

Subversive Generosity

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God's reign, founded on God's subversive generosity, opposes Roman oppression in the New Testament. Today it provides the moral vision to see through the distortions of consumerism and gives an alternative way to understand our obligations to one another and to God.

In an economic system in which profit is the primary and overriding concern, any act of true generosity is subversive. For this reason, the vision of God's reign in the New Testament stands in stark contrast to the economic machine that is powering the modern world and creating a culture of consumerism that violates human dignity. God's reign, therefore, is not a system of reform for contemporary economic globalization; it is a counter-narrative to the dominant culture, just as it was when the original Christian prophets declared it in opposition to the Roman Empire.

In the New Testament, God's reign is the alternative governance founded on subversive generosity that stands opposed to Roman oppression. Today God's reign provides the moral vision to see through the distortions of consumerism. Its subversive generosity does not just correct capitalism from producing so much human and environmental waste, it offers an alternative way to systemically understand obligations to one another and to God.¹

I will briefly summarize how generosity is a primary component of the New Testament concept of God's reign, and how that generosity opposed Roman socio-economic practices.² Then I will consider some implications of God's reign today. It will become clear that the reign of God and its founding principle of generosity do not fit within the modern capitalist/Marxist binary matrix. The reign of God and its subversive generosity provide a vision in which human beings are in harmony with God and each other—something neither capitalism nor Marxism has ever attempted, let alone achieved.

GOD'S REIGN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The reign (*basileia*) of God is translated as the “kingdom of God” in most translations of the New Testament. The *basileia* of God would have been politically seditious in the Roman context; the concept is used throughout the New Testament as a rival realm that critiques the Roman Empire. The book of Revelation in particular sees the dismantling of the Roman Empire as the in-breaking of the kingdom or reign of God (see Revelation 18). This has caused some New Testament scholars to retranslate *basileia* as “empire” to emphasize its political nature and force.³ I prefer “reign” for my translations below because it maintains the political dimensions of *basileia* and explains its implications for our modern moment: “reign” conveys that it is God who governs.

Basileia and its cognates occur over three hundred times throughout the New Testament, but most of these occurrences are in the Gospels and the Revelation. The reign of God is the subject of Jesus’s first proclamation in the Gospel of Mark, which is most likely the first canonical Gospel written: “The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). The reign of God is often the focus of Jesus’s parables. In Matthew 13 alone, Jesus compares the reign of God to soils (Matthew 13:18-23), good and bad seeds in a field (13:24-30), mustard seed (13:31-32), yeast (13:33), treasure (13:44), a pearl (13:45-46), and a net (13:47-50). The reign of God is detailed in the New Testament not so much in its spatial and temporal location, but as a reflection of its Ruler. The reign of God reflects the character of God, which is described as “holy” in the Model Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount:

Our Father in heaven,
 holy be your name.
Your reign come.
 Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:9b-10

God’s governing is better than Rome’s not just because it is a better system, but because God is the one who is governing. How God reigns is indicative of who God is, which requires us to explore the question: Who is God?

GENEROSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

God displays many aspects in Scripture, but one guiding characteristic of God throughout the New Testament is generosity. God gives! In Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus we hear that iconic verse, “For God so loved the world that God *gave* God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in the Son may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In Jesus’s inaugural sermon in Matthew, Jesus tells the gathered crowd, “But first seek

God's reign and its justice, and all these things *will be given* to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). When Jesus initially foretells his death, he encourages the disciples to follow him in self-giving sacrifice:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they *give* in return for their life?

Mark 8:34b-37 (cf. Matthew 16:24-26 and Luke 9:23-25)

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The New Testament has much to say about the motivation and scope of subversive generosity that is a distinguishing mark of God's reign. There are many Greek words that translate as generosity in the New Testament, and all of them fall under the domains of *possession*, *transfer*, or *exchange*.⁴ Generosity, at its most fundamental level, is exchange. Fifty-four specific words for generosity in the New Testament, which include many of the most theologically rich concepts in Scripture, are within the subdomain *give*.⁵ The overarching meaning for this group of words

involves the *transfer* of some object or benefit from one person to another with the initiative resting with *the person who gives* and without incurring an obligation on the part of a receiver to reciprocate. Furthermore, the giving of such an object or benefit does not imply remuneration for a previous *exchange*....

[T]he focus is on the initiative and activity of the former possessor.⁶

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The nature of this type of transfer, trade, and exchange is truly altruistic. The one who gives, the "former possessor," expects nothing in return. An expected return on the gift would not be generosity. Giving with an expected return would be an investment.

All of these words used to express generosity and the sheer number of times they are used throughout the New Testament create an overarching theme that characterizes both God and God's reign. Likewise, those who would follow Christ and live within God's reign must exemplify this defining characteristic. Scripture warns against those who would not be generous. The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) describes a couple who did not hold everything in common (*koinōnia*: fellowship, sharing possessions) with the larger community. When they withheld some of their profits from the group and lied about it, they were struck dead, presumably by God. The Letter of James condemns wealthy landowners for not paying their laborers fairly:

Come now, you wealthy people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth has rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who harvested your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the crises of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

James 5:1-4

The "woes" in Jesus's Sermon on the Plain echo James's condemnation: "Woe to you who are wealthy, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24-25). The selfishness of the wealthy in these passages stands in stark contrast to the generosity of God, God's people, and God's reign. Partiality toward the wealthy (cf. James 2:1-8) and the desire to keep one's possessions for oneself (Acts 5:1-11) may be exemplary of Roman social practices, particularly patronage, but they are antithetical to the defining characteristic of God's reign.⁷ God's generosity opposed Roman selfishness, which is the primary reason for understanding generosity as subversive. A community that held everything in common and respected the dignity of every person was fundamentally different and contradictory to Roman social practices based on a hierarchy of humanity.

GOD'S REIGN AND GLOBALIZATION

Unlike the economy of ancient Rome, the contemporary global economy is not centered in any single nation and its primary and overriding motive is profit.⁸ While the proponents of capitalism call the rest of the world to fall in line and take their place in global production, they boldly proclaim that capitalism is the way to make the world better. In her biting critique of capitalism and its "new prophets," Nicole Aschoff shows how capitalism has softened its narrative in order to appeal to the masses; it has co-opted the

narrative of feminism, ecology, spirituality, and education.⁹ These new forms of capitalism promise a new and better world and, in some cases, acknowledge that the problems that exist are due to capitalism gone awry. What is not stated among these “new prophets” is that economic globalization is removed from the democratic process. Multinational corporations that drive the global economy are not elected by the people of any nation and they have become so globally dominant that they possess more power than many sovereign nations, including some that have democratically elected officials.

At every level, but especially at the highest levels of these corporations, profit is the overriding motivation. John Mackey, creator of Whole Foods Market, and Bill Gates, cofounder of Microsoft, among others, want to leverage the profit motive for ecological, educational, and health purposes. Theirs is less a reform of capitalism and more a tweak of it. While they *may* be able to do good things for the world with their tweaks, critics like Aschoff are attempting to show how such stratagems do not live up to their promises and, in some cases, make things worse.¹⁰ In proposing that we move “from a profit-driven to a human needs-driven society,” Aschoff calls us to think differently: “Instead of thinking about how to fix capitalism, we can start thinking about a different kind of society.”¹¹

God’s reign has provided a vision of a “different kind of society” for millennia—a society based on generosity. Admittedly, the embodiment of God’s reign in human structures has never been fully realized. In fact, Christian history is full of terrible epochs motivated in part by greed and exploitation, like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and colonialism.¹²

God’s reign may function best as an oppositional call to continually correct and regulate our complexly disordered human structures. From its origin in first century Roman imperialism, that’s how God’s reign functioned. The subversive generosity of God’s reign stood against Roman systems of oppression that damaged human dignity. Similarly today, God’s reign can critique global capitalism by envisioning a future where human dignity is more important than profit.

For example, the generosity of God’s reign turns cultural consumerism, a key product of capitalism, on its head. Consumerism promotes retail therapy, the idea that we can buy our way to happiness. This “therapy” is obviously

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based on *receiving* rather than *giving*, and thus stands in opposition to the New Testament concept of “shared possessions.”

While capitalism’s primary and overriding motive is profit—based on human greed—recent empirical studies by the Science of Generosity Initiative at the University of

Notre Dame have shown that generosity is as basic to human nature as greed is. As these researchers note in their cultural history of generosity, “For Christians, to be generous is to be conformed not just to Christ but also to the loving divine Parent, whose sacrificial self-gift into the world makes possible human fellowship in the divine life.”¹³ This subversive generosity emphasizes the human capacity to *give* rather

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er than the human capacity to *take/receive*. Simply put, generosity is to give; profit is to take. When profit becomes the overriding motive, whether in capitalism or any other system, it must be antithetical to generosity and, therefore, antithetical to God and God’s reign.

CONCLUSION

The Christian ideal of generosity is grounded in God’s gracious act in the Incarnation, the birth, death, and resurrection of God’s Son, which is the height of sacrificial self-giving. This sort of generosity that characterizes God’s reign was subversive in its origin in Roman imperialism and continues to be subversive wherever human dignity is jeopardized due to greed and selfishness.

It is contrary to any system that places profit above people, including those plans of economic globalization that seek to exploit labor and land. For instance, recent campaigns to commoditize education and vaccinations (as by the Gates Foundation), ecology (by John Mackey), spirituality (by Oprah Winfrey and Joel Osteen), and feminism (by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook) turn these vitally important aspects of humanity into markets that are profit driven. God’s reign is a better way forward.

Of course, when we are surrounded by capitalist structures, it is easy to accept them uncritically as essential to everything we do. But as Christians we must do better. To take one example, in many places the prison system has been privatized so that industries now depend on stricter laws and more prisoners to make a profit. Christians should resist this trend and stand

together for human dignity. Profiteering from prisoners is not indicative of generosity. Making prisoners commodities does not increase human dignity.

The subversive generosity of God's reign calls Christians to stand against every system of greed and oppression. Rather than being uncritically submerged in the *profit*-driven system of capitalism, Christians need to emerge into the *human dignity*-driven system of God's reign. This would be a much needed subversive generosity for the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1 I borrow the term "moral vision" from Richard Hays's *Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), which is probably the most exhaustive and popular contemporary attempt at an ethical reading of the New Testament. Hays's work is a true demonstration of his desire as a scholar and Christian to work through modern moral issues. Yet nowhere in the book does he systematically focus on a New Testament ethic of economics. It is not until his conclusion that he mentions economic ethics (pp. 464-468); there he describes his own economic and ecclesiastical position, but does not offer a sustained argument about one of the most important moral issues in modernity. For an extended focus on the issue of economic justice and the New Testament, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

2 The notion that "God's Empire" is oppositional to the Roman Empire is a common thread in recent New Testament studies, especially those that rely on postcolonial theory. Yet none of these works pay close attention to the role of generosity as a founding principle to God's reign. Here is a brief cross section of this literature: Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, IL: Chalice Press, 2000); Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of the Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008); Ingborg Mongstad-Kvammen, *Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Epistle of James: James 2:1-13 in Its Roman Imperial Context* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013); Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008); Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005); and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

3 See, for example, Richard A. Horsely, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 78; Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 37; and Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 5.

4 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, second edition (New York: United Bible Society, 1989), 558.

5 *Ibid.*, 566-572. The most theologically important words are *charis* (grace), *koinōnia/koinōneō* (fellowship or shared possessions), *dikaïosunē* (justice, righteousness, or to give to those in need as an act of mercy), and *diakonia* (ministry, deacon ministry, money given to help someone in need, contribution, help, support).

6 *Ibid.*, 566. Italics added.

7 See K. Jason Coker, *James in Postcolonial Perspective: The Letter as Nativist Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 114-132.

8 The term “globalization” is often applied not only to the economy but also to culture, politics, and ecology. For the purposes of this essay, I am focusing primarily on the economic definition of globalization. For more on this terminology, see Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [2003]).

9 Nicole Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015). While Aschoff is decidedly biased, she helpfully reveals the new hegemony of unfettered capitalism, which acknowledges that things are wrong with the world but proclaims it can make them better. However, many of the problems in the world are the product of capitalism. Reformed capitalism, for Aschoff, cannot be the answer to the most pressing issues of the modern world, including feminism, ecology, education, and so on.

10 *Ibid.*, 107-143. Aschoff especially criticizes the Gates Foundation’s work in education.

11 *Ibid.*, 146, 150.

12 For the narrative of how Christianity and God’s reign were co-opted by capitalism, see Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig, “Gods and Profits: How Capitalism and Christianity Aligned in Modern America” *New Republic* (April 20, 2015), www.newrepublic.com/article/121564/gods-and-profits-how-capitalism-and-christianity-aligned-america (accessed July 15, 2015).

13 “What Is Generosity?” *Science of Generosity: Exploring an Essential Human Virtue* website, <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/more-about-the-initiative/what-is-generosity/> (accessed July 15, 2015).



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