

A Reply of Gratitude

Among the great pleasures of academic life, two stand out for me right now. The first is the opportunity to engage in substantive conversations with colleagues about matters of importance. The second is to have colleagues with whom to engage in such conversations. I am fortunate to experience both pleasures in this edition of *@ This Point*. D. Cameron Murchison has been a good colleague at C.T.S. for a decade now, and my Dean for the better part of that time. And Tim Sandoval and Todd Cioffi and I go back even farther than that: we were all in the same class at Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 1990's and have kept in better and worse touch ever since then. I imagine if you'd told our professors then what we'd be doing now, they might have been surprised. I imagine if you'd told some of our friends the same, they would have been shocked: late night conversations during the now sadly defunct "Cheap Beer Night" on the 4th Floor of Alexander Hall—a weekly gathering at which all three of us were regulars—tended not to revolve around our respective academic pursuits.

I owe a two-fold debt of gratitude to each of them. First, as one of the journal's co-editors, I want to thank them for being willing to take up the task of writing thoughtful responses to my lead essay on short notice. The topic for this edition of the journal didn't exist even in theory before last fall's economic upheavals and only became its focal point in February. To drop their own work in order to take up this task is no small matter and while it helps that all three of them have been thinking theologically about money for some time, each of them still bore costs in time and energy for which our paltry honoraria hardly compensate.

Second, as the author of the lead essay, I want to thank them for their charitable and helpful responses. Each of them has, in his own way, managed to make my work look better than it is. Along the way, they have exemplified one of the goals of the journal: to model theological conversation for the church to see and continue. With this goal in mind, then, I turn toward their essays, hoping to continue the conversation(s) they were willing to take up.

Begin with Todd Cioffi's response, "The Economic Crisis and the Church." Todd's attention to the distinctive role the church plays in God's work not only adds to my too-brief sketch of Augustine but brings a new conversation partner to the table in William Cavanaugh, who has been doing some of the most provocative work in Christian ethics over the past decade. We—and I, especially—need to be reminded of the importance of the church as a community called not only to discern what God is doing (e.g., desiring us, recognizing our desires and transforming them) but therein to participate in practices like celebrating communion toward the end of modeling God's desired society.

I say "I especially" in the previous sentence because I am somewhat less sanguine than is Todd about there being an especially interesting difference between how God acts in and through the church and how God acts in and through the rest of the world. Part of this may be due to the usual suspicion that there aren't any churches that live up to the callings that he and Bill Cavanaugh describe. When Todd writes that, "the world needs the church because it reveals God's desire for true human society," I wonder what church he's going to.

That reason for our differences, though, is fairly minor and likely to be the product of undue cynicism on my part that I need to confess, not defend. The other reason that I'm less sanguine than Todd about the significance of the church has more to do with a conviction that God may be just as active in familial, economic or political systems as in ecclesial ones. The world may, indeed, need the church as Todd says. Likewise, though, the church needs the world because as long as we're willing to confess that God is active in spheres outside the church, then it must be the case that those spheres, too, are revealing "God's desire for true human society"—albeit, perhaps, in ways to which they are blind whereas the church's vision is only significantly impaired. "One God, one faith, one baptism:" it is the same God at work in the marketplace that is at work in the church.ⁱ

It is for this reason, incidentally, that the church might find the recent furor over government subsidies and bailouts to corporations so odd. We might test the value of the bailouts according to their success at keeping citizens employed and starting the cycle of capitalism clockwise; where the bailouts won't or don't work, so be it. But the furor had to do with political interference with the marketplace. Set aside the fact that most of the largest capitalist corporations around the world are state-owned. Set aside the fact that taxes, tariffs, subsidies, environmental and health codes, and a wide range of other state legislation already reveals state involvement in the market. If Christians believe that one God is sovereign over and works through all human systems, the threats of market contamination by politics seem misdirected: there never were or could be hermetic seals around the marketplace—whether to isolate it from politics or from the church. Using the latter term very loosely, Christians have always been Keynesians.

Where Todd reminds us of the holy complexity of the church, Cam Murchison reminds us of the constructed complexity of capitalism. Highlighting the credit-cycle within the larger cycle of capitalism—the wheel within the wheel—Cam makes several important corrections to my all-too-brief explanatory circles and, along the way, points us to a number of helpful resources, including not only books like Rosner's *Greed as Idolatry* (which I'm embarrassed to say I hadn't even heard of) but also local congregations, which can serve as "open spaces" for conversations about how to create habitats of flourishing. Where I suggested we need to listen to alternative communities, if for no other reason than to disrupt our settled convictions about money, Cam suggests we listen to each other. That sounds like a very good idea to me—one that, were we to do it, might actually reveal churches to be significantly more "alternative" in a world full of speech but not conversation than we might first think.

One of the more provocative if less obvious insights of Cam's response is in his story about the use of credit cards. Buying on credit, using points, transferring credit card balances, etc: this is an excellent illustration of the credit cycle that has led to so much debt in the U.S.ⁱⁱ It is also, though, marvelously illustrative of the fact that credit-based debt isn't necessarily due to the loss of a Protestant work ethic (*a la* Weber). Reading through Cam's description of his own use of credit helps reveal just how much work goes into creating and maintaining the credit system. Perhaps we aren't frugal any more but nor are we lazy. Whether we can apply that work-ethic toward the kind of internal work by which we re-order our desires toward a sustainable system

in which all things flourish is, I think, a continuing question for Christians. But it is good—in a hard kind of way, as Cam points out—to note that that question is more live now than it has been in the recent past. Would that there were more people like Cam teaching Christians through courses like his “Money Matters in Ministry” to help us answer that question.

Of the three responses, I would not be surprised to find Tim Sandoval’s the most useful for the church. First, it does what the other three of us probably all think we need to do more: attend to scripture. Scripture, strange as it sometimes sounds to modern ears, is the church’s vernacular—our native tongue—and we ignore it to our own detriment. Tim’s thoughtful and theologically-accented account of the first nine chapters of Proverbs opens these under-explored texts up to us, offering along the way an incisive criticism of their misuse by those pursuing a gospel of prosperity. Second—and undoubtedly because he is actually working through the text that has been given to us rather than simply pursuing ideas—Tim’s work flies lower than do Cam’s, Todd’s, and my reflections. To argue against the rest of us, one must enter some rather lofty but abstract spaces. To argue against Tim, though, is to come face-to-face with a text that has guided Israel and the church for thousands of years because it is wise, practical, and, to use the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, “inspired by God . . . useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

This is especially important, I think, because the scriptures aren’t the property of any particular group of Christians but the shared text of all of us around the world. When the market crashed, many of us in the developed world were hurt. Brothers and sisters in the developing world, though, were hurt even worse. Countries that had been slowly working their ways out of poverty and huge, gaping debt were thrown years backwards, often without any functioning safety net or economic cushion. In the middle of all the cries for justice (cries sounding sometimes more like cries for the blood of bankers, automakers, etc.), Proverbs’ connection between how wisdom pursues wealth and how she pursues social justice can only reverberate in our ears if we notice how far her voice travels. If we are to be the church Todd calls us to be using the resources Cam provides us, we will have to be so with an attentive eye to the whole world as it is impacted by the current—and U.S.-induced—economic crisis.ⁱⁱⁱ

Toward that end, I end where I began: with gratitude. Gratitude to Todd and Cam and Tim for their work and their charity. And gratitude as a virtue that all of us could stand to inculcate a bit more. Perhaps one of the first steps in retraining our desires (to the extent, at least, that we can retrain them) is to learn better how to live gratefully rather than acquisitively. As we learn not only to be content with what we have but grateful to have it, we may be less seduced by greed and less pliant toward the temptations of endless credit and an economic cycle that imagines itself running only clockwise.

ⁱ There are branches within the Christian faith (and, for that matter, within the Reformed tradition, which the Presbyterian Church (USA) stands in), who make this same confession but are willing to countenance God working in different ways in these different spheres. This is not, however, a necessary position nor one I hold.

ⁱⁱ With Cam, I’m suspicious of making the distinction between production-based and consumption-based capitalism go too deep. One intriguing new area of study, though, explores the degree to which attention to *emotion* is

reshaping capitalism. See Eva Illouz's short and provocative book, *Cold Intimacies: the Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007) for a thoughtful examination of this.

ⁱⁱⁱ For details of this, see the World Bank/IMF-released *Global Monitoring Report, 2009*, available online at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTGLOBALMONITOR/EXTGLOMONREP2009/0,,menuPK:5924413~pagePK:64168427~piPK:64168435~theSitePK:5924405,00.html>. Ominously, some economists fear that the damage done worldwide and especially in the developing world could rebound back into the developed world and induce a new round of crises brought on by the globalized state of economic interdependence. Attention to the world may not only be morally important but strategically necessary to stave off further counterclockwise spin.