



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 An Economy for the Earth  
(*Global Wealth*, pp. 26-33)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# An Economy for the Earth

The earth's capacity to sustain life is threatened by our burgeoning population and growing material demands. We are depleting earth's nonrenewable resources and exceeding the environment's capacity to absorb the pollutants we discard. How did we get ourselves into this mess?

### Prayer<sup>1</sup>

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them.

**Loving God, we confess that we have often turned away from you, the Creator of all things; we have forgotten to truly care for your creation.**

The Lord will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

**Forgive us, Lord, when we fail to catch a vision of your reign. May we work for your kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven," so that all generations will know your love, your justice, and your peace. Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 65

### Reflection

While the root causes of our degradation of the earth are complex, economist Henry Rempel admits, two causes stand out: "several inherent limitations of our economic system and distortions introduced by the Church to the biblical message."

First, he writes, we must recognize these limits of capitalism:

- ▶ *Market prices do not exist for common property resources like air, water, and wilderness, or for future generations' use of them.* So, when market prices are our main guide for decision making, "we do not compensate society adequately for toxic effluents released into our streams, lakes, and oceans, for waste and chemicals placed in the ground, and for maintaining appropriate habitats to assure continued biodiversity."
- ▶ *Our system rewards return on capital, not preservation of natural resources.* "The roots of our system are located in a time when both labor and natural resources were in abundance, but the limited availability of capital – tools, machines, buildings, infrastructure, and improved human skills – restricted our growth potential." It is anachronistic today when the availability of natural resources is the limiting factor on economic growth. Rempel calls for replacing the capitalist with the "ecolpreneur." For instance, we could modify the system to reward not the fishermen who catch fish more efficiently, but those who also maintain fish populations for future harvest.
- ▶ *Large corporations have excessive power.* Corporations evolved as a way to amass capital to develop certain industries. Yet they may dominate those industries and impede competition. To satisfy shareholders, corporations must constantly expand, "especially with the use of advertising to create new human wants. As a result, we have



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unleashed on our environment a form of business organization that devastates our landscape in the same way that cancer cells prey on a human body." Thus, Rempel suggests ways to check corporations.

A second cause of our abusing the earth, Rempel writes, is failure to obey the biblical message. "Given the popularity of prosperity, the Church has failed to serve as an effective counter force or corrective to the excesses of capitalism." We do not care for natural resources as if tending God's garden, and we ignore the "concept of jubilee where ownership of the land (which was the primary production input in biblical times) was to be redistributed periodically as a semblance of fairness essential to living in community." Another mistake, he says, has been "the use of selected [Bible] passages to subjugate females to male control and to focus biblical teaching on human sexuality on procreation." Given this, Christians "must bear some responsibility for the challenge that population size presents for the environment."

### Study Questions

1. Discuss the idea of an *ecolpreneur*. How would such persons overcome the limits of capitalism in caring for the creation?
2. How, according to Rempel, could communities have greater control over the excessive power of corporations? Are these steps necessary and wise?
3. Rempel recommends fresh applications of the Sabbath and tithing. How would these help us tend the creation?
4. Describe the picture of God in Psalm 65. How is this image reflected in Neil Barham's hymn, "Being His"?

### Departing Hymn: "Being His" (vv. 1, 2, 3, and 7)<sup>2</sup>

His oceans all rumble and batter his shore,  
but he will be new when its waves are no more.  
His mountains reach skyward to touch his sweet face;  
his forests burst forth as he showers their place.

The mighty Leviathan leaps in his seas,  
the eagle mounts up on the joy of his breeze.  
The creatures of earth borrow life from his hand,  
their days are all numbered by his firm command.

Eternity springs from his Infinite Mind –  
all time and all space from his fingers unwind,  
his intricate, limitless, unbounded skill  
spins threads of his sovereign, inscrutable will.

We bow, we adore, we fall down at his throne,  
he gathers us into his arms as his own!  
He seats us in glory beside him above,  
to crown his achievement with splendors of love!

Neil Barham (2005)

Tune: PROTECTION or ST. DENIO

<sup>1</sup> Based on Psalm 146:5-6a, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Text © 2005 by Neil Barham. Used by permission of the hymn writer. The full text of the hymn is available online at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

# An Economy for the Earth

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To explore how the limits of our economic system can be a root cause of our degradation of the earth.
2. To discuss how our distortion of the biblical message has been another root cause of our degradation of the earth.
3. To weigh Henry Rempel's recommendations for a new economy and his creative applications of the ideas of the Sabbath and the tithe.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Global Wealth (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Being His" locate the familiar tune PROTECTION or ST. DENIO in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with an Observation

"Two global forces now threaten our earth's capacity to sustain life," Henry Rempel observes. "One force is rapid growth in population.... The other force is a rapid growth in the material standard of living for higher-income households.... The drain on the world's supply of nonrenewable resources by each child born in North America is such that every low-income mother would have to bear between fifteen and twenty-five children to have a comparable effect. Similarly, it is the high- and middle-income households that are the primary source of the pollution that is threatening the quality of our air quality, the purity of our water, and the safety of our soil, and is changing the earth's climate.

"Current globalizing forces in the economy are accelerating significantly this threat to life on earth. First, they enable high-income households to outbid people in lower-income countries for precious resources located there, reducing their ability to maintain their way of life. In addition, these globalizing forces seek to spread the material standard of living in high-income countries to the rest of the world.... Current guesstimates, on the basis of known technology, are that we will require the equivalent of three earths of resources to supply the current world's population with a material standard of living comparable to that now enjoyed in North America" (*Global Wealth*, 26-27).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 65 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

C. S. Lewis famously observed that the Church does not profess to provide "a detailed political programme for applying 'Do as you would be done by' to a particular society at a particular moment. It could not have. It

is meant for all men at all times, and the particular programme which suited one place or time would not suit another" (*Mere Christianity*, Book 3, Chapter 3). Likewise, the task of constructing a Christian economic system for today is a job for Christian economists, not biblical scholars or theologians. In this study, economist Henry Rempel evaluates the limits of the current economic system when it comes to caring for the earth and offers some biblically informed directions for change. His views are wide-ranging and challenging. Due to space limitations, only his critique of the current system is summarized in the discussion guide. Use the study questions to review his positive recommendations in "An Economy for the Earth."

### **Study Questions**

1. Ecolpreneurs have "the same entrepreneurial spirit evident in the capitalist but channel these energies to conserving and sustaining our natural environment." When Rempel says ecolpreneurs could replace capitalists, he does not mean we should do away with a market economy. Rather we need "an accounting output comparable to a rate of return on capital that now guides and motivates the capitalist. The 'cost' to society of all forms of pollution and the rate of depletion of nonrenewable resources need to enter the accounting calculus. This could be enforced with appropriate taxes imposed or we could break down the barriers between disciplines so accountants, lawyers, social scientists, and natural scientists could join forces to discover means of estimating such 'costs' and devising accounting systems that accurately reflect the value of natural resources to current and future generations. The latter is more likely to map out creative ways forward."

This addresses the first two limits of the current system – the absence of market prices for common property resources and the lack of incentive for preserving natural resources.

2. Rempel lists six steps toward more community control of corporations: (1) "eliminate as a tax deductible business expense spending on advertising designed to create additional wants," (2) rather than transferring all proxy votes to the existing board of directors, distribute them to a newly appointed employee representative, consumer representative, or independent board member, or allow the corporate secretary to cast those votes; (3) "require corporations to certify that they and their subcontractors abide by the same employee benefit and safety provisions and that they follow the same environmental standards as apply in the high-income countries in which they are primarily located," (4) "require corporations to pay corporate taxes in each country proportional to the production value added within that country," (5) organize forms of buying locally within our respective communities," and (6) "work at restructuring how our cities are organized by encouraging each other to reorient shopping to businesses that do not require the use of an automobile."

Encourage members to discuss how each step might help us care for the creation and preserve natural resources. Do they object to any step or have others they recommend?

3. Why not "set aside one *year* out of seven to pause from our pursuit of more to renew our spirit and to focus attention explicitly on building the relationships that are essential to living in community," and "why not set every tenth *person* within our respective communities free from earning a living to pursue either short- or longer-term service opportunities?" asks Rempel (emphases added). "The key is to build models of alternative approaches to community living that demonstrate an abundant life can flow from human beings who have discovered a sense of enough and who draw significant sustenance from being in relationship with others within a community."
4. In Psalm 65, God is not a remote creator. With hospitality and forgiveness, God invites us to share the goodness of his house, the holy temple. God visits the earth, waters it like a gardener, and generously shares the harvest ("your wagon tracks overflow with richness"). "Being His" echoes the themes of creation and redemption. Like the psalmist, Barham interprets God's ongoing creative activity as preparing for God's creatures "splendors of love."

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.