The Parable of the Talents in Missionary Perspective: A Call for an Economic Spirituality

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Recently a missions agency executive in charge of censoring articles in his field country in Africa scribbled "Why?" to the assertion, in a proposed article, that missionaries ought to be concerned about the economic growth of their host nations. He decided to ban the article because, he wrote, Christians should be concerned about the "spiritual" things. As has been commonly recognized, the parable of the talents shows us that we will be judged for the faithfulness of our endeavoring. However, Christians have reflexively confined the object of our endeavoring to what is narrowly defined as spiritual. There is no basis for this from the parable of the talents. Instead, it points us to a spirituality that calls all areas of life spiritual, since we will be judged for our faithfulness toward everything that has been entrusted to us. That certainly does not exclude what the parable is specifically about: money. The principle of the parable should be applied to the missionary enterprise, shaping policies and practices, including the missionary message and the way it is contextualized. If we really believe the point of the parable, that people are judged for their stewardship, then we must be concerned about inculcating the values of the good and faithful servant into every people group.

The parable of the talents is, on the surface, one of the easiest to understand of Jesus' parables. Commentators commonly feel they need only give it scant attention, presumably because it seems so self-explanatory. (W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann's commentary on Matthew in *The Anchor Bible* has less than a third of a page on the parable of the talents though it is the longest of Jesus' parables [1971:304].) However, the parable of the talents seems also to be one of the most neglected though, as I will attempt to show, it has volumes to speak to the world today and especially to the evangelical missionary endeavor.

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The Parable: Matthew 25:14-30

The "for" (γαρ), translated by the New International Version (NIV) as "again," indicates that this parable is closely connected to the previous parable of the ten virgins (Tasker 1961:236). "As the bridesmaids are expected to wait for the coming of the bridegroom, so the servants await the return of their master" (Kistermaker 1980: 138). Thus, like the preceding one, this is a "parable of preparedness" (France 1989: 278). Its purpose is to instruct disciples of Jesus how to prepare for the consummation of the kingdom, as the pericope following puts it, "when the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 25:31). The main thrust of the parable of the ten virgins is that we must be prepared. This parable tells us *how* we are to be prepared. As in all of Matthew 25, the final judgment is in view. The point of the parable, then, has to do, as does the rather straightfoward instruction on judgment following, with the criterion by which we will be judged.

Although some commentators (e.g. Dodd, Dibelius, Jeremias)[1] have tried to find a non-eschatological interpretation for the parable, the content ("after a long time," v. 19, the judgment) and the context insist upon seeing this parable eschatalogically. However, it is eschatology in the truly New Testament sense: the kingdom of God is breaking into this present evil age. Therefore, some make the return of the master in this parable to refer to Jesus' ministry, not to a second coming: "In the original meaning of the parable ['after a long time' (v.19) refers to] the interval between God's choice of Israel and his coming to make reckoning in the ministry of Jesus" (Albright and Mann 1971:304). Others, more traditionally, take the return to refer to Christ's second coming: "Without doubt the evangelists understood the parable to signify the departure of Christ from this world and his return at the parousia" (Beasley-Murray 1986:217). Nevertheless, even in this latter interpretation, a degree of realized eschatology is allowed if this parable is to fit into the whole of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom. The last days, when the judgment described in the parable begins, has already been initiated.[2]

"So when the parables of preparedness are followed by the awe-inspiring tableau of the last judgment (25:31-46), it comes as no surprise that the criterion of judgment is one not of profession but of practice. The true disciple is not the one who says, 'Lord, Lord,' but the one who does the will of his Father" (France 1989:278).[3] Harmonizing this parable with evangelical belief in "salvation by grace alone" is a task for systematic theology; meanwhile, all of us committed to Scripture must allow this parable to speak for itself. "The parables of Jesus are only taken seriously when one asks each one individually in the light of its special character what it has to say" (Westermann 1990:194).

What Are the "Talents"?

It must be kept in mind when dealing with any parable, especially this one, that parables are a genre of teaching that have one central point in mind. There is usually only one main principle which parables are meant to illumine. Unlike the parable of the sower or the weeds (Matthew 13:1-30, 36-43), we have no inspired allegorization, and the evangelical church has believed since the Reformation that we should avoid allegorization unless the context calls for it. Some commentators seem to have forgotten this hermeneutical rule when dealing with this parable.

"The *talent*, of which the parable speaks, was not a coin, but a measure or weight

of money, which was sometimes paid in minted coins and sometimes in bars of gold or bullion" (Tasker 1961:235).[4] What, if anything, does the money represent? The well-respected Matthean scholar Tasker writes, "The moral of the story to be drawn is that, in the interval between the two comings of Jesus . . . the disciples must make continuous, practical use by the effort of their wills of those *gifts of the Spirit* with which they are endowed. . . . Failure to strive to express these *virtues* in the practical affairs of life carries with it the penalty that the gifts are withdrawn (1961:236, emphasis added). Tasker gives no contextual reason for interpreting the talents as symbols for "gifts of the Spirit." In fact, it is an assumption that he feels unnecessary to defend.

Similarly, Simon J. Kistermaker interprets the talents as representing the "sacred trust of his revelation" (1980:144). Joachim Jeremias, rejecting the Gospel writers' "interpretation" of the parable, takes the talents to be "the Word of God" (1963:48). Likewise, C. H. Dodd believes the parable was originally about the Jews of Jesus' day who had buried what God had entrusted to them (i.e., the Word of God) and sought "security in meticulous observance of the Law" (1961:112). Dodd writes that the parable was reinterpreted by the Gospel writers and that the talents in the reinterpreted parable represent "spiritual capacity" (1961:112). G. R. Beasley-Murray must be commended for his honesty in admitting that he has indulged in "elements of allegorical interpretation" although he does not explain why such allegorizing is necessary; he assumes that the talents are "likely to be a symbol of the saving sovereignty of God" (1986: 217).[5]

The Puritan commentator David Dickson writes in the same vein: "the faithful servant, whether his talents were fewer or more, was accepted of his master and made partaker of his joy, so every man who in the discharge of his calling seeks faithfully *the glory of Christ* and increase of his kingdom shall be accepted in the day of judgment, and put in full possession of eternal life" (1981:343, emphasis added). Again, Dickson has no basis on which to assume that the talents are symbolic for seeking "the glory of Christ" (as commendable as that is). Though we believe that striving to excel in spiritual virtues (Tasker) and seeking faithfully the increase of Christ's kingdom (Dickson) are noble endeavors, the issue is whether that is what this parable is about. In a way the answer is yes. All of Jesus' teaching was aimed, in one way or another, at bringing people more fully under the reign of God. This parable serves that purpose in its own unique way. However, Tasker, Dickson, and the others fall into the fallacy of narrowly interpreting the *talents* as representative of "spiritual" tasks only (using "spiritual" in its narrow, otherworldly sense). In fact, if one were to try to make a case for interpreting the *talents* as standing for one thing (or kind of thing) in particular, the best case could be made for what is specifically mentioned in the parable: money.[6] But I think doing so misses the point of the parable and mishandles the genre of parable. Parables are about principles, and this parable is about faithfulness of endeavor. Both Dickson and Tasker mention this principle, "seeks faithfully" (Dickson) and "continuous, practical use by effort of their wills . . . to strive. . . ." (Tasker), but both assume that this faithful striving is meant only for "spiritual" virtues. They are right in discerning the principle, but wrong in so narrowly applying it.[7]

To what then is the principle of faithful endeavor to be applied? A. Julicher says, "We must vote for the broadest possible application: fidelity in all that God entrusted to us" (quoted in Dodd 1961:22).[8]

But let us make no mistake about it. Jesus was using money, and so, though I think the principle is applicable to more than just money, the principle certainly does not exclude money (or else it would be nonsense). Surely Jesus did not mean us to think that he was saying: "Now I am using money as an example of spiritual endowments and the principle I am talking about is only true of spiritual endowments. It is not true for money even though I am using that as an example." The parable has to do with money. This obvious fact should not go unemphasized. To narrowly take the *talents* as merely symbols of spiritual endowments is uncalled for exegetically. And, as we shall see, it can cause us to miss a new world of application of the principle of this parable. There is no indication in the parable that the money is meant to represent anything else in particular. The money was used as an example of everything with which we have been endowed by God. While there is truth in applying the principle of this parable to spiritual things (e.g., that we are to cultivate the spiritual gifts which have been bestowed on us), it is eisegesis that borders on allegorizing to interpret this parable solely as about spiritual endowments.

The Key Verse: A Divine Passive

The key verse of the parable is 25:29: "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him" (NIV). Some commentators believe that this verse was not an original part of the parable (e.g., Tasker 1961:236) since the same saying occurs in another context (Matthew 13:12). Whether it was or not, the inspired author uses this saying of Jesus as the key to unlock the meaning of the parable.

The "divine passive" is an important part of verse 29. It is God who gives more to those who have (i.e., in this context those who are faithful in endeavoring), and it is God who takes away from those who have not (i.e., those who are too lazy, fearful, or irresponsible to increase what they have been given). The "wicked, lazy servant" is not being oppressed by a cruel employer. The addition of even more reward to the first "good and faithful servant" at the expense of the last, lazy one is condoned. Indeed, it is an act which mirrors God's ways of judging, rewarding, and penalizing his servants. This parable is about the principle by which servants in the kingdom of God are measured and the basis on which rewards and penalties are meted out. Obviously, the socialist dictum "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" finds only half an affirmation in this parable: the first half. This parable could not be any more opposite to the last half of the dictum. Marxism in practice was only able to enforce that second half.

"The difference [between the treatment of the servants] lies in how they have made use of what was entrusted to them" (France 1989:278). Marxism in theory rewards on the basis of need. Nothing in this parable suggests that need entails a right to have though other parables and the teaching of judgment immediately following this parable (often misleadingly called the parable of the sheep and the goats) do teach that those who are wealthy have an increased obligation to charity. However, that is another essay. The parable of the talents, too, is part of God's word.

Application: Toward a Spirituality of Economic Development

I have sought in my exegesis of the parable to emphasize two points: the commonly recognized meaning of the parable to be about faithfulness of service and the

commonly unrecognized generalness of the principle (rather than the narrow application of it to "spiritual" endowments). The fact that the talents are reflexively allegorized as "spiritual" endowments reveals the often unconsciously held assumption of evangelical spirituality that it is only the "spiritual," narrowly defined, that is important to God. The possibility that this parable could also include God's interest in and judgment of our material or intellectual possessions is overlooked, not on exegetical grounds, but on the presuppositions of evangelical spirituality. This is why we are often called "narrow pietists." While not rejecting the importance of the principle of this parable to "spiritual" gifts, I would like to apply it generally to the missionary enterprise and specifically to the economic situation of most missionary receiving countries.

This parable can show us that God is intensely interested in the development of all our endowments, including material, time, and knowledge, as well as spiritual blessings. This parable, in its all inclusiveness, does not allow for the categorization of any legitimate part of life as "secular" for the Christian and, thus, breaks down the wall between evangelism and development ministries. For the missionary as well as for the target people, the parable illustrates laws of stewardship that if followed bring reward and if disregarded bring penalty. Thus, this parable rests on and teaches a biblical this-worldliness. This parable's application is truncated by evangelicals because of the unbiblical form of current-day evangelical piety. So it calls us to reexamine and revolutionize our vision of what is spiritual, what matters to God. After being transformed by this parable, evangelicals should no more ask "Why?" as one missions agency executive in Africa did to the thesis that Christians should support national economic growth.

John Stott affirms this: "The God of biblical revelation, being both Creator and Redeemer, is a God who cares about the total well-being (spiritual and material) of all the human beings he has made" (1992:343). Different cultures find it easier to assimilate different aspects of life into their view of spirituality. William A. Dyrness compares South American and African Christian subcultures and concludes that the South Americans, with their Liberation Theology, were keenly aware that the gospel should impact political and economic structures while African Christians have "tended (except in the South) to overlook the importance of political and economic structures" (1990:186). I believe it is the African Christians who more closely mirror the state of Western evangelicalism than the mainly Roman Catholic liberation theologians. In fact, even in South America, rapidly growing pentecostalism has been accused of neglecting social issues. Given the pervasiveness and influence of evangelical missionaries in Africa, it may be that this African "overlook" is in part the result of our "narrow piety." Traditional dispensationalism, which has an enormous influence on the evangelicalism of Ethiopia and probably on many other missionary receiving countries, reinforces this tendency to "narrow piety" by excluding the social concerns of the prophets from the church and by relegating the kingdom of God to just the "spiritual."[9] This dispensational habit of thinking cannot but narrow evangelical piety. However, when the parable of the talents is read for all that it encompasses, it gives us the foundation for a piety that can call all legitimate areas of life, including the economic, "spiritual."[10]

Not only should what missionaries consider spiritual be transformed by a hard look at this parable, but what they consider evil should be broadened by it. The last

servant is condemned as "evil" because he is "lazy"; he was unwilling to put out the physical and psychological energy of doing something to develop what he had been given. This point should be an important counterweight to the currently popular charge of many missiologists to adapt to or even to support the so-called relational/event-oriented cultures of many missionary receiving societies in contrast to the so-called task/time orientation of most of the missionary sending nations. While I do not wish to reject the missiological value of these anthropological insights nor to suggest that in some areas of life we Westerners do not have wisdom to glean from the cultures of our target people, it must be pointed out that the judgment on the unwillingness to apply oneself to progress, as seen in this parable, is severe. Being relational/event oriented is not allowed as an excuse for failure to apply oneself diligently to stewardship. It may be possible to be relationally oriented and still be diligent, but it has been my observation that missionaries and missiologists use this false relational vs. task orientation to excuse or even to extol underachievement. If the wicked, lazy servant had told his master, "But working hard is not part of my culture," the judgment on him would have, no doubt, been the same. This parable places laziness firmly on the biblical sin list.

Missionaries too need to examine their behavior in the light of this parable. This parable should give new impetus to the questions of the cost effectiveness of cross-cultural missions and the ways in which missionary generosity creates dependence. It should cause us to inspect which policies may be encouraging wicked, lazy servanthood: pay solely on the basis of need rather than productivity, regulations that do not allow missionaries to save (and gain interest on) donated funds but instead prompt the trumping up of ministry claims, an over-emphasis on conferences and public relations that consume missionaries' time and money for travel, a heavy-handed bureaucracy that stifles initiative, the "too many chiefs" which depend on the "Indians" to raise more support, etc. And then there is the missionary work ethic. Veteran missionary Phil Parshall estimates that about 50 percent of missionaries are underactive relative to their potential (1990:251). The parable of the talents is all about living up to one's potential.

"Now," Not Just "Not Yet"

Theological convictions, as always, shape how the principle of this parable is applied to the real world. I follow George Ladd's thesis that the kingdom of God has been introduced with the ministry of Jesus, is even now expanding by the sovereign work of God on earth, and will be consummated with the return of Christ. "If God's Kingdom is the gift of life bestowed upon his people when he manifests his rule in eschatalogical glory, and if God's Kingdom is also God's rule invading history before the eschatalogical consummation, it follows that we expect God's rule in the present to bring a preliminary blessing [or judgment] to his people" (Ladd 1974:72). The kingdom of God is both "now" and "not yet." This means that not only will God reward the good and faithful servants in the future, in the "not yet," but even now he has already begun to do so. Penalty too is both "now" and "not yet."

So as we look out on the world today, we cannot only believe that the good stewards of today will one day receive their reward from God but that God is already working to reward; we see many prospering as God is right now rewarding them for their diligent development of that which they have been given. The Confucian East

Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, are examples of such stewardship rewarded. Though 30 to 40 years ago these nations were some of the poorest in the world, they now can be considered developed by and large. They have had more added to them.

And we also see, even now, peoples penalized. Though many would like to blame the developed nations of the West for the "raping" of the Third World, the rapid economic development of East Asia, parts of which were colonized by the West and all of which have traded extensively with the West, casts serious doubts on such a proposition. Closer examination eventually destroys this proposition. The difference between the newly developed countries (most notably the Confucian East Asian nations) and the still undeveloped ones is not contact with the West but culture, especially the way their cultures value stewardship. This parable teaches that it is at least possible that many of the poorest of the Third World nations may be poor, whether wholly or in part, because of the lack of good principles of stewardship inculcated by their cultures. The penalty is that though they have next to nothing, even what they have is taken away. The parable of the talents, interpreted through the New Testament theology, teaches us to see the hand of God in all these things.

The Disparity Between Poverty and Affluence

Of course, this application of the parable of the talents flies in the face of the assertions of those evangelicals who have been the most outspoken in defense of social action. John Stott, generally considered by narrow pietists to be one of the most responsible and balanced of the advocates of social action, states : "Any great disparity between affluence and want, wealth and poverty, is unacceptable to [God]" (1984:133). Out of character, Stott gives no defense either scripturally or logically of this assertion. He seems to assume, as the above interpreters simply assumed, that the parable of the talents refers only to narrowly spiritual endowments, that it must be so; everyone, he assumes, will accept that his statement is self-evident. But I maintain that Stott's assumption, shared by many Christians, is in direct contradiction to Jesus' teaching in the parable of the talents. Not only can great disparities between affluence and want be acceptable to God; they can be, if based on the fruit of one's stewardship, the work of God. The wicked, lazy servant's poverty after he had been judged was in contrast to the great wealth of the first, faithful, and good servant. And that was the product of the master's (i.e., God's) judgment based on the merits of the servants' development. Certainly, God's perfect will is that we all practice sound stewardship, that we all be good servants, and thus all become deserving of the reward. But if we will not, then it is God's decree that the few things we have will be taken from us.

This disparity between poverty and affluence must be a result of bad and good stewardship to be considered just. As Stott says in the same essay, "What we should seek to ensure is that all differentials are due to merit, not privilege" (1984:177). There is, of course, a disparity that is the result of oppression, as Liberation Theology has not ceased to remind us. But it defies exegesis of this passage, not to mention a good look around, to assert that all poverty is the result of such forces. Indeed, with the rise of the East Asian economic tigers, it should become increasingly apparent that nations mired in poverty can rise to affluence within a couple of decades despite the hindrances. If Singapore continues its rate of economic growth, it will be as affluent as Switzerland by the year 2010, according to a speech by Prime Minister Goh

Chok Tong, August 9, 1993, though it achieved independence as a poor, crime-ridden, overpopulated city-state only in 1965. Singapore's economic miracle is in large part the product of Confucian principles of stewardship and just economic policies of its government which reinforce such stewardship. We who are eager to see people rise out of destitution and enjoy justice should carefully examine those Confucian values and economic structures. Here we must rescue the word *justice*, and its cognates, from being a code word for socialism to the simple meaning of getting what one deserves.

Liberation Theology's Economic Fallacy

This is why Liberation Theology is errant—not because it is concerned with economic development. That concern is legitimate. Nor because it supposedly equates material liberation with salvation. This may be the view of some liberation theologians, but I believe most would be more carefully nuanced. Gustavo Gutiérrez, widely recognized as the father of Liberation Theology, said, "[Liberation Theology] says that faith and God's love will oppose injustice" (quoted in "Keeping the Faith" 1994:64). No biblicist could argue with such a statement. But Liberation Theology errs in its misunderstanding of justice. Liberation theologians assume that one person's poverty is the result of another's prosperity. And thus anyone being rich while another is poor is to them unjust. As Michael Novak writes in "A Theology of Development for Latin America," the one attraction of socialism (and thus Liberation Theology) is the feeling that "if I am poor, my poverty is due to malevolent and powerful others" (1984:22). While this may be true in some individual cases of poverty, it is ham-handed to attribute all poverty to such sources. Liberation Theology uses an overly narrow diagnosis of the source of the problem of poverty and just as narrow a prescription for the cure. The diagnosis and the prescription, as has been commonly recognized, are in part remarkably similar to Marxist economics which, as we have seen, is on a presuppositional level in contradiction to Jesus' teaching in this parable. Therefore, Liberation Theology unintentionally seeks to undermine the principles of stewardship by which God rewards. The tragedy of Liberation Theology is that it only exacerbates the disease it hopes to remedy. In the name of justice, Liberation Theology propagates an economic system that is anti-justice. Its socialist program would "penalize the economic behavior of economically creative citizens, and this is an offense against God" (Novak 1994:30). The parable of the talents shows us God, as a God of justice, making a lazy servant poor because that is what he deserves and making a prosperous servant more prosperous and that, if the point were not clear enough, at the lazy servant's expense.

Milder, evangelical, North American forms of Liberation Theology proclaim the same errors, only prefaced with The Four Spiritual Laws. It is now chic for the more educated evangelicals to at least show sympathy to Liberation Theology's agenda (e.g., Campolo 1983:144f., 168). They may part company on soteriology, but economically some of the social-action oriented evangelicals agree with Liberation Theology's socialism. In so doing, they are simply falling victim to the "cultural deity," i.e., socialism, of the intellectual subculture of Western universities. William A. Dyrness writes , "the law is tilted in favor of the poor" (1990: 98) (after which he cites a passage, Leviticus 25:35-37, that has to do with not charging interest to a poor Israelite or relative). In fact, the Law states that one is not to show any favoritism

toward the poor because they are poor or for the rich because they are rich (Leviticus 19:15). There is no "bias for the poor" though many evangelicals are now favoring that idea (which is why they often put "poor" and "oppressed" together as if they were synonyms). However, this bias for the poor, which is in fact a confusion of Christian charity with socialist economics, serves to distort the interpretation of the parable of the talents.

This fashionable flirtation with a bias for the poor may be, in part, an economic version of what Yugoslav evangelical leader Peter Kusmic described as "the problem with some North American evangelicals": "they are not asking what is right and what is wrong. Rather they are asking what is Right and what is Left" (quoted in Guinness 1993:264). While evangelical thinkers like Tony Campolo passionately decry folk evangelicalism's white, affluent, conservative "cultural deity"—making "a Jesus in their own image"—their espousal of socialist-type economic systems (what Singapore's ruling party calls "welfarism") in the name of justice can hardly be anything less. However, evangelicals are more at fault than others in that we have not only the examples of what kinds of economic systems succeed and fail in the real world, but we also have Jesus' own words about justice for the diligent and the lazy.[11]

But, of course, the prophets repeatedly decried the oppression of the poor. This is because the poor, being without the resources to pervert justice through bribes or other favors, often found themselves being the brunt of injustice in a society without a strong tradition of the rule of law (*lex rex*). It was not necessarily that some were rich and others were poor that was unjust, but that those who were rich often used their wealth to deny their poor adversaries in court what was their due or to get themselves off the hook of what was their deserved punishment. In light of this, evangelicals should espouse the rule of law rather than a preference for the poor. We should be on the forefront of those calling for political systems that respect the rights of the individual, rich or poor; our churches should be institutions that are moved by the ideals of justice for all (not "just us"). In the parable of the talents, God shows his preference for the deserving.

Carl F. H. Henry comments:

> The evangelical movement is woefully confused on free enterprise issues. While it staunchly opposes communism as an ideology of totalitarian atheism and statist restriction on human rights, especially religious freedom, it is ambivalent about Marxist economic analysis. . . . Few seem aware that socialism is demonstrably a miserable failure in country after country where it has been tried, while Third World capitalistic countries like Korea and Taiwan have experienced economic revival. . . . The Bible regards individual possessions as a divine entrustment and commends compassionate response to fellow-believers' and to others' survival needs.
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> Yet some evangelicals, writing as if capitalism were intrinsically unjust, promote forced redistribution of wealth as a divine necessity. One's possession of more than others have, even if hard-won by creative labor, is considered a mark of injustice. . . . Evangelicals in fact increasingly cloud the distinction between justice and charity and compassion. (1986:399)

The Health and Wealth Gospel

This concern for developing prosperity differs from the prosperity movement in three significant ways. The health and wealth gospel is individualistic. What the Bible teaches and what, in part, the East Asians have dug out of their Confucianist culture are rooted in responsible individuals (caring for their families) but eventually transform whole nations, such as Singapore, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Second, the prosperity movement turns the goal of godliness into material prosperity. Though the Kenneth Copelands may deny it, this is the only explanation for the emphasis on using God's Word to get rich. The health and wealth gospel is focused on technique (i.e., the magic formula) while what is at the root of East Asian success are values. The values of the good and faithful servant are dependent on character traits that go deeper than greed. Third, the health and wealth gospel is magical, rather than biblically supernatural, in its "name it and claim it" approach to faith and confession. While the biblical worldview is open to the supernatural intervention of God, it is not passive, superstitious, nor fatalistic. The Chinese have the stories of Sun Wu Kong who says that everything is controlled by heaven and of Wu Tze Tien who defiantly states that since heaven has not answered her, she will neither credit heaven for her success nor blame it for her failures; she succeeds. The Chinese tie these two together with the proverb: "Success: Heaven's will, human effort." The Bible too shows us a God who can grant success through the miraculous collapse of Jericho's walls or by making the sun stand still, but usually grants success through the means of shrewd strategy and hard work. In the parable of the talents, sound stewardship, not positive confession, is the means through which God bestows the reward of affluence.

While much of the church has been deformed by a spirituality heavy on stoic resignation and a mystic's disdain for the material, the prosperity movement has been cashing in on most people's unexamined assumption that material wealth (such as the developed world has) is something good. And the unreflective ones are right. But it is time that we who eschew the hocus-pocus materialism of the prosperity movement offer the biblical alternative. Certainly economic growth has its pitfalls; as John Wesley pointed out, revival that brings a well-rounded transformation will result in prosperity and prosperity will bring the "ism" after the material, and that will strangle the revival. But, let us not be naive; extreme poverty breeds greed too and, let us not forget, prosperity in Ethiopia could have prevented the famines that put it in the headlines.

What Place for Compassion?

Then do we abandon the poor to their fate? If some of the poor are poor due to their own laziness and lack of stewardship, do we just let them get what is coming to them? If some poverty is, as I have argued, the realized eschatological judgment of God on wicked servanthood, then do we forget the poor and enjoy what we have? By no means. We can no more abandon the poor to their desperation, even when deserved through bad stewardship, than we can abandon the unbeliever to hell, though that too is deserved because of sin. Although the parable of the talents has nothing to say about having compassion on the poor and suffering, the immediately following teaching on judgment ("the sheep and the goats") does. One tells us that "to everyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away," while the other tells us that just as we have treated "the least of these," so we have treated Christ. The for-

mer shows us that we must abandon the romanticism of the socialists while the latter shows us that we must do something for the poor, even if they sometimes are wicked, lazy servants. The sheep and the goats only offers us the motivation for involvement, not the blueprint. The parable of the talents shows us the pattern. The latter teaching enjoins us to get to work reaching out to the poor while the former parable shows us that in the long run the best way to lift up the poor is to transform them into good and faithful servants who will be rewarded. Donald McGavran calls this, often unintended effect "redemption and lift" (1970:260-277); we should promote it intentionally because it prolongs and enriches lives and relieves suffering.

Developed or undeveloped, we must remember, is not simply the difference between driving a BMW or taking the bus; it is the difference between low or high infant mortality rates, irrigation or droughts, feast or famine. The most effective relief for the poor in our time has not come from welfare or development projects, but from the economic growth exemplified by nations like Singapore. If we really want undeveloped nations to come out of their poverty, then we would do well to point them down the East Asian path which is, I believe, also the path to being proclaimed a good and faithful servant. This path has two aspects: a just system (i.e., meritocracy) and the values of good stewardship. "Of all the systems of political economy which have shaped our history, none has so revolutionized ordinary expectations of human life—lengthened the life-span, made the elimination of poverty and famine thinkable, enlarged the range of human choice—as democratic capitalism" (Novak 1984:21). However, the system, just and necessary, is not enough; it must be rooted in the values of the good and faithful servant. Confucian values, such as quality work, importance of education, saving and deferring gratification, and family commitment (which makes welfare unnecessary), are all the values of a good and faithful servant. In the end, while the parable of the talents can sound gratingly harsh to some, it contains by implication the recipe for the greatest compassion for the poor.

Confucian Values and the Puritan Model

Since the parable of the talents holds up faithful stewardship as worthy of reward, we should commend it whether expressed in the old Puritan work ethic or in Confucian values. Many missionaries have not yet gotten used to the idea that affluence is no longer a monopoly of the West. Westerners can no longer patronizingly resign Third-World nations to their fate, thinking they simply can do no better (or accepting their excuses for not doing better). The now apparent fact that other cultures, if they have the right values, can prosper too should free us to seek to inculcate those values into other people groups. A group of Korean visitors told their Ethiopian audience, "Forty years ago we were in the same situation you are in," leaving "you can achieve as we did" politely implied.

Confucian values aside, we evangelicals already have a model of how to integrate the ethic of the good and faithful servant with thoroughly biblical theology: the Puritans. Richard Baxter wrote, "Waste of time is the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. . . . Loss of time through sociability, idle talking, luxury, more sleep than is necessary . . . is worthy of absolute moral condemnation. Every hour lost is lost to labor for God. . . . Work hard in your calling" (Thomas 1979:491). While that may strike us as a tad excessive, at least they took seriously the advice of Koheleth, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The

reward was prosperity. The same could be said of the early Methodists who extolled the virtues of self-help, self-improvement, and love of learning. These early Methodist virtues would be just as welcome by Confucianists. A more communitarian vision of faithful servanthood has been held up by the Mennonite communities. "The paramount theme of early Anabaptist history was, 'Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ' "(McFadden 1984:50). While the other cultural factors of the Puritans or the early Mennonites and the Methodists on the one hand and the Confucianists on the other may be vastly different, their shared work ethic (when coupled with a just system) gives them a shared reward. Good and faithful servanthood is not the property of any one culture.

Contextualization of the Values in the Parable of the Talents

Missiologists properly informed by this parable should be able to make a contribution to the study of economics. It is we who specialize in the study and adaptation to cultures who can inform international economists of why the same policies and structures seem to reap different harvests in different soils. We must point them to the roots: values. Even many of the market-oriented economists do not seem to have a full appreciation for the role that cultural values play in determining the economic destiny of nations; Michael Novak, the Catholic winner of the Templeton Prize and an outspoken convert from socialist programs to capitalistic structures, blames politics as the reason most people are poor today. He even mentions Hong Kong as a model of development without once referring to the cultural values that have guided that development (1994:30). On the other hand, those leaning toward socialist economics are arguing that the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are not suitable to some contexts; some say that what has been accomplished in Korea and is apparently beginning in China cannot be duplicated in most African nations. But this does not have to be the case. People groups have gone through cultural value transformations in the past; it is now time for missionaries to turn their attention more consciously toward molding economic values.

The church already shapes the values that influence economic behavior. I believe that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), the religion of about 50 percent of Ethiopia with roots back to the fourth century, encourages a culture of poverty. The EOC teaches earning of merit through observing numerous fast and saints days during which no work is to be done and through giving to priests of the EOC commonly seen begging. This cannot but help sanctify begging in the common peoples' eyes. It is inexcusable when such attitudes are carried over into the evangelical church. Puritan theology prodded their society toward prosperity. Confucian values scorn the sluggard and pour shame on the beggar. In Singapore begging is illegal.

Thus, promoting these values will often mean seeking to change radically the culture of our target people. For, as Stott has written, whatever may be said of natural or historical factors as the root of poverty or prosperity "above all there is the cultural factor, that is, the profound effect of a person's cultural background on his motives, thoughts, aspirations and actions" (1984:125). And though we would want to respect and preserve what can be respected and should be preserved in every culture, "how can we wish to 'protect and promote' cultures which actively hinder development, for example, by inculcating a spirit of fatalism and apathy?" (1984:133). We must be able to isolate and be willing to change those aspects of another culture that hinder development.

Missiologist Paul Hiebert comments:

> [B]y working within the cultural beliefs of the people, we reinforce those beliefs. While the Gospel can accept much of any culture as good or theologically neutral, there are areas in all cultures that need to be challenged. Where the Gospel ceases to challenge a culture, and comes to support its basic institutions we have civil religion. Consequently, in dealing with Christian growth and maturity, and especially with the theological stance of the church, we need to challenge false beliefs and introduce Biblical truths. This means we will need to introduce etic or external beliefs and standards. (Hiebert n.d.)

However, this will mean more, not less, sensitivity to culture and worldview in all its many facets. Cultural transformation does not have to mean imperialism. Westerners still show ham-handedness in cross-cultural understanding when they call modern societies, such as Japan or Singapore, "Westernized" or when they categorize all cultures as either "Western" or "Eastern." The Confucian East Asians have managed to use a cultural scalpel to separate solely Western values from those values necessary for development and modernization. We should be able to do the same as we seek the holistic well-being of our target groups. Precision in cultural analysis is needed if those aspects of a culture which hinder development (i.e., which tend to encourage wicked, lazy servants) are to be excised and those values which encourage good and faithful servants are to be successfully transplanted. The coming influx of Korean missionaries should greatly assist us in this.[12]

Meanwhile Western missionaries have had their cultural sensitivity dulled not by neo-colonialism, but by a relativism that assumes that value judgments on components of culture are anathema. Though it may win short-term popularity points with individuals in our target people, acquiescing to those self-destructive components of a culture in the name of contextualization cannot only be patronizing (and East Asians hate to be patronized), but ultimately cruel. Our East Asian colleagues, as one Singaporean missionary did, are going to find it hard to understand why a North American missionary would shrink from enforcing academic excellence on their ministerial students; or why, in a culture rife with financial misappropriation, a missionary suggested removing fiscal regulations because the nationals forgive such transgressions. After all, insisting on excellence and accountability is the thrust of the parable of the talents (and is very Confucian).

We can no longer accept the relativism implicit in some missiologists' approach to cultural analysis. The result of much academic blood being spilt over contextualization (or context-indigenization as some would have it)[13] is that evangelical missionaries are generally careful to preserve the essence of the gospel for every culture. However, there has not been the same sort of care regarding the values that lead to economic development. We must employ the insights of cultural anthropologists to the contextualization of the gospel, but we must not let such contextualization bring us to the point where we are advocating the characteristics that brought condemnation on the third servant. This is not to say that the wealthier nations are superior culturally in every respect to the poorer ones, but it is to say that the richer ones are doing something right and we are not to be so otherworldly as to disregard their achievements. Just one of those achievements is a longer lifespan. If many undeveloped countries are more "relational," then the affluence of the developed world enables us

to enjoy our relationships longer. The average male lifespan in the United States is about 72 years (in Japan it is 78 years) while it is roughly estimated to be around 45 years in Ethiopia—probably an overestimate—since 90 percent of Ethiopians live in the countryside, most of them are well out of reach of doctors or their statisticians. It simply is anti-Christian not to be interested in changing that situation, and the parable of the talents shows us how it can be done.

Surely, even if missionaries do not accept my interpretation of the parable of the talents, they must admit that a Christian should be doing something to lift up nations chronically short of food, with life expectancies in the thirties, where children die of dehydration brought on by chicken pox and mothers die of what we would consider minor pregnancy complications. Christians cannot be *laissez faire* about murderous poverty. We must do something, and having recently sat in rural Ethiopia after moving from thriving Singapore, I think I have seen what can be done.

Notes

1. "Dodd (1961:151f.) argues that the condemnation of the servant who buried his talent is an original condemnation of the selfish exclusiveness of legalistic Pharisaism, while Dibelius [1949:125] considered that it represents the denunciation of the Jewish people as a whole for not making use of what was committed to them. Jeremias (1963:58ff.) declares that the object of the condemnation was the scribes, who assumed that they could keep the treasure of God's word to themselves by 'hedging the Torah' with many prohibitions" (Hill 1972:328).

2. Even if we were to emphasize, with Beasley-Murray, that this parable "has an essential concern with the parousia" (1986:218), we can still recognize, as does Beasley-Murray, that Jesus had a "balance between delay and near expectation." The interval in the parable between the master's departure and his return can be interpreted as representing the time between the Lord's revelation to Moses and the prophets or the time between Jesus' first and second advents. Beasley-Murray advocates the latter. Either way, the main thrust of the parable is untouched.

3. In Luke 19:11-27, there is a parable similar to the parable of the talents: the parable of the minas (or pounds). "There can be little doubt that in these two parables we have two versions of a single parable . . ." (Beasley-Murray 1986:215). But there are some important differences. In the parable of the minas, an equal amount is given to all; the servants all had an equal opportunity. The first and second servants gained 1,000 percent and 500 percent respectively. "Both are commended and promoted, being given cities in proportion to their profits" (Morris 1974:275). Also, in this parable the lazy servant is allowed to speak for himself. He calls the master, who in this parable is the newly crowned king, "a severe man": "using the adjective *austeros* whose meaning is 'strict, exacting,' a man who expects to get blood out of a stone" (Morris 1974:275). God in judgment is pictured as just that.

4. "In this parable we are to think in terms of a worker's annual wage" (Kistermaker 1980:139). "The word [talent] was passed into English usage in the Middle Ages as a synonym for abilities and/or natural endowments" (Albright and Mann 1971:304.)

5. Dispensationalists avoid the problem, or at least its urgency, of what the talents represent by placing the parable under instructions on how the Jews will be judged. Louis A. Barbieri Jr., interpreting the parable through dispensational theological assumptions, writes that the parable is about how Israel should be faithful to her king during the tribulation (1983: 80). In so doing, he demonstrates why dispensationalism is not taken seriously in biblical scholarship. However, theological instructors in the Two-Thirds, missionary-receiving world must engage dispensationalism because of its pervasiveness in many areas and the consequent need to rescue passages like the parable of the talents from being excised out of the church's effective canon.

6. "It is interesting to note in this connection that the Greek word *tokos*, translated 'usury' (archaic for 'interest') in verse 27, means 'offspring.' Interest is the 'child' of capital" (Tasker 1961:235.) Though the church for centuries outlawed the charging of interest, there seems to be an implicit justification of that practice here though one cannot insist on it because as a parable these kinds of details could only be there for color without any doctrinal implications.

7. "Many attempts have been made to identify the talents. Suggestions made are that they represent natural endowments, or spiritual gifts, or the Gospel, or the Word of God, and even Jesus himself given by God to the disciples. One wonders, however, if these attempts are not really beside the point. The context in chapters 24-5 concentrate on the need for active faithfulness on the part of servants rather than on the explicit content (or limits) of faithfulness" (Hill 1972:329).

8. C. H. Dodd seems to have been almost amused that anyone would use the parable as a "justification for the capitalist system!" (1961:22). He had written that the parable should be interpreted as broadly as possible, but almost immediately he excludes economics from its scope.

9. The validity of these generalizations is implicitly admitted by the progressive dispensationalists, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock when they write that their revised form of dispensationalism requires them "to develop a clear theology of social and political concern" (1992:382). This statement also implies that not even the progressive dispensationalists have begun to recover what Reformed theologians call the social mandate. Since progressive dispensationalism still maintains a distinction between two people of God, I believe they will still have a greater tendency to ignore the broader applications of Scripture, which are of great concern to missionaries. I also believe that the nuances of the revised dispensationalism will be lost on the common believers; they will be folk dispensationalists and thus continue to ignore all the applications of a passage like the parable of the talents.

10. Thus, we are in the position of rejecting "the first and most widely accepted position" of the relationship between the Bible and economics: disciplinary autonomy. This autonomy has been said to be asymmetrical anyway, with economists feeling free to apply their theories to the practice of the church (Smith 1993:166). The propositions of the church growth movement can be seen to be a manifestation of economic (viz., market) theory to the church; this though does not automatically condemn the church growth movement since if we are to argue for the extension of biblical principles to the practice of economics, then we should accept at least the attempt to apply sound economics to ecclesiastical and missiological strategy. However, first we must determine that the types of economic theories being applied are in harmony with biblical ethics. That the church growth movement does not seem to have begun to do.

11. If Paul could say, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10), we can conclude that a need, even hunger, does not entitle one to a right to have what others have in abundance. Of course, in the context of Thessalonians, Christians were using the hope of the Lord's soon return as an excuse for idleness. Just as the parable of the talents is eschatalogical in context, showing us that we are to be diligent in our endeavors until our Master returns, so Paul makes clear that Christians are, in the light of Christ's return, to "earn the bread they eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

12. Meanwhile, we must reject the flattering but still racist idea that the East Asians have an "inborn work ethic." That is merely a simple-minded way of explaining why the Confucian East Asians have prospered, when they have a just economic system, and why other peoples have remained sunk in destitution. Perhaps such statements are the last desperate attempts of narrow pietists or cultural relativists to keep themselves from the responsibility of confronting destitute people groups with values of the good and faithful servant.

13. Bruce C. E. Fleming in *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* prefers to call contextualization "context-indigenization" (1980:53). However, he would seem to mean by that the same thing most missiologists, at least evangelical ones, mean by contex-

tualization For Fleming, an inerrant Scripture is the "core" (1980 57-59) which should be disengaged from one culture and inculturated in another Thus, the principles of good stewardship, as exemplified by the good and faithful servant, should be contextualized—or "context-indigenized"—to every people group

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