

Relational economic justice

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April 12, 2016

Maybe it's because I'm Japanese-American that I feel skeptical reading Western political philosophy. When were we ever born as free individuals into a state of nature, as Locke and Rousseau asserted? I've always believed that we're born into families, with binding ties, benefits, and obligations.

The Bible affirms that relationships are not merely social constructs for us to make and break as we choose. They are fundamental to who we are. And restorative justice, broadly speaking, is simply the restoration of healthy relationships. Theologian [Adonis Vidu](#) has outlined the ways in which the early church affirmed relational forms of justice.

In the late fourth century, theologian and bishop [Gregory of Nyssa](#) (in present day Turkey) preached scathing critiques of slavery. "You condemn a person to slavery whose nature is free and independent," writes Gregory in his "Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes,"

and in doing so you lay down a law in opposition to God, overturning the natural law established by him. For you subject to the yoke of slavery one who was created precisely to be a master of the earth, and who was ordained to rule by the creator, as if you were deliberately attacking and fighting against the divine command. . . . What price did you put on reason? How many [coins] did you pay as a fair price for the image of God? For how [much money] have you sold the nature specially formed by God? God said, let us make man in our image and likeness.

Here Gregory uses Genesis 1:26 to affirm that God created *every human being* to share in the wealth of creation. To deprive another person of material resources, and especially to enslave him or her, is to obstruct God's intention for that person. This kind of activity is "precisely to be a master of the earth," to act as an individual

“who was ordained to rule by the creator.”

Gregory’s use of the biblical creation narrative for Christian ethics has its roots in the New Testament. Jesus and the apostles refer to the creation story in their ethical reasoning about marriage relationships (as in [Matt. 19:3-12](#) and [1 Cor. 6:16](#)) and economic relationships (as alluded to in the re-genesis of [Matt. 19:28](#)). We honor others when we make space for them to inhabit God’s relational vision of co-ruling the creation. Accordingly, Gregory called for self-restraint against the temptation to exploit others.

In contrast, many American evangelicals today who write about politics follow the Enlightenment’s elevation of individual liberty as the highest value. [Wayne Grudem](#), for example, offers a highly selective reading of [Leviticus 25](#) based on libertarian political principles. Evangelicals like Grudem would likely applaud [Ron Paul for saying](#),

Forced redistribution of wealth has nothing to do with the teachings of the world’s great religions. . . . Government in a free society should have no authority to meddle in the social activities or the economic transactions of individuals. . . . We must reject the notion of prior restraint in economic activity just as we do in the area of free speech and religious liberty (2:28:00 and 2:34:00).

But Paul’s proposal that banks keep 100 percent of their deposits is itself a “restraint in economic activity” since it would eliminate fractional reserve banking. Anyone wanting to put restraints on banks (as I do) cannot also affirm economic libertarianism without contradiction.

More importantly, what might Paul say about Leviticus 25? Israel’s jubilee year asserts God’s ownership of the land. A literal reading envisions God restoring people to their family land. But more broadly read, the jubilee year also involves the restoration of Israel to God’s original vision: true humanity in a garden. As people made in God’s image, we must make space for other people and their labor in the creation.

In the Pentateuch’s vision of Israel, land was both wealth and work. Accordingly, might we be called to maximize *work* for people rather than *profit*? And if God loves every child, even those who are not our own, might God challenge our practice of

letting our future children inherit all the enormous advantages or disadvantages we can pile on them?

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