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A Journal of Religion, Economics, and Culture

Editor's Note



We should always look to drink deeply from the rich wells of Christian tradition and Thomas C. Oden helps us to do exactly that. Oden has committed much of his work to lifting up the voice of the Church Fathers. John Wesley, who is the founder of Oden's own Methodist tradition, proclaimed, "The Fathers are the most authentic commentators on Scripture, for they were nearest the fountain and were eminently endued with that Spirit by whom all Scripture was given." Wesley took with him the wisdom of patristics to the great evangelical revival in 18th century England.

By treading back along the ancient path, Oden has made that path fresh

and new for many followers of the Good News. As you will see in the interview, patristic sources offer wisdom and guidance to the kind of issues and problems we face today. Their voice is never a dated voice. We are confident Oden's words will be a blessing to you.

Hunter Baker, the 2011 Novak Award recipient, has written a well-reasoned article on social leveling, socialism, and secularism. Baker explains why utopian schemes or social leveling are dangerous to religious believers and warns us to "oppose it as it returns with ever softer and friendlier faces."

Rev. Johannes L. Jacobse has contributed a review of *Defending Constantine* by Peter J. Leithart. Constantine remains a controversial figure in the Church and Leithart works to challenge the modern and pacifist critiques of the early Christian leader. In his review, Jacobse especially praises Leithart's historical scholarship in examining "how pagan culture was, in the end, baptized."

The parable of the rich young ruler is a

notable Gospel text and it is commonly cited because it's an important one about wealth, discipleship, and obedience. John Kelly, a financial advisor, offers a deeper analysis of the parable within the Jewish law and the ways in which wealth was acquired under the Roman system and how that is different from the creation of wealth in today's society.

The "In the Liberal Tradition" figure for this issue is Whittaker Chambers. Chambers has been forgotten by too many conservatives and proponents of liberty. When he is referenced now, it is often within the context of being a Cold War footnote because of his dramatic testimony against the communist spy Alger Hiss in 1948. But because he was an intellectual of the highest degree, a man of faith, and a man who raised high the banner of truth, Chambers is a hero for any age.

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Bringing Forward Tradition

An Interview with Thomas C. Oden

*Thomas C. Oden is a retired theology professor at The Theological School of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. He is author of numerous theological works, including the three-volume systematic theology *The Word of Life, Life in the Spirit, and The Living God*. Currently he is director of the Center for Early African Christianity at Eastern University, St. Davids, Pennsylvania. He is the general editor of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture and the Ancient Christian Doctrine series. He recently spoke with Religion & Liberty's managing editor Ray Nothstine.*

R&L: *You have said your path to orthodox theology really began through patristics. Why are the words and witness the Fathers provide so important today?*

Oden: They're important because they're true. They're based upon a consensus of Christian believers, not only from the early Christian period, but from the Apostolic Witness. In other words, what was happening in the patristic period was all exegesis, or all interpretation, of the received Apostolic tradition, which later became canonized. So these writings have gone through a social process and a truth testing. And for Christians, we believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit in that testing process, in the consensus formation process that delivers to the Word of the self disclosure of God in Jesus Christ.

Why do you think many evangelicals, in their searching, are drawn to patristic thought and commentary? What can churches do to encourage those that are searching?

They're drawn to patristic thought because it is wise. They are hungry for wisdom. They are looking for reliable Christian teaching and, in many cases, evangelicals have not been exposed to these docu-

" In every Christian community in the ancient world, there were forms of active engagement with the poor."

ments because they have been focused on Christian doctrine since the Reformation. I, myself, am an example. I grew up in the Methodist tradition and I had some vague idea of what happened before Luther and Calvin and Wesley, but I hadn't really been deeply informed. And even when I went to my doctoral studies at Yale, I did not spend a great deal of time in patristic writers, so I had to find these on my own.

So what can churches do to encourage people that are searching? First of all, they can make accessible the writings that have been long buried, especially within the later Protestant tradition. They were commended by Luther and Calvin and Cranmer and Wesley, but not sufficiently taught and transmitted. The texts themselves have largely been buried. Now, fortunately today a lot of these are digitalized. There's a lot more available. So

there's almost no excuse for an evangelical who wishes to know classic Christianity, to ignore these teachings.

Would you offer some thoughts on the Church Fathers and their views on poverty? Can the Church learn from them today?

In *The Good Works Reader*, I deal with such passages as the rich man and Lazarus and relief for the needy. You can hardly find any contemporary political issue that has not been dealt with, in some form, in a previous cultural and linguistics situation by the early Christian writers.

That does not mean they can be directly transferred into our political situation, but by analogy we can learn from them about the faith that become active in love and produces good works. And the doctrine of good works, of course, is taught in Scripture. Now, that is not, certainly not to Protestants, to diminish the priority of justifying faith for our salvation. We are not saved by our works, but we are called by grace, through our faith, to be active in the works of love.

There is a great deal of material about poverty in patristic exegesis, particularly in commenting on those scriptural texts on stewardship, money, generosity, and hunger. In every Christian community in the ancient world, there were forms of active engagement with the poor. When you went to church, from earliest times you would have an opportunity to give to the poor.

So what happened to those resources that

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Aristotle (384 - 322 BC)

Social Leveling: Socialism and Secularism

By Hunter Baker

Social leveling is something that we typically associate with the destruction of material differences between human beings. It is the socialist dream of a classless society in which distinctions, usually the result of economic variation, are made irrelevant. The state, empowered by the political action of the masses (or at least a group claiming to speak for the masses), works to gain control of the wealth and property of a society and then to redistribute it in such a way as to make people equal. It should be obvious that this type of action vastly increases the power of the state because it becomes the effective owner of all property.

Although socialism aims to wipe out material inequality, it may merely present a new opportunity for sin. Madison noted that taking control of the property in a state will not make people equal for more than a very short time. They have different talents, abilities, and levels of energy. A new elite will assert itself, just as it has in every nation with a communist revolution. The difference is that instead of the productive computer genius earning the luxuries of life, it goes to a gifted political functionary or some other obedient person. Forced economic leveling performed by the state is intended to erase the sin of greed, but it turns out that someone has to make the sacrifice of living at the mountain retreat with the on-call sushi chef!

While there have been Christian socialists, socialism has primarily been the province of secularists. I suspect that is because while it is easy to understand how Christians could

endorse a voluntary sharing of all property, it is harder to see them endorse the kind of *involuntary* sharing which a more blunt person might refer to as coercive confiscation legitimized by government power. Augustine thought in this way when he pictured some governments as bands of robbers with official uniforms of state.

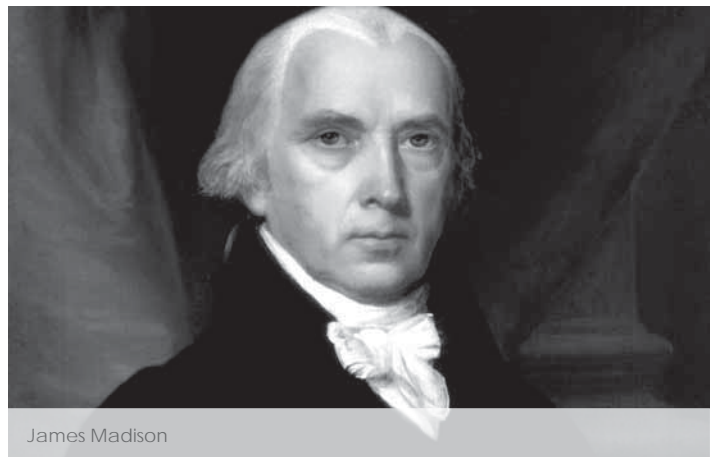
Political leftists often criticized Ronald Reagan for his great willingness to help individual persons who asked for his aid while he was simultaneously opposed to erecting great structural plans of income redistribution or expansion of the welfare state. That is because he was interested in the virtue of one person helping another.

Interestingly, Aristotle held the same position. He decried socialism because it would replace the beauty of voluntary giving with a state-imposed sameness of means. Reagan knew it was right for him to sign a check and send it to a person in need. He did not presume to do that on someone else's behalf by confiscating their funds.

The logic of social leveling can be extended in many directions. Plato applied it to property and to family. Members of his imaginary guardian class were to have both com-

mon wives and children and common property. Making sure that all of them had basically the same things was designed to create great empathy and cooperation. Thus, Plato imagined that when one felt pain, all would feel pain and move to heal it. When one felt pleasure, all would enjoy it, and so on.

There is a serious problem with this line of



James Madison

thinking and it has to do with human nature. Aristotle pointed out that the man with a thousand sons really has no son. The man with one son is almost surely willing to give his life for him. Similarly, a field that is owned by everyone is unlikely to be plowed. But a field owned by one man is likely to be as productive as he can make it. Starvation was a perennial problem in China until the communists began to yield the point.

There is another reason why Christians are

unlikely to embrace social leveling. The logic of social leveling applies to more than property. Indeed, socialism and secularism are closely related to one another. While *socialism* seeks to erase the economic distinctions between human beings by taking individual choices about property out of people's hands, *secularism* seeks to erase the religious differences between people by making religion irrelevant to the life of the community. This action of secularism, so similar to socialism, is why I refer to it as a type of social leveling.

Social leveling has a degree of appeal. The idea is that people will be made equal because equality is a goal worth striving for. The great problem in applying social leveling to property and/or economic achievement is that it takes no cognizance of merit or virtue and thus diminishes the value of both. Social leveling applied to religion may be worse because it pays no attention to the *possibility of religious truth*. All religious propositions are treated as utterly unprovable revelation fit primarily for the credulous. This presents a special problem for Christians who believe that their faith is really true and that there is evidence to support it in real space and time. One should not be surprised that secularists view Christianity as a psychological crutch. They think Christians adopt their faith for primarily emotional reasons. The power of Paul at the Areopagus or in our day of a C.S. Lewis or perhaps even a Francis Schaeffer comes from pulling the crucifixion and resurrection into the public square and saying, "This really happened. And if it did, don't you think it is important that we figure out what it means?"

Social leveling in the form of secularism does faithfully treat all religions the same. They become equally private and equally segregated from the life of the community. Secularists, of course, hope that religion will eventually fade away as human beings embrace their equality with each other. Empiricism tends to run in a different direction. If there is equality among human beings, it is equality before God who has

placed his image upon all of us.

I have argued that social leveling achieves a wrong result in the sense that it ignores things like merit and virtue in the form of socialism, and truth in the form of secularism. That alone is good reason to oppose it, but there is a bigger problem than that. The social leveling that is achieved by socialism

" If there is equality among human beings, it is equality before God who has placed his image upon all of us."

and secularism can only be engineered by one entity in a society. That entity is the state. Thus, the state will become the effective



Pope John Paul II Monument in Gryfice, Poland

owner of all property and the state will determine what manifestations of religion (if any) are acceptable to itself.

If we empower the state to this degree, then the state effectively dictates reality and tends to move in the direction of totalitarianism. It is notable that the Marxist dream of human brotherhood rooted in universal equality stalled out repeatedly at the dictatorship stage without any probable movement forward to the "withering away of the state" as Marx predicted. This tendency toward dictatorship among nations opting for radical brotherhood seems to confirm the American founders' view of the human being and to disconfirm Marx's view. In other words, the suspicion of power fostered by a Christian awareness of human sinfulness is a more realistic approach. That suspicion led the American founders to build a system which makes dictatorship or the functional equivalent extraordinarily difficult to achieve.

In a system where the state has the power to engage in social leveling, institutions which would compete with the state for influence must be minimized. So, for example, the school system is used to transmit values to children. Those values will be values dictated by the state. In this way, the influence of other institutions in the society such as families and churches can be blunted in favor of the state's chosen message transmitter. We are fortunate in that we live in a society where the education function is not monopolized by the state. It is, however, highly subsidized and alternative choices involve what amounts to a financial penalty.

In our country, there is still a healthy debate about what ought to be taught in schools and there is freedom to withdraw. But in a social leveler state, no such choice exists. Imagine how difficult it would be to pass on ideas and information to a child in conflict with the message of the state institution that dominates his or her day. Everything in that child's life that is officially evaluated says that what the family or church believes is unimportant.

The logic of totalitarianism is that there are only two classes of actors in the society: the state and the individual. The individual is

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expected to serve the purposes of the state. This dynamic also partially explains the enthusiasm of social levelers for secularism. If the church is vital within the society, then it offers an independent voice which can compete with the state for the hearts and minds of the people. Poland offers an extraordinary example. The Poles resisted communism more effectively than many other nations because its Catholic church staunchly stood up for its rights and encouraged the people to see themselves as human beings who should be free. Karol Wojtyła, the man who would become Pope John Paul II encouraged young people to accompany him on wilderness hikes and canoeing trips to help them develop space for freedom away from the state. His underlying message: The state is not the supreme reality. There is more to life than that. A church, independent of the state, is freedom enhancing.

Jacque Maritain captured this role of the church nicely when he wrote:

In the course of 20 centuries, by preaching the Gospel to the nations and by standing up to the flesh and blood powers in order to defend against them the liberties of spirit, the Church has taught men freedom.

The 20th century was the century *par excellence* for social leveling. At no other time in history was there so much energy behind experiments in government on a massive scale. It was the most dangerous century the world has known because it married the greatest political ambition with the greatest technological achievement. Though the close of the 20th century saw the threat of totalitarianism blunted, we must understand the part enthusiasm for social leveling played in its rise. And we must continue to oppose it as it returns with ever softer and friendlier faces.

Hunter Baker is the author of The End of Secularism. He serves as associate dean of arts and sciences at Union University. Baker is the recipient of Acton Institute's 2011 Novak Award.

Double-Edged Sword: *The Power of the Word*

Hebrews 1:3

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Augustine said the expression "at the right hand" places Christ in a state of "perfect blessedness." Additionally, Christ is a ruler. In what manner does he rule and reign? The author of Hebrews references His suffering and sacrificing for humanity as the perfect lamb. His love and compassion was evident throughout His earthly ministry. His suffering for us knew no limit, just like His love.

But some Christians focus only on Christ up to His resurrection and miss the full power, reign, and authority He holds over all creation. There are benefits to Christ's ascension that have direct implications for us. We know from Scripture that "we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense" (1 John 2:1). We also have a promise that we have our flesh in heaven, and that He will too take us to dwell in Glory.

The Incarnational nature of Christ permanently unites us with Him. Bonaventure said he can show "to the glorious face of His Father the scars of the wounds which he suffered for us." He is the perfect advocate because Christ knows what it's like to suffer in the flesh. Hebrews 2:16 declares, "For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham."

Jesus, who is the radiance of God's glory, looks down upon us from His heavenly Kingdom and in all of our ungratefulness and wickedness calls us His own. He adores us and lifts us up as the eternally empowered advocate. He is the shepherd and overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25). The Lord still aches for us to be with Him and he still searches for those who are lost, and for those who are broken. Luke's Gospel says there will be a vast rejoicing for the repentance of one single sinner.

Among many people, there seems to be a lot of confusion about who Christ is and what authority he holds. Religious pluralism has opened up a wide door that adds to this confusion. Some say Christ is just one authority of many or believing in Him is just one equal belief among many. The right hand metaphor for Christ should clear up vague and misguided perceptions about His ability to save, uplift, and restore all things to perfect harmony. As Revelation 15:11 proclaims: "And He will reign for ever and ever."



Emperor Constantine

Constantine and the Great Transformation

Review by Johannes L. Jacobse

Review of: Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine* (IVP Academic, 2010), ISBN: 978-0-8308-2722-0.

The argument that the lifting of the persecutions of early Christians and the subsequent expansion of the Christian faith led to a “fall” of the Christian Church is more widespread than we may believe. Academics have defended it for years. Popular Christianity, especially conservative Protestantism, takes it as a truth second only to the Gospel.

Towering over this argument is Constantine the Great. When Constantine faced the final battle that would determine if he became Rome’s new emperor, he saw a cross shining in the sky above the sun and heard the words, “By this sign conquer.” He took it to mean that divine providence chose him to be the emperor of a new and undivided Rome. His soldiers went to battle with a cross painted on their shields and won. The persecutions stopped. Christianity was the new religion of the empire.

But is the collective wisdom accurate? Is it true that the fourth century represents decline? No, argues Peter J. Leithart in his new book *Defending Constantine*.

“Constantine has been a whipping boy for a very long time and still is today,” Leithart begins. The historical and theological consensus identifies Constantine with “tyranny, anti-Semitism, hypocrisy, apostasy, and heresy.” Constantine, the conventional wisdom goes, was a “power-hardened politician ... a hypocrite who harnessed the

energy of the Church for his own ends ... a murderer, usurper, and egoist.”

This opinion has its roots in the work of John Howard Yoder, a prominent pacifist and “probably the most influential Mennonite theologian who ever lived,” Leithart argues. His influence is far-reaching and includes such prominent names as Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University among others. “In Yoder’s telling, the Church ‘fell’ in the fourth century (or thereabouts) and has not yet recovered from that fall. This misconstrues the theological significance of Constantine ... ”

Challenging Yoder’s thesis is not the only reason Leithart wrote the book but it certainly is the most compelling. Leithart believes Yoder’s pacifist preconceptions distort the historical record to such a degree that they blind us to the inherent moral power of the Christian faith to transform and elevate human culture. The pacifism of Yoder and like-minded disciples, Leithart argues in so many words, is nothing more than a debilitating emasculation of the Christian faith.

The culture surrounding the early Christians was often violent. But the violence, while often senseless, still has a cultural and thus comprehensible context. Violence was endemic in pagan culture. It often was seen as divinely ordained. It’s the historian’s task to uncover, define, and describe it for us. It takes real work to describe it properly and the reader must labor to understand it. When the narrative has to throw off the strictures of pacifism and other anachronis-

tic preconceptions, the task is even harder.

Rescuing the historical narrative then requires two things. First, the modern animus against violence must be seen for what it is: a moralistic precondition imposed on the text and fundamentally ahistorical. Second, a new narrative free of the precondition has to be written; history needs to be rediscovered. This requires an able historian who is also a good writer.

Leithart accomplishes both. First, he is very clear in his purposes and approach. He pulls no punches, couches nothing in euphemism, and makes no appeals to false virtue. Second, Leithart has the novelist’s gift for description and detail. He captures the native lyricism of the language. The book is a joy to read.

The late Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his popular history *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* years ago that Constantine exemplified the transition from pagan antiquity to Christian culture. The complexity of his life and rule is not due to crass self-interest and hypocrisy that the modern critics claim (indeed, what does modern criticism allow beyond the condemnation of putative motives?). Instead, his life reflects the very real existential conflicts that arise when a culture transforms itself into something new.

Leithart would most likely agree. The emergence of Constantine, particularly his embrace of Christianity, represents a cultural shift of the highest order despite the

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moral problems, ambiguities, even contradictions expressed throughout his life. In fact, these problems represent some of the conflicts that emerge when cultures change. The great transformation from pagan to Christian civilization was an organic enterprise. It happens in space and time. It was more than an architect's plan. It took real sweat to build the walls and shingle the roof.

Therein lies the value of Leithart's book. In laying out for us the chronology and ideas of the momentous shift, from Constantine's conversion, Nicea, the Christian foundations of law and so forth, he shows us how pagan culture was, in the end, *baptized*.

Reducing Constantine to a marginal figure based on nothing more than unexamined moralistic preconceptions (political correctness), reflects a debilitating paucity of moral vision. This truncated vision, this failure of imagination and thought, has contributed to the failure of Christians to address the very real challenges brought by secularism and other forces that deny the sacred dimension of our lives.

Pope Benedict of Rome and Patriarch Kyrill of Moscow have both affirmed that Western Culture needs to return to its Christian roots. It needs to uncover the knowledge and power of that initial baptism of culture that occurred in the age of Constantine and in no small measure under Constantine's protection (the Orthodox Church honors Constantine with the title "Equal to the Apostles"). Indeed, this call to re-evangelize is rapidly becoming the common ground between the Churches of East and West.

That too is Leithart's vision and therein lies the value of *Defending Constantine*. Leithart has given us a clear, comprehensible, theologically sound, and beautifully written history of *our* beginning. It is, I believe, a book of tremendous value for all orthodox Christians.

Rev. Johannes L. Jacobse is President of the American Orthodox Institute in Naples, Fla., and a priest in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese.

What is Acton doing outside of the United States?

When I am out on the road and have the opportunity to meet supporters and people interested in Acton, I often get a lot of questions about our international projects. There have been a lot of new developments since I addressed this topic in the 2006 winter issue of *Religion & Liberty*.

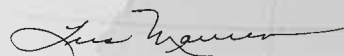
Acton recently participated in the 2010 Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization in Cape Town, South Africa. The Lausanne Movement is an evangelical effort to promote global evangelization, and it has recently launched a formal partnership with the World Evangelical Alliance. Combined, these two organizations represent some 430 million Christians. A special edition of the NIV Stewardship Study Bible was made available to attendees at the Cape Town conference and additional translations of the study Bible will soon be available in popular languages. At Lausanne, we were asked to provide editorial input, facilitate dialogue, and publish resources for leaders at the meeting. The subjects of stewardship, generosity, and work were recurrent themes at the conference, allowing us to play an important role because of our focus on economics and theology.

Participation in global evangelistic events such as the Cape Town Congress has been very successful in drawing religious leaders from around the world to Acton University. They can in turn put our resources to work in feeding and equipping their denominations, congregations, and parishes in building the "free and virtuous society."

In 2010, we put together a very inspiring slate of international conferences drew hundreds of attendees at many events. In May, we held a conference that examined the commercial society of former Eastern bloc nations in Kraków, Poland. In November, Acton held a conference on free-enterprise solutions to poverty in Lisbon, Portugal.

These are just a few examples of our international conferences, which experienced showed a tremendous uptick in attendance and visibility. Many of our invited speakers at these events—as well as Acton speakers—have been interviewed by major foreign news outlets. We are planning three economic development conferences in the coming months in Nairobi, Rome, and London.

For 20 years, the Acton Institute has helped shape the perspectives of thousands around the world, empowering and inspiring moral leaders to connect their good intentions with sound economics. Increasingly, that work reaches new leaders and communities around the globe.



Kris Alan Mauren
Executive Director



Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler

The Rich Young Man: The Law Versus Privilege

By John Kelly

As Jesus conducted his public ministry, he drew considerable crowds. Within the throngs were, of course, the peasants of the neighborhood, along with longer-term disciples. There were many who wished to see miracles, many who wished to hear his sayings of peace, love, hope and promise. There were those who wanted reinforcement of the Law and those who wished to see some of the Law abandoned. Within all these groups were many who were troubled by personal doubt.

Jesus spoke with these people, engaging them, answering their questions, asking them questions, all the while proclaiming the authority and the efficacy of the Law. He said, “Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish - but to complete them.” He then goes on – he’s trying to make sure his listeners understand: “In truth I tell you, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, is to disappear from the Law until all its purpose is achieved.” (Matthew 5:17-18 - NJB)

Some of Jesus’ most engaging images come from these conversations. Rich and poor, titled and powerless, legalists and apostates, disciples and strangers all had encounters with Jesus that fleshed out for them his view of the Law. However, our lack of knowledge regarding the economic, political and cultural environment in which Jesus lived and preached sometimes hampers our understanding of his message.

One of the more famous of these encounters was with the rich young man. This story is found, in almost identical versions, at Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-23. He approached Jesus and asked what was necessary to be saved. “Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied that the young man should keep the commandments. “I have kept all these,” stated the rich young man, “What more do I need to do?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me.” This was too much for the young man. Scripture says that he “went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.”

This story seems too hard for most of us. What is fundamentally wrong with being rich? Preachers try to make sense of this passage by assuming that the rich young man was too materialistic, and that the story is a warning to us about that failing. That much may be true, however, that interpretation is about the young man’s reaction, not about Jesus’ words. Jesus instructed him to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. Why?

Let us look at the story in light of the Law and the conditions of first century Palestine. The man called Jesus “Master,” and was familiar with the commandments, even exhibiting some bit of pride that he kept them. It is logical to assume that he was a rich young *Jewish* man. This also meant that he knew the Law, at least as far as the ordinary Jewish man knew it. So, as

a boy, the rich young man had probably gone to school under religious teachers, as

“ Jesus instructed him to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. Why?”

Jesus had, with the Law and the Prophets as his texts. Being a person who was proud of his observance of the commandments, he attended synagogue or Temple services, so his early education in the Law was continuously being reinforced as an adult.

He was also rich. Now being a rich Jew in first century Palestine was an anomaly. The Jews had been reduced to poverty by the rack-rents of their landlords. Many had been forced to sell themselves or their children into debt bondage or slavery. Their condition resulting from the laws imposed upon them by the Herods and the Romans had quickly changed their status from that of yeoman farmers to right-less serfs.

Over the previous 60 years, bloody succession fights had transferred rule over the land from the family of Jewish Hasmoneans to the Roman-sponsored Herod Antipater, a non-Jewish Idumean. His son, Herod the Great, succeeded him. Presented with this rich and abundant land, Herod could not seem to keep himself from plundering it. To him it was like con-

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quered territory, not worthy of his care; worthy only as a source of his enrichment and a demonstration of his power. He did not dally.

That he succeeded is known through a number of sources. Josephus relates that during a succession struggle after Herod the Great's death in about 4 BC., ambassadors from each of his sons' camps tried to make their case for successor kingship to Rome, in the person of the emperor, Caesar Augustus. One son's ambassadors recounted what Herod had done during his reign.

... they declared that he [Herod] was indeed in name a king, but that he had taken to himself that uncontrollable authority which tyrants exercise over their subjects, and had made use of that authority for the destruction of the Jews ... there were a great many who perished ... they that survived were far more miserable ... not only from the anxiety they were in ... but from the danger their estates were in of being taken away by him.

Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, 17.11.2

The passage continues saying that Herod lavished attention and adornments on cities within his kingdom that were occupied by foreigners, but Jewish cities, with the exception of Jerusalem, "were ruined and utterly destroyed." The indictment continues stating that "whereas, when he took the kingdom, it was in an extraordinary flourishing condition, he had filled the nation with the utmost degree of poverty." Harkening back to the longer passage above, concerning "estates," Josephus writes that, using trumped-up charges, Herod would confiscate the "estates" of original possessor families or of previous, formerly favored recipients of confiscated lands. So some of these lands were "owned" contrary to the principles of the Mosaic Law already. Now things would get even worse. The "dispossessed," if they had means, were in deep trouble. Some Herod had killed; the rest

were made to give him or his cronies a constant stream of "gifts," which finally brought them to ruin. The lands were given over by Herod to remaining elite Jews and foreigners who would comply with his corrupt practices. Violent extortion became rampant. Peasant revolts formed overnight; they were put down mercilessly. In a very short time, the people were reduced to deep poverty and even slavery, this from being so individually prosperous just a few short years before. In *The Wars of the Jews* 2.6.2, Josephus writes that "... the Jews had borne more calamities from Herod, in a few years, than had their forefathers ... since they had come out of Babylon."

The land they had legally possessed under God's Law was now in the hands of a dis-

" At the Temple, free-will offerings were no longer freewill, they had become mandatory."

tant privileged few. Because the Mosaic land tenure system was primarily based on God's statement, "the land is mine," (Lv 25:23), the individual Jewish possessor families had paid rent to God in the form of the tithe; now they were forced to pay rent to the new landlords. Regardless, the priests and the Pharisees demanded that the standard tithes be continued as well – but now on their wages, for they no longer had land. Furthermore, there were now taxes to pay, the equivalents of today's sales and excise taxes, as well as tolls, fees and whatever arbitrary taxes the tax collectors came up with. At the Temple, freewill offerings were no longer freewill, they had become mandatory. Money offerings could only be made in Temple shekels, which, not being in general circulation, had to be purchased at scandalous exchange rates. Each different faction of

the power elite demanded, and got, their pound of flesh. The average citizen was driven down by this oppressive regime. The economic Law of Moses, which had protected the people from such abuses for so long, had been crushed.

Yet this Jewish man who approached Jesus was rich. How had he escaped his brothers' fate?

Although most of the new system had been imposed from the outside, there were a few Jews who participated in it from the top. There were Jewish landlords, Jewish tax farmers (Matthew, the apostle and Gospel writer, for one), and the Jewish family of Hannan, who, according to the Talmud, had the sacrificial pigeon and money exchange monopoly at the Temple. There were Jewish governmental officials who worked under both the Herods and the Romans. Jews were certainly part of Herod's court and the Roman Procurator had Jewish advisors. Contrary to the ancient Exodus principle of equal rights, these Jews had been granted privilege. It follows that our rich young man, being rich, was probably a landlord, a tax farmer, a government official, or some other person of governmental privilege. The non-Jewish world had operated with grants of privilege for millennia. It was the only way within the world's system that one could become and stay rich. However, privilege was alien to the Law of Moses. Under the Law, there were almost no rich and no poor. Since the exile, the Jews had understood this.

A Jew who accepted privilege was therefore knowingly complicit in the upending of the Law. If a Jew was a landlord during this time, he knew that he was part of the problem, and he could see the effects of the imposed system on his fellow Jews. This is not to say that these individual Jews might not also have done some good. They might have given to the poor or tried to advise against punitive new regulations and laws. Nevertheless, they knew that their gains from the system were illegal under Jewish or Mosaic Law.

This man, after telling Jesus that he has kept the Commandments, asks, “What more do I need to do?” He may have been looking for a way out of his privilege dilemma. He seems to be pressing. Perhaps he is feeling guilty. He may not think that Jesus will give him a pass, but that there might be some way, through charity or some other means, to right himself with the Law.

Jesus, for his part, seeing the man pressing for an answer beyond the Commandments, probably perceives that here is someone who might be ready to renounce the privilege system at the root of the people’s plight. He replies, “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor ...” After all, his possessions are, under God’s Law, the fruits of his participation in the kleptocracy of the Herodian/Roman system. The rich young man, and others like him, was living off stolen goods. Those goods should be returned to their rightful owners. Selling them and giving the proceeds to the poor marks a good faith effort to do just that. When Jesus asks him to get right with the Law, the rich young man understands the context of the request, as do those who witness the exchange. Jesus knows that he has made a difficult request. The Scripture says that he “looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him.” So he offers two enticements. First, he tries to make it easier on the man by promising a substitution: *you will have treasure in heaven.* He then offers membership in the messianic company: *come, follow me.*

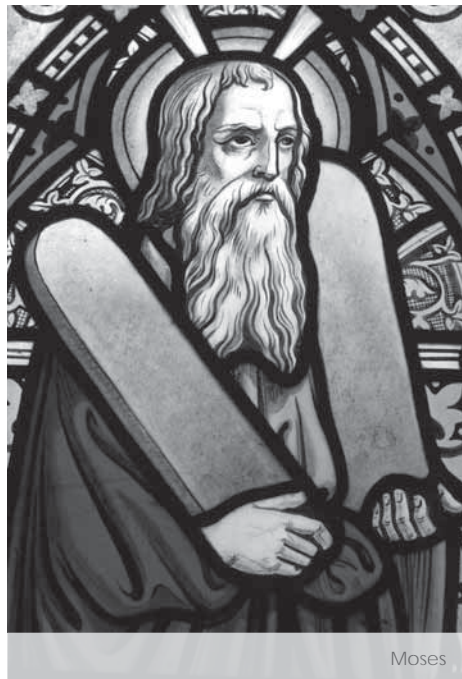
The rich young man was in turmoil. He well understood how only compliance with the Law would cause Jesus to let him off the hook. He could feel the love Jesus felt for him, yet he couldn’t bring himself to give up the security of his riches. This Galilean prophet would not compromise his views on the Law. The rich young man made his decision. He sadly walked away.

There was probably silence as he left. The encounter was quite dramatic. This prophet, who seemed to approach everyone

with love, gave the rich young man very little wiggle room. The Law, including the economic Law, seemed very important to this teacher.

Matthew and Luke agree with Mark, quoted below, about what happened next:

Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were astounded by these words but Jesus insisted, “My children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye



of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Mark 10:23-25

“ He could feel the love Jesus felt for him, yet he couldn’t bring himself to give up the security of his riches.”

In first century Palestine, the rich, of whom Jesus was speaking, were the privileged. Again, in the Baal-inspired world, only through privilege could a person become rich. And the privileged, particularly the Jewish privileged, knew that their government-granted advantages were paid for by taking from the ordinary populace some of its economic freedom. Jesus said that this recognition made it virtually impossible for the Law-knowing privileged to merit an eternal reward with God. Indeed, he went on to say that it would be difficult for anyone to merit it, presumably because everyone broke the Law – all were (and are) sinners. Then, to drive the point home, he returned to the rich, whom he set apart as particularly grievous lawbreakers. He said it was almost impossible for them to favor reestablishing the kingdom. The familiar *eye of a needle* comparison left little room. Once Jesus had made his point, he added that God could still ignore the cold demands of justice and, using mercy, save the rich as well as the poor. He sums up the lesson in verse 27: “By human resources it is impossible, but not for God: because for God everything is possible.”

The world ran on the privilege system, the law of Baal. It seemed inescapable, yet Jesus would not make accommodation with it. Better to renounce all of its trappings than to compromise with it. Yet he did say that there was hope – individually, in God’s mercy, and as a people, in God’s Law. God’s Law eliminated privilege. God’s Law provided for everyone. It had in the past and it would again – if only his people would reintroduce it.

So the rich of Jesus’ time were very different from the rich of today’s western economies. Today’s rich, by and large, have earned their riches, or are the progeny of those who have. There is no injustice in such accumulations.

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were given to the poor? Some people sold all of their goods and gave them all to the poor. So there was an interest in participating in Jesus' life, in the Son's self giving for all humanity. There was an interest in participating in that incomparable self-giving act. But to those who did not know that they were doing something for Christ, He said, "Whatever you neglected to do unto the least of these, you neglected to do unto Me!" (Matthew 25:40).

whole populations were made prisoners.

We have a large body of patristic literature that deals with what we today would call social witness. For example, displaced persons, the homeless, and care for widows. How do you care for the fatherless? These were all considered, based on scripture texts. How do you care for sick people? The whole idea of a hospital emerged within the frame of this ethos of caring for the poor and the sick

the Roman persecutions in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries, they would pray for them, seek to locate them if missing, go visit them, and raise money to free them. There were ways to do that in the Roman period.

The big debate today raging around the issue of hospitality really is immigration. And there are some evangelicals that are saying that we need to take in illegal immigrants. I just think that's kind of an interesting divide right now in evangelicalism in terms of hospitality.



Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Let's talk further about the poor boxes. There came a time when a kind of dependency arose out of their use. To some these gifts elicited an entitlement mentality, even in the early Church. That required leadership by the church, to make reasonable rules about how to give aid without increasing the temptation to dependency, which is demoralizing to initiative. That remains a huge problem today. The patristic writers were commenting on Scripture texts in a way that remains important for us today in our understanding of abuses and temptations that may arise out of good motives.

The Church can certainly learn from the Church Fathers in other areas of social witness, for example, those who are marginalized such as prisoners. What thoughts can you offer here?

The ransom of prisoners was a major social concern of early Christianity, especially during times of persecution, when believers were sent as slaves to the mines, and after wars of conquest, where

and the needy. Basil of Caesarea created the first hospital as a way of participating in the healing ministry of Jesus. But all across these areas of social witness and marginalization, we have the same concern. If somebody is hungry, you try to provide food for him, without demeaning him or making him a dependent. If they don't have clothes, you provide clothes. You provide what's needed.

If you want an even more condensed study of these sorts of marginalization, you can find it in *The Good Works Reader*. Among the topics treated there are hospitality to the stranger, the children of war, sexual abuse, and homelessness. Dealing with actual human needs was central to the practice of the Christian life.

You mentioned earlier the ministry to prisoners, like Chuck Colson's prison ministry. That is a wonderful expression in the modern period of a very ancient practice of Christian ethics. If Christians were in prison as they often were during

Ancient Christian writers knew that all Christians were being called to receive strangers and travelers hospitably. But that does not quite get to the crux of the question of law as to whether the stranger is entering into a territory under false colors. That's a different question. So there are two moral principles that may, at certain points, conflict. And they do in our society. They conflict dramatically between those who would emphasize the hospitality in an absolute way, and those who would emphasize the moral requirement of following the law as a part of a just social order, including the duty to respect legal borders. Patristic writers sought to hold these in tension. It's a very old conflict.

For somebody just getting started out in studying church history and the Church Fathers, can you recommend a good starting point for them, and how do we read them in a way where we are mindful of their context?

The phrase "mindful of their context" is an important qualifier. If you're going to be the scholar, you must be mindful of the context of an event. But if you're a lay reader, you have broader permission to read ancient writers in their own words and seek their wisdom. The *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* is written for both audiences. For most laity, the best way to get in touch with the heart, mind, soul and spirit of classical Christian teaching is to allow early Christians to speak for themselves. Don't read somebody else's view of Augustine. There's plenty that he said plainly that you can grasp and benefit by. Keep in mind that he was speaking to lay people all the time.

A good starting point is to read good translations of any of the ancient consensual Christian writers. If you are asking for specific texts, I would say read Augustine's *Confessions*, Athanasius' *Incarnation of the Word*, or Gregory Nazianzen's *Oration*s as a beginning point.

We have read a number of stories of African missionaries in developing nations coming to the United States and other Western countries. What do you make of this?

All who read the New Testament know that there is a Great Commission in Matthew 28: Go into the entire world. Preach. Baptize, Disciple. There are a very surprising number of believers from the continent of Africa, who are forming active communities of believers here in the United States.

I happened to be doing a lecture in Libya. I was in Tripoli lecturing in a Libyan university. I had been trying to get into Libya for years because I have been very interested in Early African Christianity in Libya. I was able to meet there with international diplomats, evangelicals, and people that were there for business reasons. Many of them were from sub-Saharan Africa. They wanted to expand their work into Libya. Those who were Christian believers were meeting in a house church without property. Their missionary activity was taking place there because they hungered for Christian fellowship. Spreading the gospel is intrinsic to the Christian life. I found there an unexpected correlation between the stream of business interests and the stream of evangelization mission. Ironically it was lay business peo-

“ We are being called to share Christ's life, to carry the cross and to share in his suffering.”

ple, not professional or ordained missionaries, who were doing the work.

Do you think there is a crisis in Protestant culture now, related to the lack of teaching when it comes to a theology of suffering? There are a lot of hurting people out there and many times they are looking for help and healing in the wrong places. How, and in what way, would reading and study of the patristics help them?

It isn't just Protestant culture. It's also Western culture. The hedonism of our culture makes us really look for quick and easy solutions to our problems, and one challenge to all human freedom is suffer-



Saint Augustine

ing. Those who read the early Christian writers carefully find in them a huge challenge to our hedonic assumptions about what suffering means and doesn't mean. For ancient Christian writers, suffering is a participation in Christ's suffering. When we suffer, we are doing something that the Son has done in relation to and for the Father. We are being called to share Christ's life, to carry the cross and to share in his suffering.

What has happened to me in my suffering is that it has humbled me. It has made me more empathic. I know this. This is empirically verifiable in my view, because I can see the changes for good that have come to me as a result of this suffering.

That doesn't imply that suffering is a wonderful thing. I wouldn't have chosen it. But under the pedagogy of the ancient Christian writers, it is a part of the Christian doctrine of providence; that God allows us, in our human finitude, to be subject to the risks that go along with that

finitude. Otherwise we really wouldn't be free. Human freedom lives within a deep history of human fallenness. Created in the image of God, we are profoundly fallen creatures. This is hard for hedonic cultures to learn. It is very clear in Augustine and John Chrysostom. God does not directly cause any suffering, but he permits it on behalf of our growth in the obedience of faith, and provides a context in which any suffering that we have can be overcome by grace.

Is it possible to say that the mainline Protestant

churches are still relevant?

They are growing more and more irrelevant. They are by now more sideline than mainline. The mainline metaphor is largely turning out to be the ideology of left wing partisans from a certain political party. I don't even need to name it. Everybody knows it. I think the bishops have colluded in this by allowing this to happen, and in effect, joining in it. It's still possible to change the leadership of the mainline churches. The laity of the mainline must study and become informed about the money trail that flows out of their churches and into the hands of aging, ideologically partisan bureaucrats.

More of Religion & Liberty's interview with Thomas C. Oden can be found on the Acton PowerBlog at <http://blog.acton.org/archives/20791-preview-rl-interviews-thomas-c-oden.html>.

Whittaker Chambers [1901-1961]

“The crisis of the Western world exists to the degree in which it is indifferent to God.”

In the form of a letter to his children, Whittaker Chambers wrote in the forward to his book *Witness*, “A man is not primarily a witness against something. That is only incidental to the fact that he is a witness for something.”

Chambers is best known for his dramatic role in outing U.S. State Department official Alger Hiss as a communist spy in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1948. A communist spy himself, Chambers had a Christian conversion and declared that in 1937, he began “like Lazarus, the impossible return.”

His return to the principles of freedom made him one of the most forceful anti-communists of the 20th century. William F. Buckley, Jr. called him the greatest figure who defected from communism. A proponent of the free market, Chambers worked to orient conservatives towards higher truths about economics – and the nature of man and God. In *Witness* he wrote, “Economics is not the central problem of this century. It is a relative problem which can be solved in relative ways. Faith is the central problem of this age.”

In his view, the future of freedom was dependent on a deeper recognition of the value of the human soul. Increased secularism was the great threat to America, which Chambers believed would leave the Republic too vulnerable to outwork Soviet resolve and thus unable to defend itself. He believed that man must know himself in relation to God if he is to

know himself truly.

Chambers was a popular editor at *Time Magazine* where he worked after leaving Communism to warn the nation of the Marxist threat. In 1952, he published his epic autobiography *Witness* after the Hiss trial. He also included New Dealers among a branch of dangerous progressives whose revolution “was not simply reform within existing traditions, but a basic change in the social, and, above all, the power relationships within the nation.” In his view, New Dealers rejoiced that the power of politics was replacing the power of markets and the entrepreneurial spirit. He lamented that loyal New Dealers were unable to identify the communist threat because they shared many of the same goals.

For Chambers, religion and freedom were indivisible. “Man was never more beastly than in his attempts to organize his life, individually and collectively, without God,” declared Chambers.

In 1984, President Ronald Reagan, who credited *Witness* as being monumental in his own political conversion, posthumously awarded Chambers the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The medal citation reads:

At a critical moment in our Nation’s history, Whittaker Chambers stood alone against the brooding terrors of our age. Consummate intellectual, writer of moving majestic prose, and witness to the truth, he became the focus of a momentous controversy in American history that symbolized our century’s epic struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, a controversy in which the solitary figure of Whittaker Chambers personified the mystery of human redemption in the face of evil and suffering. As long as humanity speaks of virtue and dreams of freedom, the life and writings of Whittaker Chambers will ennoble and inspire. The words of Arthur Koestler are his epitaph: ‘The witness is gone; the testimony will stand.’





‘Social Justice’ is a Complex Concept

A column by Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, a Catholic writer for *The Washington Post*, makes the claim that “Catholic social justice demands a redistribution of wealth.”

He went on to say that “there can be no disagreement” that unions, the government and private charities should all have a role in fighting a trend that has “concentrated” money into the hands of the few. In this conjecture, Stevens-Arroyo confused the ends with potential means.

What Stevens-Arroyo is promoting is an attenuated and truncated vision of “social justice” that has fostered a great deal of injustice throughout the world. This path, he should know, has been decisively repudiated by the Church.

He also betrays a strange split in thinking common to those on the religious left, who are quick to denounce the profit motive and commercialism. Yet, they seem to think that the key to happiness is giving people more stuff — by enlisting the coercive power of government. This perverse way of thinking holds that “social justice” demands that we take money from those who have earned it and give it to those who have less of it. That’s not social justice; that’s materialism.

A friend and colleague, Arthur Brooks, a social researcher who is now president of the American Enterprise Institute, has shown that what makes people truly happy is a system that “facilitates earned success among its citizens and does not create disincentives to achieve or squash ambition.” That’s the market economy.

The incredible growth of economies in places like China and India isn’t happening because wealth was being shifted around, but because wealth is being created.

What happens when wealth is “redistributed” is obvious now. We’re seeing the train wreck of the “social assistance state”

in Europe.

In his 1991 social encyclical “*Centesimus Annus*,” Pope John Paul II warned that a bloated state “leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase in public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concerns for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending.” I call that prophetic.

Let’s also be clear that the Church’s teaching condemns the idolatry of money and material goods.

The Church finds another way, neither condemning market activities nor exalting them beyond their rightful place in the grand scheme of things. It asks us to work for the highest good and to contribute as we can our time, talents and wealth that we have earned for the betterment of the world. The Church also demands that we build just systems of trade that enable the poor to be the agents of their own betterment.

So let’s drop these false notions about what constitutes the Church’s understanding of social justice.

A system that pits the haves against the have-nots, with politicians and bureaucrats acting as referees, should be rejected by anyone sincerely interested in building a just social order.

This article originally appeared in the Detroit News.

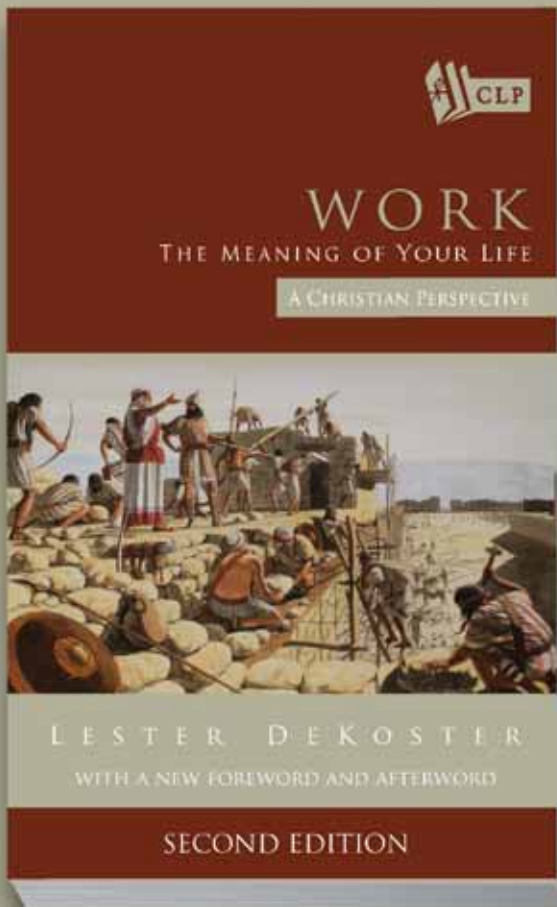
Rev. Robert A. Sirico is president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

WORK

THE MEANING OF YOUR LIFE

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

WHERE DO WE FIND THE CORE OF LIFE'S MEANING? RIGHT ON THE JOB! AT WHATEVER WORK WE DO – WITH HEAD OR HAND, FROM KITCHEN TO EXECUTIVE SUITE, FROM YOUR HOUSE TO THE WHITE HOUSE! "WORK IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER – EVERYONE HAS TO COME TO IT IN ORDER TO FIND MEANING IN LIVING: NO SHORT CUTS, NO DETOURS, NO BARGAIN RATES."



Lester DeKoster (1916–2009) became director of the library at Calvin College and Seminary, affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, in 1951. He earned his doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1964, after completing a dissertation on "Living Themes in the Thought of John Calvin: A Bibliographical Study." During his tenure at the college, DeKoster was influential in expanding the holdings of what would become the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, one of the preeminent collections of Calvinist and Reformed texts in the world. DeKoster also amassed an impressive personal library of some ten thousand books, which includes a wide array of sources testifying to both the breadth and depth of his intellectual vigor. DeKoster was a professor of speech at the college and enjoyed taking up the part of historic Christianity and confessional Reformed theology in debates on doctrinal and social issues that pressed the church throughout the following decades. Both his public debates and private correspondence were marked by a spirit of charity that tempered and directed the needed words of rebuke. After his retirement from Calvin College in 1969, DeKoster labored for a decade as the editor of *The Banner*, the denominational magazine of the Christian Reformed Church. This position provided him with another platform from which to critically engage the life of the church and the world. During this time DeKoster also launched, in collaboration with Gerard Berghoef (a longtime elder in the church) and their families, the Christian's Library Press, a publishing endeavor intended to provide timely resources both for the church's laity and its leadership.



Includes an excerpt of:

The Oikonomia Network's longer Manifesto ("Whatever You Do: Why Discipleship Is Withering—and What We Can Do About It")

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