring to operate) in both economies.

Normal Economy. We begin with three things that are inseparably linked in normal everyday economies. They are so commonplace we hardly need to list them: earning, owning, and resources.

1. **Earning.** The practice of earning has central place in any economy we can imagine. We have been told our whole lives that there are no free lunches. For most of us, significant amounts of time and energy are devoted to earning a paycheck, earning a living.

2. **Owning.** One of the primary reasons we engage in earning is so we can own. Earning a pay check makes owning things possible. In capitalism owning also makes earning possible. If you have access to capital, you can create earning opportunities for others and yourself. Thus we do not just earn to own, but potentially we also own to earn. This linking of owning and earning, despite its shortcomings, can be a powerful economic engine.

3. **Resources.** Earning and owning are difficult to imagine apart from various kinds of resources, both natural and human. We should note that the language of “resources” doesn’t encourage us to think about where they come from or what particularly they are for; they are simply resources to be used. If we look out the window, we might see miles of trees that could potentially become lumber, paper, or a myriad other things. Earning and owning are also difficult to imagine apart from what we typically call “human resources.” Many of us work for organizations that include HR people among their vital staff.

4. **Saving, investing, donating, etc.** What do we do with this stuff that we work so hard for? We can save it, invest it, give it away, or pretty much anything else we desire, precisely because we own it. That’s the point of owning something; we can do with it whatever we determine is in our self-interest. Here we should note we are using “self-interest” the way economists use the concept. The concept isn’t synonymous with selfish interest; rather, “self-interest” means that my decisions are governed by what I believe is in my interest to do, rather than having them being governed by someone else’s interests. I might, for example, determine for any number of personal reasons that it is in my interest to take care of my neighbors. But that’s still my interest, not necessarily anyone else’s.

5. **Protecting and guarding.** An enormous part of our economy—our household ordering—goes toward protecting and guarding what we’ve worked so hard to earn and own. The levels of complexity here are mind-boggling, and include everything from the very basic technology of a door lock to such things as financial institutions, insurance policies, and the rule of law encoded in contracts such as mortgages.

6. **Securing an uncertain future.** If we are honest, much of the point of all of this economic activity noted above is to secure an uncertain future. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring. If you can’t think of a frightening scenario that will keep you up at night, turn on the television and someone will help you land on one. There’s a lot of fear being pandered to because it is good for the economy. Our economies are ordered to reflect this uncertainty, this lack of a guarantee regarding the future. For example, everyday hundreds of people die in unforeseen accidents, and no one expects the rest of us to take responsibility for the aftermath. That’s not the way our collective household is ordered. There may be a bit of social security available, a bit of a societal safety net, but for the most part we know that this by itself is unlikely to be sufficient. And so most of us have been shaped to believe it is our responsibility to take these matters into our own hands in order to do the best we can to secure an uncertain future, leaving many of us with considerable anxiety and fear about the future.

7. **How much is enough?** But all of that leaves us with a problem: how much is enough to secure an uncertain future? I imagine that on most days Bill Gates thinks he has enough; he is remarkably generous. Yet most of us aren’t billionaires and we can imagine scenarios where a health catastrophe, a weather event, loss of job, illness, or any number of things could wipe out whatever

hedge against the future we have built. So it feels like you can never have enough. The threats are always bigger than the available resources.

8. **The Story of Scarcity.** One of the reasons it feels like there is not enough is because our society as a whole tells a powerful story of scarcity. Economists talk a good deal about scarcity. In fact, many define economics as the science of scarcity. Because human desires and wants are unlimited, yet resources are limited and finite, human beings are always going to want more than there is available. How is that scarcity to be managed? That's the task of economics, which begins by assuming that there isn't enough.

9. **The Point of Life: Get Yours.** We rarely say it this baldly, but in our normal economy it's pretty clear that the point of life is to get yours. There are no free lunches. No one is going to give you what you need, you're going to have to earn it. For example, jobs are regarded as scarce commodities. No one is going to give you a job; you're going to have to hustle for one and there are simply not enough jobs to go around. In fact, a lot of economists think we need 5% of the population to be unemployed because that puts the proper check on inflation for the other 95% of us.

God's Economy. As with our "normal" economy, we begin our exploration of God's economy with a basic triad: receiving, stewarding, gifts.

1. **Receiving.** The basic posture of the Christian life is one of reception. How many times have we heard in our congregations: "Everything we have we have received at God's hand"? In my Methodist congregation we insist that during communion we come with cupped hands. We don't get to grab for this life-giving bread; this gift is placed in our hands. Open hands is the proper posture before God. There is nothing that we do not first receive. This is a radical notion, not least because receiving is fundamentally different than earning.

2. **Stewarding.** Stewards are not owners. Rather, stewards manage that which has been entrusted to them. The Greek word *oikos* noted earlier is also the root for the words our English Bibles translate as "steward" and "stewardship." A steward is a household manager. This means that a steward is much more than a servant or slave, for a steward acts in the place of the owner. The owner and steward must have a close relationship since the steward must make judgments based on the owner's desires.

3. **Gifts.** Gifts are fundamentally different from resources. Little about resource language encourages us to think about where they come from and what they are for; they are simply there to be used. Gift language, by contrast, always encourages us to think about where a gift comes from and why it was given. To receive a gift well, you have to know why it was given, not least because gifts create some of the basic bonds that nurture and sustain relationships. Here again we see the tension between these two economies. You can't *earn* a gift; it is given. This raises a fundamental question about the character of the world we live in: Does the world come to us first of all as gift, or as the result of our own efforts? And to be clear, with God's economy we are talking about much more than money. In fact, as we will see, most of the life-giving gifts that circulate in God's economy are much more interesting than money.

4. **God's Interests.** In God's economy, we are encouraged to make God's interests, God's desires, our fundamental framework for our lives. What is God doing in the world? What does God desire? Is it possible that what God has placed in my hands might be used to further God's ultimate desire of healing and wholeness for all of God's creation? If the gifts I have been given include my abilities, passions, aptitudes, and life-experiences, what might it mean to direct these gifts toward God's desires and purposes for the world? This would be radically different than simply doing what our normal economy encourages me to do, which is to auction off myself and my abilities to the highest bidder for my personal gain.

5. **Kingdom Risk-taking.** Rather than guarding and protecting what we have worked so hard to earn and own, in God's economy we are encouraged to take risks for the kingdom with all that has been placed into our hands. This is the central lesson of Jesus' parable of the talents in which the last servant is castigated because he refused to risk. He's been asked to be a steward but he is paralyzed by fear. Such fear, though understandable, begins to dissipate when we realize that God has not only called us to be part of God's work of healing and mending, but also equipped us, gifted us, to do so. This frees us to take risks.

6. **Living Into God's Promised Future.** Rather than devoting our life energies to trying to secure for ourselves an uncertain future, we are called to live into God's promised future. We don't, of course, have a master plan for that future, but we do know that God is making all things new, creating a new humanity, bringing into existence a new creation, reconciling all things. Because of Jesus, we know where history is ultimately headed.

7. **God's Abundance.** Although our normal economy instills in us the constant fear and anxiety of never having enough, God's economy is founded upon God's gracious generosity and overwhelming abundance. In biblical terms, "abundance" means "more than enough." One of the reasons American culture finds it difficult to experience true abundance is because we have no functional notion of enough. Simply put: if you have no notion of enough, you can never experience *more* than enough.

8. **The Story of Abundance.** Christians have a story to tell about abundance that has nothing to do with the prosperity gospel. The gospel story of Jesus feeding the 5000 destroys the ancient myth of scarcity. The God we worship and serve is not a God of scarcity, or a God of just barely enough to go round; rather, our God is a God of more than enough. In the gospel account everybody had their fill and there were 12 baskets of leftovers. If people in their everyday lives experience scarcity, this is the fault of God's creatures, not the Creator.

9. **The Point of Life: The Joy of Partnership.** We are called to take joy in this remarkable invitation to be part of God's work of *re-creation*. We are called to use our Spirit-led creativity, minds, and energies to discern how best to marshal what God has entrusted to us to participate joyfully in God's work of re-creation. What more could we possibly want out of life than the privilege of working with God to bring a greater measure of healing and wholeness—a greater measure of shalom—to a broken world?

In the next posts, we will explore how we can live as a people more fully into God's economy, and in so doing, live more fully into our full humanity, bearing witness to God's desires for all of creation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When you hear the word “economy” what comes to your mind?
2. What difference does it make to talk of God’s economy?
3. How do the first three aspects of normal economy (earning, owning, resources) shape your perspective of work?
4. How do the first three aspects of God’s economy (receiving, stewarding, gifts) shape your perspective of work?
5. What constitutes “good” work within the normal understanding of economy?
6. What constitutes “good” work within God’s economy?