



THE ECONOMY OF GRACE AND THE MARKET LOGIC

M. Douglas Meeks

Note: This paper contains some of the themes Dr. Meeks developed in his consultation addresses and are also found in his book, *“God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy”* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, which can be ordered from: <http://fortresspress.com/store/index.asp> and www.amazon.com. Other ideas in the lectures are in the book he hopes to finish this spring tentatively titled: *“Spreading the Lord’s Table: The Church in the Global Market Economy.”*

THE ECONOMY OF GRACE AND THE MARKET LOGIC¹

M. Douglas Meeks

While the science called economics is certainly a relatively recent modern invention, the word economy (*oikos + nomos*) is not; it is an ancient word that means literally the “law or management of the household.” “Economy” is found throughout the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and the New Testament and the phrase *oikonomia tou theou* (the economy of God) is central and decisive for the biblical speech about God. Economy in its ancient sense is about access to what it takes to live and live abundantly.² Up to the seventeenth century, to pursue economy meant to pursue the question, “Will everyone in the household get what it takes to live? Will everyone survive (*sur-vivre* = “live through”) the day and, where possible, flourish?”³ As the arrangement that makes it possible for the household or community to live, economy was bound to community. In fact, it was clear that economy existed to serve community. Economy in the broadest sense meant the relations of human beings for the producing of the conditions of life against death.

Oikonomia, therefore, connoted *home*. Robert Frost has one of the characters in his poem “The Death of the Hired Man,” define home as “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”⁴ If we expand this poetically, we can speak of four other aspects of home. Home, first of all, is where everybody knows your name, that is, at home everyone can narrate your story and thus can tell your hopes. Secondly, being at home means you can count on being confronted, forgiven, cared for, and loved. Thirdly, home is where you can always count

¹ Parts of this lecture were given in lecture form to the United Methodist Council of Bishops and published in *Vision and Supervision: A Sourcebook of Significant Documents of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, 1968-2002*.

² M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp 29-45.

³ Other words that derive from the root *oik-* are *ecology* and *oikoumene*. Ecology asks whether nature will have a home. Nature's way of protesting homelessness is to die. Thus Rachel Carson spoke of the “silent spring.” We are slowly learning that if nature dies, so will human beings. The ancient question of *oikoumene* is not just whether the Lutherans and the Baptists are going to get together. That is an important question. But the fundamental question of *oikoumene* is whether all the peoples of the earth will be able to inhabit the earth mutually in peace. The United Nations tells us that today, as every day, 42,000 children will starve to death. They will not have found earth to be home.

⁴ Robert Frost, *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p.53.

on there being a place for you at the table. And finally, you know you are at home when you can reckon on what is on the table being shared with you.

If these are irreducible means of having “home,” then to be without home, to be without name, mutuality of care, assurance of belonging, and sustenance is to be subjected to the conditions of death. Homelessness means to be unprotected in the face of the nihil (the power of death). To put it simply, children who are homeless in any one of these senses are subject to death. Children who are homeless in all of these senses are not likely to survive the day. But in the end, given enough time, this is true of every human being. Economy is a matter of life or death. Home, that is, participation in economy, means access to the conditions of life against death. Homelessness is death.

The difficulty with modern economics, especially with the rise of neo-classical economics at the end of the nineteenth century, is that the ancient question of livelihood has dropped out of the center of economics. This eclipse of the question of access to livelihood, of access to life, is the impoverishment of modern economics, in spite of its stupendous accomplishments in other respects. Economics qua science tends to be a mechanistic study of supply and demand and of the manipulation of fiscal flows. Questions of how to form and sustain community, questions of how the members of the household are related to each other, are in modernity often divorced from questions of economy. In this context, it is assumed that community exists to serve economy. This amounts to a truncation of the older meaning of economy that threatens the peoples and the earth itself.

The Market Logic

The difficulty of juxtaposing theology and economy is this: the absolute prevailing logic of our society is the *market logic*. Perhaps the only thing that approximates a universal presence in the world today is the market logic. The market is spreading into and, in one way or another, impacting, even if only negatively, every village of the world. It is the language with which all people are fascinated. It is increasingly the logic through which people expect life, security, and future.

The market logic is in and of itself a potential good. It is perhaps the most successful human social device ever conceived. No one can deny its awesome effect in modernity. But we do need radically to criticize many of the assumptions of the modern market. These assumptions destroy the possibility of Christian discipleship within economy and are increasingly narrowing

the public space of appearance in which the church can exist. They destroy the possibility of democracy shaping property, work, and consumption in ways that preserve equality, participation, and access to livelihood and community. The market could flourish without these assumptions and many of the institutions to which they have given rise.

It is thus not the market per se but rather what Karl Polanyi calls “the market society” that I am opposing. That is, I am criticizing a society in which all the spheres in which social goods have to be distributed are determined by the market logic itself. In a market society, all social goods are produced and distributed as if they were commodities. It is therefore possible for such a society not to be outraged when many of its children no longer have access to what it takes for them to live and live abundantly. The best way to judge the viability of an economy (that is, its contribution to the life of human beings and nature) is to pose the question, What happens to the children in this economy?

The Church and the Market Logic

Does the household of Jesus Christ have a memory that contradicts the notion that all the spheres of distribution of the goods necessary for life should be controlled by the market logic? The church, like all other institutions in our society, is threatened with amnesia and anesthesia. Alcohol, drugs, pain-relievers, unrelieved work, too much television watching, and stoicism in all its popular forms make us forgetful people unable to experience our own suffering much less the suffering of others. So it cannot simply be assumed that the church will stand up against the exclusion of children from home, for the church's “dangerous memories,” the ones that would contradict the present arrangements of our public household, must be re-membered through its scriptures, its worship, and its sacraments. A church without the Bible and without the memory of God's promises and without the practices of God's grace is merely another institution of the market society candidating for inclusion by confirming the market logic.

But if we have a memory, we know that there are certain social goods that should be distributed according to a different logic because these social goods are themselves not commodities. Israel and the church have always known, if memory is poised, that healing cannot be distributed according to the logic of exchange. Hospitality is at the heart of the Christian life (Rom.12:13). Hospitals were originally the church's way of practicing hospitality as open house for the stranger, the poor, the sojourner, and the homeless. The church said that they should be given home even if they had nothing to exchange. And, yet, even our church hospitals now are

employing a logic which causes them to exclude the very persons for whom hospitals were brought into being.

Israel and the church, if memory is poised, have always known that you cannot distribute learning and the generation of the generations according to the logic of exchange. The church said, We need schools which exemplify two convictions (how quaint they seem in the stupor of our amnesia): 1) all human knowledge should be related to the truth of the gospel, and 2) no persons gifted for learning should be excluded from home simply because they have nothing to exchange. And, yet, even our church colleges and universities (not to speak of our seminaries) are increasingly organized according to the market logic. Decisions about entrance and about learning are increasingly made according to the “bottom line.” If the church regains its memory, will we not have to start all over again establishing hospitals, retirement homes, schools and universities, and all sorts of centers that support the humanizing of children’s lives according to the logic of the gospel? Else we do not believe that the shalom of the gospel is really meant for this world.

This in no sense means that the church can replace the public institutions for human welfare. But it may mean that as these public institutions are dismantled, the church, as it has done in the past, would apply the imagination of the gospel for modeling new institutions that are governed by life against death for the children of the world.

The market is the greatest mechanism we have ever devised for producing and distributing commodities. But if something is not a commodity, should it be distributed according to the market logic or is there another logic for the distribution of those things necessary for life and life abundant? According to the gospel and the depth of human wisdom, *what is necessary for life* cannot be a commodity or exclusively a commodity. Thus social goods such as food, housing, jobs, education and health care should not be exclusively distributed according to the market logic and social goods such as justice, security, belonging, respect, affection, and grace should not be distributed in any sense according to the logic of exchanging commodities. Otherwise, it is inevitable that those with nothing to exchange will get left out of home. In the market society, however, there is nothing that cannot, in principle, be distributed as a commodity. Everything is for sale. Market economists even suggest that air pollution can be solved as soon as we learn how to make air a commodity.

Modern *economics* has undermined ancient *economy*. In modernity market economics

increasingly displaces economy in this sense and offers itself as a pervasive logic by which all spheres of human endeavor can be comprehended and mastered. At one time it was said, “outside the church, there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Now the children of the world and those who love them are faced with a new bitter dogma: Outside the market, there is no salvation.

The ominous fact of which Christians in the North are only barely conscious is that the church itself is also more and more governed by the market logic. Even our church institutions have joined the move from traditioned accountability to accountancy. Many of the enormous changes in North American denominations are explained most accurately by reference to this mostly unnoticed process. Our denominations are collapsing from the top down. Market solutions to the crises of decline only delay the church's reformation by the gospel or in some cases exacerbate the deformation.

In a market society there is decreasing space of appearance in which the church and its expectation of the reign of God's righteousness can exist. The fascination of the modern market is its claim that it can shape mass human behavior without force or authority, and therefore that the violence of the state and the authority of the church can be replaced by simple exchange relationships. The result is a set of economic laws that make decisions for us. The market is an organizing (and conveniently invisible) mechanism that is automatic. It allows us to avoid public encounter and decision-making and trades citizenship in a polis (or, in the church, discipleship in a community) for consumership in a market.

Is it possible that the market logic takes over even in the church, in the way a congregation or a conference glues itself together? Productivity, incentive and efficiency are the words that are on our lips and that we instinctively understand because we so effortlessly belong to the market society governed by the laws of market economics. Could it be, after all, often the market logic that in the end governs our clergy deployment system, our view of the effectiveness of ministry, and some of our church growth schemes, some of our evangelism and stewardship programs, some of our theories of leadership and organizational development? And if your answer is in some sense yes to these questions, then we should ever more urgently teach the logic of the gospel, lest our churches in the end have nothing new to say to a public household that excludes the children. For the gospel of Jesus Christ is the appropriate logic in the church and, in the last analysis, is the only new word the church has to say to the world, the only thing the

world has not already heard. The only new blessing in the New Testament is “Blessed is he or she who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:23). Is Jesus Christ really meant for the world? Or have we become so sophisticated that we, too, find Jesus in public offense?

If the church is actually meant to be the living economy of God, then we should go no further without saying that to make a genuine contribution to alternative economy in the world, an economy open to the flourishing of children, the church itself would have to be radically restructured and “recultured” by its own gospel, sacraments, diakonia, and koinonia for mission. The great task facing the church toward the next century is how and where to find the actual free space in our market society to become the *oikonomia tou theou*. No other question is so urgent for the church of Jesus Christ.

The church, at least in the North Atlantic rim and I think increasingly throughout the world, exists in a vicious circle, for the realities it most needs are the very realities that are contradicted by the market logic. The church in any society must demand the right to do three things:

- 1) to speak and live the gospel of Jesus Christ publicly,
- 2) to form a sustained community that exists for the sake of the others, and
- 3) to take part in lawfully establishing and enforcing conditions of justice and peace.

But the three realities most necessary for the church to do these things are not allowed to appear in the market logic: *praise*, *promise*, and *gifting*. The historical, public, objective (that is, spatial and temporal) appearance of these realities as defined by the narratives of God's economy I take to be the *conditio sine qua non* of Christian mission. But this condition seems nearly impossible in our present society. It is impossible unless Jesus Christ is the being of the church and not the market logic.

This crisis of the church is not the “fault” of the market economy. The church does not have to conform to the logic of the market (any more than it had to conform to slavery, feudal, or mercantilist societies), but so pervasive is the logic of the market as the common sense of human operations that the church will experience freedom for its public mission only as gift of God's grace. Precisely on the basis of God's grace the church's struggle with the market logic is crucial in our time, for, as I claim, the multiple problems of the formation of the church and its mission in our society come to a focus in the question of economy.

I am not claiming that freedom from the market logic will solve all questions of the

church and its mission. It won't. There are many other idolatries that face the church: racism, sexism, nationalism, etc. Nor am I claiming that the church must be utterly free from the market economy. Since for the foreseeable future all imaginable economics worldwide will be market oriented, to claim that the church should be utterly free from market economy would be tantamount to claiming that the church should not even be *in* the world when in fact the gospel claims that the church, fully present in the world, should not be *of* the world. But if the church does not manifest an alternative economy in space and time, it is not a candidate for serving God's redemption of the world. The household of Jesus Christ is meant to be space and time filled by the Holy Spirit with different interests, goals, and power structures than the spirit of the market society. The church is the time and space in which the coming of the Spirit of Jesus Christ under the conditions of messianic promise and discipleship creates a community devoted to the praise of God and to God's redemption of the world. The Spirit of Jesus Christ constitutes the church, gives it direction and energy, gives it time and space for the relationships and conditions of life.

The Church as Alternative Economy

What is absolutely necessary for a home? This is a question most of us have a difficult time even contemplating, since our homes have become so complicated and well-appointed. But through the millennia human beings have considered five things necessary to home. First is *water*. No home without the proximity of potable water. Second is *bread*. No home without the daily conditions of sustenance. Third is *table*. No home without a table (or a place) around which the family gathers for food and, fourth, the table *stories* which make the home what it is. Finally, it is impossible to think of home without a *towel*, the symbol of reciprocal serving and mutual life-giving without which human life cannot be protected against the threats of the nihil. These five conditions of home are, of course, immediately recognizable as the word and sacraments by which God the Holy Spirit creates the economy of the Household of Jesus Christ.

Like all economies, the Household of Israel and the Household of Jesus Christ are created around tables and shaped by what is on the table, the stories that are told around the table, and the relationships of life that result from the table setting. The primary story that makes us who we are is told around the Seder table. At the Seder table the mother or father does some strange liturgical act that causes the children to ask, "Why are we living in this way?" And that is the signal and the possibility to tell the precious story that makes us who we are. This is a primary

difficulty with the church today: Our liturgies, our worship, our lives are not strange enough, are not enough out of step with the world around us for our children to be prompted to ask about the story behind our lives, to ask about the story that makes us who we are. Were we soberly honest, we would have to admit that the first reason we are declining in numbers as a church is that we are losing our own children! And is it not the *leitourgeia* by which we serve God by serving the children other than our own that will determine whether our own children will listen to the story of the gospel?

The table story that makes us who we are begins one and only way: “Remember that you were a slave (*oiketes*) in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut. 5:15). There is no knowledge of God before, above, or under this story. This is the beginning of our story. We first came to a knowledge of God while we were yet slaves in Pharaoh's economy of slavery. The stench, the chains, the whip, the separation from the ones we loved, the lack of freedom to move and decide our future: These are the things we remember when we ask how we first came to know the God who gave us a home beyond slavery and against slavery. Israel's and the Church's story has been credible through the ages to the degree that they accepted the power of God's grace to stand up against slavery -- in all its forms (and multiple are its forms even yet in our own societies).

Though the tradition has largely emphasized political metaphors in speaking of God (e.g., King, Master, Lord, Judge, Possessor), the primary scriptural narratives speak of God more in economy metaphors. God redeems the world by *creating home* for God's creatures. The story of redemption is the economy of God. Thus the most important name of God is a narrative description of God's economy act: “I am the one who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage [economy of slavery]” (Ex. 20:1). Though it does not sound “macho” enough to our Western ears, at least in the Moses and Jesus trajectories the Bible speaks of God as a household slave in the sense of a steward, that is, the one who is charged with the responsibility of making sure that everyone in the household has what it takes to live. These traditions culminate in the highest Christological hymn of the New Testament, the best statement of who God in Jesus Christ is in the redemption of the world:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, *taking the form of a slave* [an economist in the ancient sense],

being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:5-9).

God redeems the world by becoming a household slave, a steward to the household of the creation. The principal name of God in the New Testament, also a narrative description, is the "One who raised Jesus Christ from the dead." God raises this economist from the dead and creates the Resurrection Household, with new household rules.

The History of God, Bread and the New Economy

The Bible tells the story of God's redeeming power by telling the story of bread. We fell into slavery when bread became exhaustively a commodity; we are redeemed through the bread of life who is a gift of God's grace.

The first full-fledged "economist" in the Bible is Joseph. We remember the beautiful story of Joseph when he saved us from famine, but once he became Pharaoh's economist he had to play by Pharaoh's household rules.⁵ When another severe famine came upon us, we came to Joseph and said "Give us bread! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone" (Gen. 47:15). Because the stored-up bread had become a commodity, Joseph took first our money, then our livestock and plows, then our land, and finally ourselves in exchange for bread. Then comes that most ominous sentence that set the stage for the whole of the Bible and even for us today: "...and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other" (Gen. 47:20b-21). It is still our question: To whom does the land really belong? To whom to the people really belong?

The next economist who appears in the narrative is Moses who hears from the strange phenomenon of the burning bush the two most important realities of God's economy of redemption: *promise and command*. The philosophical ontologies of the West have described God as being infinite, unchanging, immortal, independent, and incapable of suffering.⁶ These attributes stemmed from Greek metaphysics and described God or highest being as if God were the Emperor of the creation. The attributes described a certain kind of power that is abstract,

⁵ For the following see Meeks, *God the Economist*, pp. 75-97

⁶ These attributes describe the Deist God who arose at the time of the rise of the market economy and who is the God of American civil religion. "In God we trust," says American currency. But which God is meant?

isolated, without limits, unaffected by others, and not subject to death. Even when these attributes seem no longer to describe divinity, they are nevertheless cherished by the *homo Americanus* who desires to control his or her environment. The word from the God of Israel is not a word of power through control but of redemption through dwelling with those who are most threatened by homelessness:

I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them... (Ex. 3:7-8b).

The promise of this God is Immanuel, God's own dwelling with those who are systemically separated from the household of life.

The promise of God never comes without the command of God. (Most of the problems of the church stem from emphasizing one without the other.) The command of God: Go to Egypt where my people are suffering homelessness. Moses' response: Not on your life! I've been to Egypt, and I know who's got the power. But the command comes again and again: Go to Egypt!

I suppose that at this point Moses stalls by playing theological games: "If you will give me a well-constructed, persuasive ontology of your being or some other divine assurance, then I will consider going." God answers "I am who I am," an enigmatic statement that is in any case no adequate ontology. I believe YHWH is saying to Moses that he (and we) will not get a fully worked out ontology of God's being in advance. Moses will not find out who God is in this sacred space or by divining the order of the cosmos or by delving deeply into his spirit. Rather he will find out who God the Economist is only by following up God's promise ("I have come down to deliver them") and God's command ("Come I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people"). God's promise and command will send Moses into the very place where God is working for a new household for God's people. There in the midst of this struggle, there through the particulars of this historical situation, Moses will find out who God is. Just so, we also know the Economist God insofar as we take part in God's economic work.

And Moses went. On such a miracle of grace is built the economy of God. And the economy of slavery was dismantled at least enough for the children of Israel to flee.

And yet the very first thing we did when we landed in freedom in the desert was to complain. Freedom is never as it is advertised. "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought

us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex. 16:3). It is at this point that God has to decide whether there is after all going to be a different household, an economy other than Pharaoh's. God answers, Yes, and the new economy begins with a new bread. The people call it mana (in Hebrew, “what's it”) because they do not know what it is. But as its character is uncovered, it proves exactly the opposite of Pharaoh's commodity storehouse bread. It cannot be stored, lest it rot. It cannot be exchanged because it is a gift of God's grace. Because this social good is not a commodity, it must be distributed according to a radically different logic:

they gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, he that gathered much, had nothing over, and [s]he that gathered little had no lack; each gathered according to what he [or she] could eat (Ex. 16:18)

The economy of God is given shape by this logic of distribution. The history of bread and God culminates for the church when at the eucharist we elevate the bread and give it a new shared communal understanding: “This is my body, broken for you.” This bread of life becomes the symbol of all those things which must be distributed if God's children are to live and live abundantly. Everything in the church should be tested for its appropriateness according to this logic of grace. If we are gifted with the blessing of memory, we know that there is a radical difference between the bread of slavery, bread of tears, bread of death, on the one hand and the bread of freedom, bread of joy, bread of life, on the other hand. Whether the children will eat today, depends on which bread determines what we do with our possessions and our work.

Household Rules of the Torah and the Gospel

From the desert we went to Sinai where God gave us the precious, life-giving rules of the household of life against death.⁷ The life question of the people of Israel is how to live in the household of freedom without falling again into slavery. Life in God's household of freedom, then, means living in obedience to God's way of distributing righteousness. Keeping God's Torah economy is life; disregarding God's Torah economy is death. Covenant faithfulness is what the Torah requires in the distribution of what it takes for everyone in the household to live. Torah means guidance for the life of righteousness in God's household.

Both liberal and conservative Protestants in the last two centuries have eschewed these

⁷ These household rules are found in the Covenant Code (Ex. 20:22-23:33), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 12-26), and the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26).

household rules calling them dusty irrelevant rules of the past, superseded by the gospel. Surely God does not expect us to keep these outmoded rules. Our opposition to the Old Testament Torah, to Jesus' Jewishness, and to the reign of God promised in the prophets has not a little to do with anti-semitism, even when it has been unconscious. When the church leaves proximity to the synagogue, it tends toward heresy. The life and death household rules of God's economy are part and parcel of what Jesus teaches. Jesus' gospel of the kingdom makes no sense without the content of God's promises to Israel for God's household. Whether they are realizable today is precisely the question I have been raising regarding the actual existence of the church in space and time in our societies today. Jesus does not loosen the household rules; he radicalizes them.

Yahweh's exclusive right to or claim on the household of Israel is based on God's liberation of them from the house of bondage (*oikos douleias*, Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6, 7-21). “And you shall remember that you were a slave (*oiketes*) in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you ...” (Deut 5:15). God liberated God's people when they were strangers and oppressed; therefore God's redeemed people should show the same compassion toward the needy in their midst (Ex.22:21; 23:9). The church states the same logic even more radically, While we were yet enemies of God, Christ died for us.

The household rules begin with, *Don't charge interest to the poor*.⁸ This seems such an absurd rule in modern economies that run on credit. At least as an American, if you are not in debt, something must be wrong with you. And don't we live in an economy with a highly tuned fiscal apparatus that prevents people from being hurt by debt? No. Debt (personal and national) is still making life miserable for the majority of people around the world.

The reason for this Torah economy rule is simply that debt leads sooner or later to slavery, and God will not tolerate it that the people who belong to God, the people God has freed from the economy of slavery, be again submitted to slavery. They belong to God! The same must be said for the children of our societies: They belong to the one who has died for them; they may not be treated as if they belonged to another master. Even when interest was allowed by the Torah, strict rules prevented the exclusion from access to life: “If ever you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only

⁸ Lev. 25:35-38; Ex. 22:26- 27; cf. Deut. 24:6, 10-13; Deut. 15:7-11.

covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate” (Ex. 22:26-27). The Torah sets limits on the oppression of the poor by restricting the right of creditors to seize that property on which the poor depend for life. Nothing that is necessary for life may be taken as collateral. “For they are my people, whom I brought forth out of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God....For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 25:42-43, 55). It doesn't sound right to our Enlightenment-trained sensitivity for freedom, but the biblical traditions claim that to be a slave of God (or disciple of Jesus) *is freedom*.⁹

Debt still causes many kinds of slavery today. We who pray “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” will remember how debt in all its forms closes the household to the children.

A second household rule is *leave gleanings*. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.”¹⁰ There is only one reason for this rule: So that the poor will not have their faces ground into the dust. The poor are given access to God's economy of life through the right to share in the harvest (cf. Deut. 24:19-22; Lev. 23:22; Ruth 2). In the seventh year the vineyards and orchards are to be left untended not only so that the ground may be rejuvenated but also so that the poor may benefit (Ex. 21:24; 23:10-11). The Deuteronomic law extends the law of leaving sheaves and fruit beyond the seventh year to each harvest time (Deut. 24:19-22). The Deuteronomic law even permits the poor to enter the field before harvest, although the hungry may merely satisfy their need and may not take advantage of the owner of the field (Deut. 23:24-25). Jesus followed this rule by picking grain for the hungry -- on the sabbath! These laws prevent the poor from begging for their survival and show that God's claim on redeemed slaves means their right to the means of life. This right supersedes the right to land and produce.

Isaiah responds to the Israel's refusal to recognize these rights in this way: “The Lord has

⁹ A collect of the Anglican Book of Common Prayers says: Jesus Christ “in whose service is perfect freedom.”

¹⁰ Lev. 19:9-10; (Lev. 19:9-10; Cf. Deut. 24:19-22; Lev. 23:22; Ruth 2.

taken his place to contend, he stands to judge his people. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: `It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is on your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?' says the Lord God of hosts" (Isa. 3:13-15).

Gleaning rights are not voluntary acts of charity of the rich toward the poor; gleaning rights are the poor's right to livelihood. The commandment "do not steal" means do not take what belongs to the poor because the poor belong to God. This Torah rule is the ground for the teaching of the prophets, of Jesus, of the Church Fathers, of Medieval theology (especially Thomas Aquinas), of the Reformers, and perhaps what is the most distinctive teaching of John Wesley, namely, that what one does not need for life (Wesley termed this the "necessaries and conveniences") *already belongs to God's poor*. Our forgetfulness of this rule of God's economy of life may also be the reason that the Church in the United States has remained strangely silent about the dismantling of welfare and the exclusion of children from access to home.

Jesus had a lot to say about storehouses and big barns. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, Whose will they be? So it with those who store up treasures for themselves *but are not rich toward God*" (Luke 12:20-21). Today our storehouses are our insurance and pension funds. They exist of course to secure us, and is this not a good? But what have they done to our freedom to live the gospel?

A third household rule is *practice tithing*. Tithing exists for many reasons in the Torah. But the most distinctive reason is for the sake of the poor's access to livelihood (Deut. 14:22-29; Malachi 3:7-12). We often think of the tithe in our context as a means of supporting a religious institution. The tithe is a means of building up the household by making certain that no one is excluded from the livelihood of the household. The reason for tithing is the same as the one which is repeated throughout the household codes: "You shall remember you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you" (Deut. 24:18, 22). Even if the poor are always present, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land" (Deut. 15:11). The tithe is Torah household redistribution of God's power for life; the tithe is that which belongs to the poor.

A fourth rule of God's economy is *practice hospitality*.¹¹ This means open house for those who are otherwise threatened by death because of their exclusion from home, beginning with orphans, widows, strangers, migrants, and the poor. True worship is living the economy in which God invites into the household all those who are excluded by the denial of God's righteousness. Almost all of the prophets are concerned with the replacement of hospitality in God's household by empty worship and malicious feasts. Isaiah juxtaposes the worship of God and hospitality for the poor and stranger in this way:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and *not to hide yourself from your own flesh*? Then shall my light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am. (Isa. 58:6-9; cf. Isa. 1:12-17; Amos 2:6-7; 5:21-24).

Finally and perhaps most importantly, God's economy requires *practicing the sabbath*. Though modern theology has stressed God's rest as the basis of the sabbath, the sabbath is fundamentally about *God's justice*. The sabbath is the actual, historic presence of God's justice under the conditions of history. In the sabbath those ways in which human beings oppress and exploit one another come to an end, that is, work, property, and consumption cease to be agencies of domination. The household will stay free and will live only so long as the sabbath is kept.

Jesus did not do away with the sabbath but rather radicalized it, including the sabbatical (Jubilee) year of Leviticus 25 (Lk. 4:18ff.).

The Torah works against the disharmony of class and of great discrepancy in wealth through the sabbath years. According to the Torah rules of the sabbath Jubilee Year 1) slaves are to be freed, 2) debts are to be canceled, 3) the land is to lie fallow, and 4) the land (wealth) is to be returned or redistributed to its original holder (Lev. 25:23-24). In God's Torah household the amassing of wealth cannot be justified in the face of the poor who are excluded from what gives

¹¹ Deut. 15:7-11; Isa. 58:6-9; cf. Isa. 1:12-17; Amos 2:6-7; 5:21-24.

them life and future. One can neither take nor withhold from others what they need to contribute to the life of God's economy for God's people.

The Resurrection Household

These household rules can be kept only through the power that God gives us at the banquet of the resurrection. Like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, we are not certain we want to go into the resurrection party.¹² We can hear the music and the dance and the laughter of the feast God is giving because “this my Son was dead and he is alive.” We know that there is life against sin, evil, and death only in this feast and in the economy rules which spring from it. But the resurrection household rules seem to put in jeopardy what we have secured for ourselves by the property rights of the public household. The resurrection household requires that we be gifted by God's grace and that we gift our lives and everything we have in return. But we have forgotten how to be gifted and to gift. So used to the logic of exchange are we that the logic of grace seems foreign. The whole logic of grace at the resurrection table is that God has given God's own Son so that we and the world may have access to what it takes to live. This means, if we think in the trinitarian form of our faith, that God gives God's own life. The answer God expects to God's gift is “much obliged:” yes, we give our lives to what you are doing to redeem the children of the earth, and, if the children, then all humankind.

The Lord's Supper in the resurrection economy is a joy so great that it judges and transforms, a judgment that is so absolute that we cannot help but be thankful that it is gift. Joy and judgment are the beginning of God's new economy; they make us outraged by poverty because of the endless generosity of God and shock us with the recognition that not being in the mode of gifting and being gifted is blasphemous.

God's economy depends upon the retaught and relearned generosity of God, upon gifts that give in being given and create dignity in being received. Only the gratuitous language of praise can break the suspicion and hatred of gifting and being gifted in our public household. No one in our public household wants to be “much obliged,” for it would mean by definition the loss of freedom for exchange. But unless we will mean by the church's mission only what the market intends, the miracle by which we understand ourselves and our community as gift to be gifted

¹² See Meeks, *God the Economist*, pp.182-183.

would have to take place.¹³

For the church as God's household to participate in the public household in ways that lead to life, first for the children, is a mission so awesome that we should not even think about it far removed from the Host who invites us to a meal in which the earth and all its creatures are promised home and in which we have a realistic because crucified place from which to be so bold as to speak of an economy of life against death. God grant us the grace that we may go into the unending feast of joy in the resurrection economy.

¹³ “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and provide in abundance for every good work. As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; His righteousness endures forever’” (1 Cor. 9:8). “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God” (2 Cor. 8:6-12).