

“The Economic Crisis and the Church: A Response to Mark Douglas”

Todd V. Cioffi, PhD

Whitworth University

Mark Douglas’s article, “Capitalism, the Crash, and Christianity,” is a timely piece, but perhaps not obviously so. Its timeliness may be thought to stem from an attempt to address our country’s economic crisis. Currently, any time an article appears with the word “capitalism” or “crash” in it we all perk up, hoping for an encouraging word for our economic doldrums or at least due judgment on those who caused our financial meltdown. While Douglas’s article certainly provides this, his words of encouragement and judgment are not based on a simple embrace of an economic Promised Land or a straightforward critique of capitalism and its minions. Instead, the timeliness of Douglas’s insights is that he calls us back to our better selves, to selves that are properly related to God and to one another.

I suspect that most readers at this point were hoping that my appeal to the timeliness of Douglas’s work would reveal a deeper insight into the current economic crisis we’re facing. How is it that proper relation to God and to one another is a timely bit of advice when home mortgages and the like are going bust and people’s lives are being auctioned off to the most solvent among us? Is this not something we already knew and comes as an obvious response? If so, such claims come across as platitudes, or even worse as a bit of “I told you so,” as if we’ve forgotten about God and are now paying the consequences. But, in fact, when the bottom falls out from underneath us, we often find ourselves wondering what it was exactly we were standing on and indeed what was and is the foundation of our better selves. So, the timeliness of Douglas’s essay is precisely that he calls us to reconsider – yet again, no doubt – the *true* aim of our lives. This question is always timely, or at least it should be. And so we find ourselves at the beginning one more time.

Our better selves, as Douglas notes with Augustine, has to do with our desires, our ability to desire properly. Consequently, the problem with capitalism is not its failures, Douglas claims, but its successes: its ability to get us to desire and desire and desire – indiscriminately. Our desires or “loves,” Augustine taught, must be rightly ordered, they must be trained and disciplined. Or, as Douglas puts it, “We [must] learn to discern what our dissatisfactions in this world could teach us about what satisfaction might ultimately look like,” pointing us to something beyond ourselves, to something that is “bigger and grander than anything that the current world has to offer.” Our desires, for good or for bad, should point us to God, the one who desires us rightly in Jesus Christ and reveals to us what our desires in and through Christ should look like.

Douglas is just right, in my opinion, to suggest that before we can get a handle on our current economic crisis, before we can get a handle on our current desires and the messes they’ve created, we need to know what God is doing, what God is desiring, and what God requires of our desires. As Douglas writes, “Only from that point can we begin to imagine what our responses should be.” The economy can wait, God cannot. It is a matter of “faithful discernment,” says Douglas. I want to pursue this point a bit further.

In *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, William Cavanaugh asks a similar set of questions that Douglas asks, drawing on Augustine for insight into human desire, what God desires for and of us, and how our desires can be properly ordered by God.¹ Cavanaugh develops his reflections, just as Douglas advises, from the vantage point of what God is up to in the world, and first and foremost in terms of what God is up to in and through *the church*. According to Cavanaugh, the church becomes the place where we best discern what God is like,

¹ See William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008). All references to this work will be made parenthetically in the body of this paper.

what God is doing in the world, and what God requires of us. The church, in other words, is the social space where we are called to enact the life God intends for us in Jesus Christ. The church, then, drawing again on Augustine, is God's *true society*, that place or social space where persons are formed by God's grace and divine gifts, i.e., proclamation, sacraments, prayer, fellowship, etc., into rightly desiring human beings. To suggest that the church is God's true society is not to suggest that the church as we now know it is perfect. Instead, it is to claim that the church, by the grace of God, displays features that reflect God's intentions for human life in community. Given this, Cavanaugh contends that the church holds a key to understanding and to shaping human desires, and therefore, getting to the root of our economic woes.

To see this, Cavanaugh argues that human desire is a social production, for "desire is a complex and multidimensional network of movement that does not simply originate within the individual self but pulls and pushes the self in different directions from both inside and outside the person" (9). If desire is a social production, then the church is that society, that social production, which trains and disciplines us in the way of true desire and thus allows us to achieve our true end in God. That is, the church allows us to achieve our better selves. How might this look? Cavanaugh provides the example of the Lord's Supper. With the Lord's Supper, we are not only asked to partake of Jesus Christ, by way of the bread and the wine, but we are being taken up by Christ, into his body, his person and work, his desire for us. As such, we are at once desiring, being desired by God, and having our desires transformed by Christ by way of the sacramental elements and the community that has formed around these elements. We are, to put it differently, forming and being reformed as God's true society by the church's social practices. As a social production divinely orchestrated, the church's ongoing practice of the Lord's Supper

trains our desires and thereby trains how we see and desire the world around us, giving us the needed vision to see things a right. So what does this have to do with the economy? Everything.

Our current economic ethos has encouraged the social production of an indiscriminate desire of consumption. Our market-driven consumption seems to be an end in itself, with no greater good in sight. But, as we consume in the church – i.e., as we partake of the Lord’s Supper, take in the preaching of the Word, embrace the fellowship of the Christian community, and so forth – our consuming is “turned inside out” (54), says Cavanaugh. As the church, we are consumed by God and in turn our habits of consumption are transformed. Our new habits of consumption allow us to consume and yet not indiscriminately so, to receive and yet not selfishly possess, to partake and yet offer to another. Indeed, as Cavanaugh reminds us, “For becoming the body of Christ also entails that we must become food for others” (55). Here then is true society, as formed by God and given to the church, and it is this society, this social production of the church, that rightly understands economic life – the exchange of goods and services for the well being of human life and human community – and can therefore serve as a foretaste and even model of what God intends for economic life.

The world needs the church, and not simply for the obvious reasons. The world needs the church because it reveals God’s desire for true human society. When we recognize and live out our calling as Christ’s body, the church, we are not simply preparing for the afterlife or setting up a pious enclave within the mainstream, but we are embodying the coming Kingdom of God, consuming God and God’s gifts and yet giving it all away to those who stand in need.² This is true society, this is true economy, and the world needs us to be the church, living out our better

² Stephen Long puts it this way, “A Christian economy assumes a life of charity ordered toward God and one’s neighbor.” See D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000), 235.

selves as given by God and practiced in Christian community and setting the groundwork for the Kingdom that is upon us and it to come in full some day. Indeed, there are many corrections and solutions that need be applied to our current economic crisis, but no less than grand economic theories of Nobel Laureates Christians need to be the church more than ever. Being the church is a timely matter in these tough economic times. In fact, being the church has always been and will always be a timely matter.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you see the church, indeed your local church, as the Body of Christ, as Christ's presence in the world? What difference does this make to see the local church as Christ's body?
2. If the church is at least a glimpse of *true society*, what difference does this make in how we see our local congregations?
3. How does seeing the church as the Body of Christ and God's true society shape and direct our thinking and lives during this country's economic crisis?
4. If the church is called to live out economic life as God intends, what would have to change in your local church? What should remain the same?
5. How can we begin to offer up our churches as models for the wider economic life of our society? Indeed, how can we offer up our churches as models for social life in general?

For further reading:

William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000).