

KINGDOM COMMERCE

THE KINGDOM ECONOMY 5



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

A REVISION STUDY

Kingdom Commerce
The Kingdom Economy Part 5
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Kingdom Commerce*

In many ways the Kingdom economy God is bringing into being consists of features common to all human economies. Among them is the work of *commerce*, the exchange of goods and services. While grace is the currency of the Kingdom economy, commerce is one of the forms in which grace is expressed and transmitted. Thus, we should expect that, in the Kingdom economy, all commerce would be characterized by love for God and neighbors, and would advance the glory and Kingdom of God on earth.

But for this to be the case, we'll need to make sure we understand God's perspective on commerce, and that we mirror in all our commercial activity His wise, just, and gracious ways.

Kingdom Commerce is Part 5 in our study of *The Kingdom Economy*. While citizens of the Kingdom of God are not *of* the world, we do live *in* it. Everything that has been entrusted to us – all our time, work, talents, and treasure – are gifts of God which He intends us to use as means of channeling His grace to the world. This is true for our commercial activity, both within the Kingdom and in the larger setting of the surrounding culture and society.

In this study we will look at Biblical principles to guide our commercial activity, so that in this area as well, the grace and truth of God may prevail and His Kingdom economy advance.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to subscribe to our free instructional newsletters, including *ReVision*, *Scriptorium*, *The Week*, and *Crosfjgell*, featuring insights from Scripture and our Celtic Christian forebears.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Genius of Commerce

Therefore He says:

“When He ascended on high,

He led captivity captive,

And gave gifts to men.” Ephesians 4.8

The dismal science

These days, the social standing of economists is beginning to rival that of lawyers and politicians. Various schools of economic theory compete, mainly to influence public policy in the political arena, and any politician can find an economist or economic theory to support just about any policy he or she may wish to introduce.

Economics has long been known as “the dismal science,” in part, I suppose, because we have not yet found a working model that all can agree on to guide us in the making and exchanging goods and services. Models as varied as hunter/gatherer, subsistence, feudalism, mercantilism, capitalism, Marxism, and socialism all try to make sense of the ways the money changes hands – or should.

Yet all of them seem to have their Achilles heel, and some more than others.

But an economy, considered as a single objective entity knit together by the systematic interaction of its constituent parts, can be a thing of beauty and genius. That millions of people, working together largely unconscious of and even indifferent to one another, can create so many goods and services to benefit themselves and one another is a wonder that witnesses to the genius of God. He is the ultimate Source of our economic systems and structures, and He inhabits them in order to make Himself known (cf. Acts 14.17). All economic and commercial activity proceeds under the watchful eye of God, and He judges all commerce according to His holy and righteous and good Law.

Commerce to the glory of God?

In Ephesians 4.8, Paul quotes from Psalm 68.18, but, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he adjusts the Old Testament text somewhat in order to bring the revelation of God given to David into the New Testament Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Rather than the ascended God *receiving* gifts from men, as David has it, Paul explains that the ascended Christ *gives* gifts to men – all people.

Paul’s focus proceeds along a very specific line, but the fact remains, as the psalmist indicates, that God gives many and varied gifts to people in order that, through them, His glory and goodness might be made known to the world. This includes all the gifts, skills, goods, and services that make up the commerce of the world and the economies of human society, as we see in Paul’s comment to the Lystrans in Acts 14.17.

God intends the gifts He has given to men to be used in ways to glorify Him. God is glorified when His presence – in the form of grace – is manifested in all the time of our lives and all our work. When economics and commerce are pursued with a view to accomplishing God’s glory, then not only does an aura of transcendence superintend the whole – characterized by such things as good stewardship, fairness, generosity, and compassion – but people flourish and know life far richer and more satisfying than they could if they were forced to subsist by themselves.

Ancient principles

Of course, it has not often been the case in human affairs that people have undertaken to govern their commercial activity according to a strictly Biblical model. Indeed, some who have sought to do so, have failed

utterly. Especially in the modern era, with the advent of capitalism, the driving force in commercial activity has been the accumulation of wealth, rather than the distribution of grace. Commerce based on the bottom line has turned away from the guidelines of grace and truth encoded in the Law and Word of God, and economic activity has been made a servant of pragmatism rather than divine revelation.

Many of the *specific practices* God prescribed for the proper working of the ancient Hebrew economy are, of course, no longer applicable. However, embedded in those practices, and in the laws and statutes in which they appear, is a wealth of *principles* conducive to the wise, fair, compassionate, and prosperous functioning of any economic model. Among these are such familiar matters as the right to private property, just weights and balances, fair and timely wages, minimum use of debt, consideration for the poor, truthfulness in contracts, resource conservation, and the personal freedom to pursue interests and develop abilities and resources.

Yet all of these are set within a framework of love for God and neighbor, where the Kingdom currency of grace, its realization and distribution, is the guiding force for all commerce and economics.

Economics need not be dismal; indeed, it can be practically divine, depending on the extent to which God's Word is consulted in guiding the way the money changes hands.

For reflection

1. In how many different ways are you involved in economic activity (commerce) each week?
2. How confident are you that *all* such activity is being engaged within a framework of love for God and neighbors?
3. In what specific ways do you seek to engage in commerce as a means of realizing and channeling the grace of God to others?

Next steps – Transformation: Write out your answers to the three questions above, then go to the Lord in prayer, and ask Him to begin transforming the way you engage in economic and commercial activity, so that His grace may prevail in all these areas.

2 The Elements of Commerce

*She considers a field and buys it;
From her profits she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
And strengthens her arms.
She perceives that her merchandise is good,
And her lamp does not go out by night.
She stretches out her hands to the distaff,
And her hand holds the spindle.* Proverbs 31.16-19

The wise woman

The wise woman of Proverbs 31 is perhaps the quintessential Biblical model of divine principles at work in an economy. She embodies the wisdom of Proverbs and represents the intentions of God for how people ought to engage in commerce and economic activity.

This wise woman is visionary, industrious, creative, steward-like, fair, and compassionate in all her doings. She manages start-up businesses that create new goods and employ workers. She manufactures items to fill various niches in the market. She invests in real estate, and works to provide for her needs and those of her family.

She is what we would call today an entrepreneur and a small business owner, and her conduct of her economic and commercial activity is such that her family is blessed, her husband is honored, and her community benefits in a wide variety of ways. She is presented as the culmination and embodiment of all the wisdom of God revealed piece-meal in the Book of Proverbs.

Here is a woman to be admired and emulated. Anyone engaging in commerce could wish to be as skilled and successful as she, and to know such satisfaction and reward from their labors.

What is her secret, we wonder? How did she come to embody such mastery of commerce and to know such economic success?

King Lemuel tells us: “a woman *who* fears the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates” (vv. 30, 31).

Components

Economies and the commercial activity they comprise consist of five primary components (thinking now only in the temporal sphere). These are *people*, and their many talents, interests, and aspirations; *resources*, both natural and material; *work*, which provides the arena within which the energy flows that fuels an economy; some *medium of exchange*, such as money; and an agreed-upon *system* within which to coordinate the functioning of all the other components. This can include such things as laws, markets, brokers, banks, and so forth.

None of us is self-sufficient; all human beings engage in commerce. That people are able to identify, enlist, coordinate, and cause all these disparate elements to function together, albeit imperfectly, is itself a testimony to the wisdom, grace, and goodness of God Who endowed human beings with such skills.

But all commerce is not merely *temporal* activity; all commerce proceeds under the watchful eye of God (Ps. 33.8-15). Because the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it (Ps. 24.1), He has a natural interest in and an active concern for *all* commercial activity and *every* economic system.

Economics “under the heavens”

The wise woman of Proverbs 31 pursued the full extent of her economic interests and abilities. She understood that everything in life is to be done in the fear of the Lord, and according to His Word and plan. Living as she did, “under the heavens” – that is, with a view to honoring God in all her endeavors – she took up her work, made her investments, and distributed the fruits of her labors as an extension of her relationship to God and her Kingdom-and-glory calling as one of His people.

The Lord wants us to see the wise woman of Proverbs 31 as a model of economic genius and beauty. In her interactions with others, in all the exchange of goods and services and the ways money changes hands, she was a blessing to her family, a boon to her community, and an object of boasting by the writer of God’s Word. She embodies the wisdom of the book of Proverbs, but she also represents the teaching of all God’s Word concerning the ways people should interact with one another in the exchange of goods and services.

Her example calls us to search the Scriptures, in order to discern from all its parts, how we must pursue commercial activity within the Kingdom economy of the Lord.

For reflection

1. With which aspects of this wise woman’s economic life can you identify? Why?
2. Why specifically does the writer of Proverbs 31 set this woman forward as an example for us? Does he mean for us to show the fear of God, and to manifest His grace, in our own economic and commercial activity? Explain.
3. What are some other places in Scripture you might look to discover principles to guide you in pursuing commerce “under the heavens”?

Next steps – Preparation: What specific aspects of this wise woman’s economic life speak to you? Why? How does she encourage you to think more Biblically about your own economic life? Share your thoughts about these questions with a fellow believer.

3 The Ends of Commerce

Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Ephesians 4.28

Everybody's happy

The old Broadway musical *Tenderloin* is set in the Wild West, when lawlessness and pragmatism were the norm, and people had to survive as best they could.

Tenderloin includes a song that captures the essence of economics and commerce in a getting-and-spending economy where the bottom line is what matters most. In the song the town prostitutes sing the chorus, "Oh, it's grand how the money changes hands./Yes, it's grand how the money changes hands./Everybody's happy; that's the way it stands/ just as long as the money changes hands."

The song relates how the men pay the girls, and the girls pay the pimp. The pimp pays the madam who owns the brothel, and she pays the sheriff – Oh, yes, it's grand how the money changes hands. Everybody's happy, even the people who watch the play and see in this Wild West commerce a reflection of their own economic activity.

Certainly, we don't endorse the particular economic cycle being celebrated here, but you get the point. But the song of the prostitutes, while not intended, begs the question. What are the proper *ends* of economic activity? Is anything people wish to do, which can be transacted by money, a legitimate act of commerce? Can we conduct commercial activity any way we like, or by any means?

Or are there larger and more eternally significant ends for economic activity? Ways more consistent with the wisdom and glory of God?

Making a living

In our secular age and its getting-and-spending economy, most people would acknowledge perhaps two proper ends of economic activity.

The first is to provide for oneself and those for whom he is responsible, or for whom he has a concern. Everybody has to make a living, and those who can't make it on their own must be provided for by others. In the exchange of work, goods, and services for money, an important part of the purpose of commerce is being fulfilled, as Paul acknowledges in Ephesians 4.28 (see also 2 Thess. 3.10 and 1 Timothy 5.8).

As people go to work and draw a salary, the process of commerce is engaged – of money changing hands. This results in the acquisition of food, clothing, shelter, necessities, and niceties for all those who find themselves within the orbit of the cycle.

A second end of commerce is further back in the economic cycle, and isn't thought of much by most participants in an economy. But it is absolutely necessary for the first end to be consistently realized. This second end is the development and use of earth's natural and human resources in such ways as to maximize the wellbeing of all people.

In our day, many questions are on the table about this end of commerce. Concerns are being expressed about the way earth's resources are being used, the ends toward which we use them, and the ways certain practices bring about negative economic impacts on certain people.

Glorifying God in commerce

This end too is built into the very fabric of the program of the Kingdom economy (cf. Gen. 1.26-28; Gen. 2.15). God plans for people to enjoy the good of the earth and the fruit of their labors; He also commands that we should care for the earth in ways that ensure this end can be consistently and broadly met.

On these two ends for commerce we should be able to get agreement from just about anyone. It's the third end of commerce that people in a secular age ignore. But this is the most important end of all, for it provides the *framework* and *ordering principles* for all other economic activity. That is the end of bringing glory to God, of using all our time, doing all our work, and conducting all our economic activity as unto the Lord, and not unto men (1 Cor. 10.31; Col. 3.23, 24). The absence of this crucial end in the secular economic agenda is the cause for all its failings and ills.

Not all work we might do will bring glory to God, and not every way in which we do our legitimate work will honor Him or further His gracious purposes. It's only truly grand how the money changes hands when the work, the exchange, and use we make of all our commercial activity is done with the wisdom of God, conscious of His oversight, and as a means of realizing and channeling His grace to the world.

But to pursue commerce in this way, we need to understand God's framework and guidelines for economic activity. For without an eternal framework and revealed guidelines to direct commerce, it quickly becomes a game of getting-and-spending where it's every man for himself in figuring out how and to what ends the money should change hands.

For reflection

1. Where does our society today look for principles to guide economic and commercial activity?
2. Meditate on 2 Timothy 3.16, 17. Is economic activity a "good work"? Should we expect Scripture to be able to prepare us for this good work? In what ways?
3. Off the top of your head, what Biblical principles of economics and commerce can you call to mind? Jot them down.

Next steps – Conversation: How does your church prepare its members to live like the Ephesians 4 in their economic and commercial lives? Ask a pastor or church leader.

4 Threats to Commerce

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine." Revelation 6.5, 6

Driving toward lesser objectives

In John's vision, four horses symbolize the primary streams of activity in the course of human history prior to the return of our Lord. The black horse represents economic injustice, a system of commerce which has been corrupted by the rejection of divine standards and ends. Where grace is not the base currency of an economy, greed and self-interest will be. And self-interest always means someone gets left out or oppressed.

That's certainly what John was shown in this vision of an economy characterized by the blackness of sin.

Wheat and barley – necessities for everyone – were being sold in small amounts for the exorbitant fee of a denarius – about the equivalent of a day's wage. In such a situation, inflated prices make money increasingly useless, and the needy grow increasingly desperate. John was being shown an historical stream of corruption in commerce, in which economic policies of greed and self-interest on the part of the wealthy would mean that the daily bread of many was practically out of reach.

Meanwhile, the oil and wine – luxuries of the day, which only the wealthy could afford – were not being harmed – they were still readily available to those who could afford them.

In a setting where the *end* of commerce is not the glory and pleasure of God, and where every transaction is governed by self-love rather than neighbor-love, the *engines* of commerce will bend toward whatever *lesser* ends their drivers might dictate. Typically, this is the way the corruption of sin is bred into a system, throttling the divine plan for economic activity and consigning many to lives of suffering and want.

The tenth commandment

Three threats haunt any economy, with the potential to corrupt and drive it into the ground under the hooves of the black horse. The first is simple covetousness. When the tenth commandment is ignored or disobeyed in the world of commerce, greed runs amok. Greed supplants grace as the base currency of a corrupt economy, and opens the door to all manner of sin.

Where greed – mere self-interest – obtains, people spend more than they should for things they don't really need, accruing debts they can't really handle, leading to large-scale economic instability. Owners of goods and services, driven to increase their bottom line above all else, make it difficult if not impossible for some to benefit from their products. Society begins to degenerate into a two-tiered structure of haves and have-nots, and covetousness in each sector breeds resentment, jealousy, anger, and at times, even violence. Such a "Let them eat cake" economic situation can lead to cultural decline and social disruption on a major scale.

Greed also gives rise to the second threat to commerce: exploitation. When the only standards that govern economic activity are self-interest and pragmatism, it's too easy for some people to take advantage of others. Hoarding, price gouging, cartels and monopolies, bribes, price-fixing, political favoritism, and a wide range of scams and scandals can ensue when every man is seeking to do only what is right in his own eyes. Oppression, violence, and the ravaging of peoples and land are more drastic forms of exploitation, all of which we have witnessed – and are witnessing – in our lifetime.

The final threat to commerce carried out “under the sun” rather than “under the heavens” is idolatry – trusting in things, wealth, or experiences to bring happiness and satisfaction in life. Idolatry is merely the other side of the coin of covetousness and greed (Col. 3.5). Idolatry is encouraged by advertising, exacerbated by debt, and institutionalized through the teaching of materialism and pragmatism in the schools.

When people devote their primary attention and energy to the acquisition and consumption of things, they have made idols out of creatures, false gods that cannot deliver the meaning, happiness, and peace all people seek. Governments are aware of these threats, and do what they can to regulate and control them. Yet because government policies are also largely driven by self-interest, typically they tend to do as much – if not more – harm than good.

The heart of the problem

When people’s hearts are not subject to the God of heaven and earth, no amount of external constraints or regulations will keep an economy from becoming corrupt. Greed and self-interest supplant grace and neighbor-love as the base currency of the economy, and the threats of covetousness, exploitation, and idolatry find ways to infiltrate, set up shop, and become institutionalized.

The black horse of corruption and self-interest will not be constrained to discolor and destroy only the commercial lives of a people. Politics, culture, relationships, and traditions degenerate along with economic activity when greed, rather than grace, is the base currency of an economy.

For reflection

1. What evidence do you see that the black horse of Revelation 6 is raging through our economy?
2. What would tell you that greed rather than grace was becoming the “base currency” of your own commercial life?
3. What are some ways that greed becomes institutionalized in an economic system? Is it possible for grace to become similarly institutionalized? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Talk with a Christian friend about your answer to question 2. How can you help one another to be more sensitive to times when greed rather than grace is becoming the base currency of your commercial and economic life?

5 Commerce Corrupted

*Dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord,
But a just weight is His delight.
When pride comes, then comes shame;
But with the humble is wisdom.
The integrity of the upright will guide them,
But the perversity of the unfaithful will destroy them.
Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,
But righteousness delivers from death.* Proverbs 11:1-4

The rot of sin and corruption

Human systems and institutions are susceptible to corruption for the simple reason that they are created, managed, and used by sinful people. The more sinful people give in to covetousness and mere self-interest, taking greed rather than grace as their base currency, the more they will configure their systems and institutions to support their objectives. Corruption becomes inherent in any system – including a system of commerce – when people lack the integrity and will to regulate their practices according to the Law of God.

Where the holiness, righteousness, and goodness of God’s Law are compromised in a system, there the rot of sin and corruption will take hold. Love – grace – grows cold where lawlessness obtains (Matt. 24.12). People become mere objects of exploitation to satisfy the material wants of the “haves.” Soon enough, economic practices that polarize people become the new normal, as the corruption of commerce becomes a cancer on society.

It may be helpful to review just a few examples of how corruption has created or affected elements of our own economic system, so ensconcing itself in the system as to corrupt entire institutions. Among these we may mention slavery, the sex trade, abortion, and political favoritism.

Slavery

Slavery was a crucial part of the economy of the American South for over 200 years. It was based on a practice common to many nations at the beginning of the 17th century, but it was justified as an economic tool among the Christian nations of Europe and their colonies by specious appeal to certain passages in Scripture. Slaveholders ignored the larger teaching of Scripture (cf. Col. 3.11; Philemon) and the long tradition of Christian manumission of slaves in order to prop up a sector of the economy on which they had become dependent, and which allowed them to maintain their comfortable lifestyle.

The American Civil War was only the most visible cost to this nation of the pernicious practice of slavery, and the effects of that commercial cancer still manifest in and threaten the social fabric in our day.

Corruption and judgment

The sex industry – prostitution and pornography, primarily – including abortion, depend on spurious claims to freedom of expression and the right to privacy, and the sensual and libertine temper of the times, to prop up multi-billion dollar industries. The demand for sexual indulgence has also renewed the slave trade, as girls and women are stolen from their homes or wooed by false promises into a life of degradation and exploitation. More people are in slavery today – a large number of them for the purpose of illicit sexual activity – than in the entire history of the American colonial experience.

Political favoritism – in which lobbyists and lawmakers maintain a dance of mutual advantage – has become so much a part of the American landscape that it seems almost futile even to think of reforming the ways

corporations and other special-interests woo and own politicians, and the way politicians curry favors and political contributions from wealthy clients. Cries of corruption in politics have become so common, and the sense of futility regarding any change in these practices is so widespread, that a kind of national cynicism about politics is becoming the new normal.

Clearly the black horse of corrupt commerce is trampling the American economy, and the economies of many other nations. Slavery, the sex industry, and political favoritism represent or promote corruption in the American economy, introducing false and sinful standards and practices, compromising integrity, engendering pride, and leading to oppression and the judgment of God. Such institutionalized corruption cannot help but affect those whose own commercial activity takes place within such an environment, promoting more greed, creating more dissatisfaction and debt, and promoting cultural and social degeneration in a wide variety of ways.

Our holy God is even now pouring out His wrath on societies that turn away from Him, as they give the rein to greed, and worship the idols of material self-interest (Rom. 1.18-32). If people will not face up to the corrupt practices in their economy, and in their own lives as participants in such economies, God will certainly intervene, in His way and time, to vindicate His holiness.

For reflection

1. How are corrupt institutions – such as slavery – ever reformed? Is violence the only way to rid an economy of some form of corruption? What is the Christian's responsibility in a corrupt economy?
2. Do you believe the Word of God speaks to the economic and commercial practices of people? Explain.
3. Christians are called to be witnesses to King Jesus and to sow His Word into every area of life. What does this mean for us as participants in the getting-and-spending economy of our society?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a church leader about how your church might better equip its members to live in the Kingdom economy rather than in a corrupted commerce.

6 Commerce Corrupting

Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" Mark 11:17

A cancerous corruption

Once corruption has found its way into an economy, it grows like a cancer. When greed supplants grace as the currency of an economy, the dark horse is untethered, and deceit, self-interest, pride, oppression, corruption and idolatry spread throughout, until no sector of society is safe from infection. Even the Church can take up practices symptomatic of economic corruption, and become so accustomed to their use that they fail to see the threats and dangers inherent in them.

This is what happened in the temple in Jesus' day. The religious leaders of the day had turned spiritual leadership into a means of personal aggrandizement, even depriving their needy parents of support in order to bankroll a system that ultimately enriched them more and more (Mark 7:9-13). So comfortable had these religious leaders become in their position of prestige, power, and prosperity, that their great fear concerning Jesus was that the Romans would do away with their privileges (Jn. 11:45-48).

Sanctioned and licensed by the religious leaders, the temple merchants brought buying and selling, as well as money-changing, into the sacred precincts of the Lord's house, making a profit on people's desire to be pleasing to the Lord, enriching the purses of those who approved their corrupt economic practices.

But Jesus would have none of it.

Worldly practices?

I often wonder what the Lord thinks about some of the practices we have taken up in His Name. Visit a Christian bookstore, for example, and contemplate all the items of clothing, jewelry, candy, chewing gum, and much more that have been "spiritualized" by some Jesus imprint or Gospel tagline. Look at the way fund-raising in the Christian community seeks to manipulate donors through sentimentality, marketing techniques, premiums, and vague promises of personal blessing and enrichment. Consider how churches assess their health and growth by counting heads and tallying-up bottom lines. Look at the lengths churches go to "market" or "position" themselves in the eyes of their communities.

All these practices have the odor of secularism about them. As long as we continue to man these tables in the courts of the Lord, letting programs take the place of prayer and preferring numbers to spiritual nurture, we are giving in to economic self-interest in the name of the Gospel – and we cannot expect the Lord to bless our endeavor.

In our day corrupting economic principles and practices have pervaded much of the life of the Church; it is no coincidence that the Body of Christ in America is both richer and more populous and, at the same time, more marginal and irrelevant than at any time in our history. In many ways, we have fit ourselves into the economy of greed and getting-and-spending, rather than work by grace through faith to bring the Kingdom economy of God to reality.

The evidence of sin's corrupting presence is easily marshalled. If Christians worked as hard at their sanctification and Personal Mission Fields as they do at their jobs and diversions, we might bear more fruit evidencing our Kingdom-and-glory calling. If we tithed as freely and lavishly as we spend on our own greed and self-interest, no good work undertaken for the Kingdom economy would go without the resources it needs. If we invested as much time in Scripture and prayer as we do in the various diversions that gobble up

God's gift of time, we might be more inclined to seek the Kingdom and righteousness of God rather than our own comfort and convenience above all else.

If churches and ministries spent as much time praying as they do pleading for funds; if they studied and obeyed the Word of God as assiduously and faithfully as they embrace the latest techniques for organizing or marketing themselves; and if they insisted on holiness as earnestly as they promote spurious notions of "growth," the Church in America today would be a far different place.

It is ironic that, for much of the past generation, Christian thinkers and preachers have been flailing away at the corruption of the world with all their might, denouncing cultural perversion, defending the Ten Commandments, declaiming against all manner of moral evil, and denouncing the greed and wickedness of the age.

But are we not like Brer Rabbit, flailing at the tar baby of a corrupt economy, and, rather than overcoming the evils of the world with good (Rom. 12:21) – since we have offered so little of real good ourselves – we have become ensnared, enmeshed, and enfolded in the very evil we so ardently denounce?

Corrupt economies infiltrate all the institutions of society, and the Church today harbors its own money-changers and power brokers, all the while thinking itself immune to the cancer of greed.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that the Church today has become ensnared in the corruption of our greed-based economy? Explain.
2. What is Jesus looking for from His followers? From His Church? How can we know when we are fulfilling His expectations?
3. What does it mean to overcome a corrupt commerce and economy with an economy of Kingdom good? How does that happen?

Next steps – Preparation: Wherever you see the corruption of the greed-based economy of our age leaching into your life or the life of your church, make a point to pray daily, that Jesus will exert His grace-based rule into your midst with renewed vigor.

7 Commerce Redeemed

Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. Acts 4.34, 35

Transforming grace and truth

No nation can exist without an economy. Whatever its form or elements, an economy will exist among men in order to facilitate the exchange of money, goods, and services, to meet the needs of those who participate in it.

But the black horse of corrupt commerce all too easily finds boarding within the economies of the world. And those systems of commerce, once corrupted, spread their cancer to all other areas of life and culture, even to the churches.

But economies do not have to remain centers of corruption and corrupting influences in the lives of those they are intended to serve. Chattel slavery, after all, was abolished. Robber barons have been regulated. Corrupt politicians are exposed and removed.

Even the Church has experienced revival, renewal, and awakening.

The Scriptures boldly proclaim, “Blessed *is* the nation whose God *is* the LORD” (Ps. 33.12). This blessedness pertains to every aspect of national life, including commerce. Can an economy be redeemed? Or, at least, can it be so salted with the grace and truth of God that it begins to reflect divine principles of economic wellbeing? We must believe that, as Jesus Christ works to reconcile the world back to God (2 Cor. 5.16-20), the economies of the nations may also know the presence of His transforming grace and truth.

For evidence of this we may look to our first Christian forebears. Among them the reigning currency of greed was exchanged for an economy of grace, self-denial, compassion, generosity, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. And that Church flourished, even in its commerce.

The grace exchange

What principles can lead us to a system of commerce that is more honoring to God? And what can we expect in the way of real gains in seeing our own national economy transformed by the grace and goodness of the Lord?

First, some principles: As we see in the first Christians, they embraced the goals of economic activity that we described earlier – meeting needs and giving glory to God. These people knew that they were not their own, that they had been bought with the price of Jesus’ blood and righteousness, and they resolved to honor Him with every activity of their bodies, even their commerce.

This has to be the starting point of all economic activity for every believer. This is the fountainhead of grace – love for God and love for our neighbors. Christians must renounce greed and self-centeredness, queue up daily at the grace exchange of Scripture and prayer, pay attention to the needs of those around us, moderate our natural acquisitiveness, give freely even as was freely given to us, and seek to advance the righteous, peaceable, and joyous reign of Jesus Christ in all our economic activity (Rom. 14.17, 18).

Stewards of a trust

Second, we must engage all commerce as stewards of a trust. God has given us gifts, resources, skills, and opportunities so that we might be fruitful in economic endeavor; but we must always remember to invest our

resources wisely, for Kingdom ends, and to hold the fruits of our labors, as a trust from God. We are not our own, after all; we belong to Christ, Who belongs to God. We are His stewards, and servants of His Kingdom and economy, and all our economic activity must reflect this.

Finally, we must determine to trust the Lord in all our doings and not to look for short-cuts to self-advancement through economic or other machinations (Acts 5.1-11). This will require that all our economic activity be based in Scripture, bathed in prayer, and transacted with the currency of grace.

Only as we look to the Lord together, as communities of believers, will we be able to identify and resist the temptations of economic gain, overcome the corrupting practices of worldly living, and serve as salt, light, and the leaven of truth for our neighbors.

And this is as much as we can expect by seeking the redemption of commerce and economic activity: to be a light in a dark place, as those who ride the white horse of Christ against the black horse of corruption. The Church can be a haven of hope in a desperate world, an emblem and arena of compassion and sacrificial living to any who may be in need, a sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God. But we cannot do so on the world's terms, as if the Kingdom economy of God were not advancing daily in the world.

We must seek the Kingdom and righteousness of Christ in all we do, as believers and communities of faith, even in our economic and commercial transactions. If we can begin to achieve this, believer by believer, church by church, grace unto grace, we may begin to redeem our corrupt system of commerce and realize significant progress in the advancement of Christ's Kingdom.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that Christians should seek to play a role in redeeming commerce? Why or why not?
2. In your own life, where do you need to begin working for the redemption of commerce?
3. What could your church do to bear witness to the Kingdom economy in its transactions with the surrounding community?

Next steps – Transformation: Take your answer to question 2 and reduce it to a series of next steps in each area. Support these steps with Scripture, commit them to prayer, and begin taking them every day.

For reflection or discussion

1. What is a system of commerce? Why is such a system necessary and inevitable?
2. What kinds of things introduce corruption to a system of commerce? How can you see that commerce and economic life are not separate from spiritual life?
3. What do we mean by saying that, in a corrupt economy, greed has replaced grace as the base currency?
4. What can believers do to begin redeeming our corrupt system of commerce? Why should we do so?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you planning to implement that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.