

An Economy for the Earth

BY HENRY REMPEL

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 into this mess?

The thin outer crust of our earth holds a bountiful supply of resources essential for life. The rich soil, when combined with water and sunshine, sustains plants that are basic to all forms of life. A diversity of animal life, ranging from insects to birds, fish, and mammals, is an essential complement to the plants required for life. In addition, this crust contains a wealth of minerals that we use to produce our high material standard of living. This range of natural resources forms a landscape within which we live, providing both the means for all of life as well as an aesthetic setting that stimulates our various senses.

Two global forces now threaten our earth's capacity to sustain life. One force is rapid growth in population. Given the youthful age of the world's population, current estimates place the expected size to level off in excess of nine billion. The other force is a rapid growth in the material standard of living for higher-income households. Together, these two forces are rapidly depleting known reserves of nonrenewable resources and exceeding the capacity of our environment to absorb the array of pollutants we discard as we go about our daily life.

Of these two forces, it is the latter that is the larger, more immediate threat to ongoing existence of life on earth. 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. For example, the effect of promoting in China and India an aspiration in each household to own a car has created noticeable upward pressure on the world price of oil. 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. Increased production to meet global demands, especially in China and India, is now contributing large quantities of pollutants into the air, water, and land, compounding the earth's capacity to absorb our waste products.

How did we get ourselves into this mess? The causes are complex. In this brief space we will explore two major causes: several inherent limitations of our economic system and distortions introduced by the Church to the biblical message.

RECOGNIZING THE LIMITS OF CAPITALISM

Capitalism as an economic system relies on the market to guide decision making. For decisions about two important types of goods, market prices do not exist: for *common property resources* such as the atmosphere, flowing streams, large bodies of water, and large tracts of wilderness; and for the *claims of future generations* on the use of the current known stock of natural resources. As a result, we expel freely into the air smoke from cigarettes, exhaust from vehicles, and pollutants from industrial smoke stacks. Similarly, 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. Finally, the current exploitation of nonrenewable resources does not make provision for the needs of our children and grandchildren.

A second limitation of our economic system is return on capital as the primary motivating force for business decisions. 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. Capitalism addressed this by placing the owners of capital in the driver's seat and rewarding them on the basis of capital mobilized and the efficiency in the use of such capital.

This capitalist system has been instrumental in generating the high material standard of living we enjoy. But it is becoming anachronistic in our

current setting, where the availability of natural resources, not lack of capital, is the binding constraint on further economic growth. Here are just three examples. As we deplete the fish stocks in the ocean, our system addresses the problem by creating larger boats and bigger nets to maintain the supply of fish in the market. The end result will be depleting our fish stocks even faster. Or, a firm inflicting visible harmful effects on its immediate surroundings with pollutants released into the air responds by building a taller

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smokestack to disperse the pollutants further afield. Likewise, assuring adequate food for all will require research to maximize nutritional output per unit of water and land over time rather than current research designed to reward the owners of capital, including intellectual property.

A third limitation of our economic system is an

accepted modification to the system. This change is a legal right of owners of capital to collude and to behave as a single firm in the form of a limited liability corporation. This was accepted because it allowed firms to become large and take advantage of tremendous economies of scale available in certain industries. The production of light bulbs would be a prime example. The evolution of such firms, where they monopolize or dominate certain industries, has eliminated the competition that was central to capitalism, both to motivate efficiency and to assure some semblance of fairness in how commodities are produced and distributed. In addition, to satisfy the demands of their shareholders, corporate executives have to increase the value of shares, pay out high dividends, or both. The primary means to this end is growth of the corporation, especially with the use of advertising to create new human wants. As a result, we have 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.

CORRECTING DISTORTIONS OF 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. The use of resources was to be governed by a theology of stewardship, where human beings were expected to be wise stewards of what belonged to God. This was a distortion of the biblical message in that it presumed creation was a one-time act rather than an ongoing process. According to Genesis 1 and 2, God calls us to be co-creators for an ongoing process of creation, tending to

our natural landscape as if it were a garden.¹ If we fail, the created order falling back to some form of chaos (comparable to Genesis 1:1) remains a live option.

Furthermore, in a capitalist setting premised on private ownership of property, the ideal of stewardship lacks substantive content if Church teaching fails to address how individuals are to exercise control over the resources they own. Such teaching has not invoked the biblical admonition that gifts of God, such as natural resources, are not to be bought and sold in the market as if they are simply another commodity. Second, an emphasis on wise use of God's gifts of nature typically does not include a God-given mandate to nurture and sustain life on this planet. Third, in our teaching we have not pursued a 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.²

A second distortion of the biblical message is the use of selected passages to subjugate females to male control and to focus biblical teaching on human sexuality on procreation. The latter had some application in earlier times when death rates periodically swamped birth rates. But this now means the Church is largely irrelevant as a rapid decline in infant mortality in developing countries creates family size larger than desired by most families. Given this distortion, the Church must bear some responsibility for the challenge that population size presents for the environment.

Within the Church we have taken seriously the claim "everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17; cf. Galatians 2:19-20). We agree this means the motivation that drives us has been transformed from serving self to serving Christ. Application, though, tends to limit this change to personal spiritual discipline, evangelism and missions, and support for the institutional church. Lest it jeopardize financial support for the Church, we have been hesitant to apply such a change in motivation to the use of resources and the employment of people.

Specifically, there has been limited emphasis on the biblical message that the Creator has bestowed on each one a vocation that includes a shared responsibility to ensure the use of natural resources for the benefit of all. Given that our ability to live well as human beings is dependent on our living within community, this benefit for all includes the pursuit of fairness where the means of production are directed first and foremost to the needs of the poor rather than the wants of the rich. This vocation also includes peacemaking, where we work toward defining and enforcing fair agreements and exchanges among distinct communities at national and international levels.

BUILDING A NEW ECONOMIC CULTURE

So, what can we do? Where do we go from here? Now is an opportune time to pursue this agenda as the issue of climate change has captured the

imagination of many people. There is a growing concern that major disasters, such as the devastation of New Orleans by hurricane Katrina, may become more frequent with increasing destruction.

An appropriate place to start is to spell out what a change in motivation to live for Christ might mean for our behavior as consumers. Is our economic system indeed correct in assuming that happiness is a product of our abil-

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ity to hold and consume material commodities? As an alternative, Jonathan Lear postulates that human behavior is governed by a basic human emotion to avoid shameful acts. Within a society, its culture shapes a way of life that sets standards of excellence for defined social roles and establishes boundaries of acceptable behavior and,

hence, identifies what constitutes shameful acts. According to Lear, to build a culture and to transmit it to subsequent generations a society needs concepts that enable it to construct a narrative, the story of the people.³

Pursuing this line of reasoning, it is clear the solution cannot be located at the individual level. We need to build communities that enable us to proceed together. We need new concepts that will allow us to build cultural norms that serve to channel human consumption in a manner that is sustainable.

For example, we need to rediscover the biblical concept of keeping the Sabbath. It is much more than an institution that defines religious behavior one day out of seven. Rather, it challenges us to follow the example of our Creator and set aside one day of seven where we rest from a frenzied pursuit of more and contemplate both the marvelous wonders of our natural landscape that sustains us and the warmth of human communities that enable us to be fully human. A case can also be made that happiness might be built better if we 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.

Another biblical concept we might renew is the tithe. Rather than each of us merely setting aside ten percent of our income every pay day to be channeled into charitable donations, why not set every tenth person within our respective communities free from earning a living to pursue either short- or longer-term service opportunities? The implications for fairness within community and provision of motivated personnel for service opportunities are tremendous.

These are merely a few examples to stimulate new approaches to reshaping our culture and hence our behavior. 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.

BELLING THE CORPORATE CAT

Limiting our consumption of material commodities will represent a significant threat to large corporations, especially the ones that operate multi-nationally. In addition to their power of advertising, they can weaken our resolve by offering a vast array of commodities at relatively low prices. By locating production off-shore, it becomes much more difficult to monitor either the working conditions or the environmental impacts of such production. Should a significant number of people, for example families active in the Church, become immune to the lure of advertising, exotic products, and low prices, many corporate executive officers will lose their traditional means to satisfying their shareholders.

Our challenge is similar to the proverbial mice who agree they would all be safer if they could place a bell on the cat, but they cannot agree on how to do this. While large corporations have immense economic power, they are also quite vulnerable to coordinated consumer responses. One example is the boycott some years ago of Nestlé products, which brought about changes in the way baby formula was promoted in low-income countries. As few as a dozen independent messages – as distinct from individuals submitting form letters or signing petitions – will cause the media to evaluate programming lest advertisers withdraw their sponsorship.

There are many ways to place a bell on the corporate cat. We could *encourage legislators to eliminate as a tax deductible business expense spending on advertising designed to create additional wants*. In a world where available natural resources, given the state of current technology, are inadequate to extend our material standard of living to the rest of the world, action to expand wants is immoral. Action here will be resisted vigorously by most media outlets as reduced advertising will require new ways of financing our radio and television programming, newspapers, and magazines.

We might *redefine corporate shareholder meetings by eliminating the automatic transfer of proxy voting rights to the existing board of directors*. For example, each board might be required to have at least one member representing employees and one member representing consumers. The proxy voting ballot could then make provision for identifying whether the employee representative, the consumer representative, an independent board member, or the corporate secretary casts that proxy vote.

We could work toward international agreements that *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.

We could work toward international agreements that *require corporations to pay corporate taxes in each country proportional to the production value added within that country.*

We should *organize forms of buying locally within our respective communities.* This could include a cooperative arrangement with local farmers and small business where each contracts to supply quality products, on a seasonal basis, in exchange for a price that sustains our farmers and our small businesses. Some communities issue chits, as a form of local money, which facilitate

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tate exchange within the community beyond mere barter arrangements.

Finally, we should *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.* A place to start could involve organizing places of worship within walking or cycling reach or readily accessible by some form of mass transit.

Even if greater community control of corporate behavior is realized, there still will be a need for other significant changes to our current economic system. Specifically we need to work toward replacing the current driver of the system, the capitalist, with a new driver. Herman Daly calls for an environmental conservationist.⁴ In my book on our modified form of capitalism I coined “ecolpreneur” as a potential replacement for the capitalist.⁵ The intent was to capture the same entrepreneurial spirit evident in the capitalist but channel these energies to conserving and sustaining our natural environment.

Such persons exist. What our economic system requires is 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.

The Church should call its professionals and scientists, whose motiva-

tion has been changed from serving self to serving Christ, to become pioneers in their respective professions in this process of discovery.

NOTES

1 See the articles in *The Moral Landscape of Creation*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 2 (Winter 2002), and Norman Wirzba, "Imagine a Sabbath Economy," *Sabbath*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 4 (Summer 2002), 31-35. These resources are available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

2 For more on the jubilee tradition and its relation to the creation story, see Richard H. Lowery, "Sabbath, a 'Little Jubilee,'" *Sabbath*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 4 (Summer 2002), 9-16. This article is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

3 Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

4 Herman E. Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

5 Henry Rempel, *A High Price for Abundant Living: The Story of Capitalism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), especially chapter 12.



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