

When a Third of the World Died

During the Black Death, the greatest catastrophe in human history, how did Christians respond?

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In October 1347, when a Genoese trading ship fresh from the Crimea docked at a harbor in Sicily, dead and dying men lay at the oars. The sailors had black swellings the size of eggs in their armpits and groins, swellings that oozed blood and pus, and spreading boils and black blotches on the skin. The sick endured severe pain and died within five days of the first symptoms.

Other symptoms appeared in some of the next victims: continuous fever and spitting of blood. These victims coughed, sweated heavily, and died within three days or less—sometimes in 24 hours. No matter the symptoms, everything about the victims smelled foul, and depression and despair fell over them when they contracted the disease.

The disease, bubonic plague, was so lethal some went to bed well and died before morning; some doctors caught the illness at the patient's bedside and died before the patient.

Borne by ships traveling the coasts and rivers, by early 1348, the plague had penetrated Italy, North Africa, France, and crossed the English Channel. At the same time, it moved across the Alps into Switzerland and reached eastward to Hungary.

In a given area, the plague wreaked its havoc within four to six months and then faded, except in larger cities. There it slowed in winter only to reappear in spring to rage for another six months. In 1349, it hit Paris again and began spreading through England, Scotland, and Ireland as well as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Prussia, and Iceland, sometimes in chilling fashion. Off the coast of Norway, a ship drifted aimlessly offshore, finally grounding itself in Bergen. On boarding the ship, people discovered a load of wool and a dead crew.

By mid-1350, the plague had passed through most of Europe. The mortality rate ranged from 20 percent in some places to 90 percent in others. In many rural villages, the last survivors moved away, and the village sank back into the wilderness, leaving only grass-covered mounds. Overall the estimate of one medieval observer matches that of modern demographers: "A third of the world died." That would have meant about 20 million deaths.

In other words, from 1347 to about 1350, medieval Europe experienced perhaps the greatest calamity in human history. It shouldn't surprise us that this plague, or the Black Death as it is often called, left its mark on medieval Christianity. But in many cases, the mark it left looked as hideous as the symptoms of the Black Death itself.

Deserting Loved Ones

In the beginning, people were merely astonished, and awed witnesses tended to exaggerate their reports. In Avignon, France, chroniclers put the death toll at 62,000 (and some at 120,000), although the city's population was probably less than 50,000. Exaggeration or not, the plague devastated cities and grand projects came to a standstill: in Siena, Italy, as the Black Death took more than half the inhabitants, work was abandoned on the great cathedral, planned to be the largest in the world.

The primary concern at first was burying all the bodies. When graveyards filled up, bodies at Avignon were thrown into the Rhone river until mass burial pits were dug. In London, corpses piled up until they overflowed out of the pits. Corpses were left in front of doorways, and the light of each morning revealed new piles of bodies.

Rather than encourage mutual aid, the plague's deadliness drove people from one another. One Sicilian friar reported, "Magistrates and notaries refused to come and make the wills of the dying," and worse, "even the priests did not come to hear their confessions." In one account called the *Decameron*, the author said, "One man shunned another ... kinsfolk held aloof, brother was forsaken by brother, oftentimes husband by wife; nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children to their fate, untended, unvisited as if they had been strangers."

Yet there were also pockets of extraordinary Christian charity. According to one French chronicler, the nuns at one city hospital, "having no fear of death, tended the sick with all sweetness and humility." New nuns replaced those who died, until most had died: "Many times renewed by death [they] now rest in peace with Christ as we may piously believe."

Appeasing God's Wrath

To most people there was but one explanation for the calamity: the wrath of God. A scourge so sweeping had to be divine punishment for sin. One writer compared the plague to the Flood.

Efforts to appease God's wrath took many forms, but the most common were processions authorized at first by the pope. Some lasted as long as three days, and some were attended by as many as 2,000 (which, of course, just help spread the plague). Penitents went barefoot and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled themselves with ashes, wept, prayed, tore their hair, carried candles and relics. They wound through city streets, begging for mercy from Jesus, Mary, and the saints.

When the plague refused to abate, the processions moved from ceremonies of remorse to self-flagellation. The flagellants believed they were society's redeemers; they re-enacted Christ's scourging on their own bodies to atone for human sin.

Stripped to the waists, beating themselves with leather whips tipped with iron spikes until the blood flowed, groups of 200 to 300 (and sometimes up to 1,000), marched from city to city. They begged Christ and Mary for pity, and townspeople sobbed and groaned in sympathy. They performed three times a day, twice publicly in the church square and once in private.

They were organized under a lay Master for usually 33 1/2 days—to represent Christ's years on earth. They pledged self-support and obedience to the Master. They were not allowed to bathe, shave, change clothes, sleep in beds, talk or have intercourse with women without the Master's permission.

The movement quickly spread from Germany through the Low Countries to France. Hundreds of bands roamed the land, exciting already overwrought emotions in city after city. Inhabitants greeted them with the ringing of church bells and offered them hospitality. Children were brought to them to be healed. People dipped cloths in the flagellants' blood and pressed the cloths to their eyes and preserved them as relics.

The flagellants quickly grew arrogant and began overtly attacking the church. Masters began hearing confessions, granting absolution, and imposing penance. Priests who tried to stop them were stoned; opponents were denounced as Antichrists. The flagellants took over churches, disrupted services, ridiculed the Eucharist, looted altars, and claimed the power to cast out demons and raise the dead.

Murderous Atonement

Then the self-torturers and other Christians turned their anxiety upon another group: the Jews. Jews were suspected of poisoning city wells, intending "to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over all the world." Lynchings began in the spring of 1348 following the first plague deaths. In France, Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires.

Pope Clement VI tried to stop the hysteria. He said Christians who imputed the pestilence to the Jews had been "seduced by that liar, the Devil," and that the charge of well-poisoning and the massacres were a "horrible thing." He urged priests to take Jews under their protection as he himself offered to do, but his voice was hardly heard in the rush to find a scapegoat.

In one town, an entire community of several hundred Jews was burned in a wooden house especially constructed for the purpose. The 2,000 Jews of Strasbourg, France, were taken to the cemetery, where those who didn't convert were burned in rows of stakes.

Eventually church and state got the upper hand. When Clement VI called for their arrest, the flagellants disbanded and fled, "vanishing as suddenly as they had come," wrote one witness, "like night phantoms or mocking ghosts."

Angry Aftermath

The plague broke out about once a decade over the next sixty years in various places. Yet for all the excess of sorrow and death, there were few profound lasting effects on society.

Some noted the sad effect on morals, "lowering virtue throughout the world." There was an orgy of greed with the glut of merchandise available in the aftermath. Peasants took unclaimed tools and livestock. The poor moved into deserted houses, slept on beds, and ate off silver. Lawsuits to gain deserted lands proliferated.

Others noted an improvement: many people living together got married, and swearing and gambling had so diminished that manufacturers of dice were turning their product into beads for saying prayers.

Higher education benefited. Emperor Charles IV felt deeply the cause of "precious knowledge which the mad rage of pestilential death has stifled throughout the wide realms of the world." He founded the University of Prague in the plague year of 1348. By 1353, three new colleges were founded at Cambridge, one of them funded by the income derived from masses for the dead.

The church was also enriched, first by the offerings of pilgrims who, in 1350, flocked to Rome seeking absolution from their sins. Also, a flood of bequests were made to religious institutions. In October 1348, the Council of Siena temporarily suspended its annual taxes for religious charities because these were so "immensely enriched and indeed fattened" by bequests.

But the church also garnered much criticism. Most clergy turned out to be as frightened and self-serving as the populace, some gouging people for their services during the crisis. This was severely condemned by Pope Clement VI and violently resented by the people. In Worcester, England, for example, citizens broke down the gates of a priory, attacked the monks, and tried to set fire to the buildings.

Wrote one contemporary, "When those who have the title of shepherd play the part of wolves, heresy grows in the garden of the church." Most people plodded on as before, but dissatisfaction with the church's behavior at a critical moment accelerated reform movements, which were to break out uncontrolled a century and a half later.

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Contagious Compassion

Deadly epidemics and social traumas haunt the news and test the limits of our kindness and courage. How should Christians respond, when the church itself is so divided? Perhaps we need another Catherine of Siena.

James D. Smith III and Kimberly Dawsey-Richardson

These are disturbing times: We cannot escape news of the global AIDS crisis, the impending flu pandemic, the plight of political prisoners, the resurgence of ethnic cleansing and genocide, and the failure of leaders. The last century's fascination with progress has given way to longings for hope and belonging.

Harvard historian Clarissa Atkinson has observed, "Today, an awareness of dangers we can't seem to stop makes us, in some ways, more like medieval people than like our own great grandparents." If so, there may be no better mentor for us than the medieval saint and Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena. She lived in a time of almost apocalyptic fear. The Black Death and the institutional convulsions of the Catholic Church caused a devastated populace to cry out. Catherine stepped courageously beyond her own fears and society's conventions to heal the sick, speak truth to papal authority, and build a network characterized by dialogue and reconciliation in Christ's name.

Rebel in Rearing

Your love should be sincere: you should love your neighbors with the same love with which you love Me.

Catherine Benincasa was born in 1347, probably the 23rd of 25 children. As a young girl, she was known for her unquenchable cheer and golden brown hair. At age six, while walking home from church with siblings, she had a vision of Christ smiling and blessing her. The sense of affirmation that God was calling her to ministry was powerful and permanent.

Though her mother longed for a "normal" daughter, Catherine refused to be stereotypically feminine. On one occasion, she frantically chopped off her hair in hopes of being rejected by a suitor and being taken seriously by her family. She was steadfastly devoted to God's call and even dreamed of joining a monastery disguised as a boy. She did not want to marry or become a nun, yearning instead to serve God in her own way.

After great perseverance, she persuaded her family to let her join the Third Order of Saint Dominic at the age of 16. She participated in the community's devotional activities (in addition to her own stringent disciplines) while she lived at home, largely in her room. Seeking purity, humility, and communion with God, she wrestled for three years to gain dominion over her heart and fleshly impulses. Hers was a total surrender, with Word and sacrament as the foundation.

These three years concluded with a fervent awakening to the needs of the world outside. God led her away from thinking that she could not help her neighbor without losing her mind ("I want only to do good," she thought, "but let it be *my* way.") And he gave her a devotion that reflected Jesus' words: "Not my will, but yours be done." Arguably, the supreme test of her Christian character was her response to the most devastating pandemic in human history—the Black Death—and its aftermath.

"They Died by the Hundreds"

In the mid-1330s, there were initial reports of a widespread epidemic in China. Traders carried the infection to the Middle East and Europe. Contemporaries called it "the Great Mortality" and "the Black Death" because the skin of sufferers would often become blackened from infected lesions and hemorrhages beneath the skin. As more than half of the local population in many areas died, traditional social systems broke down and economies were left in upheaval. Dread and depression shrouded the land. One survivor in Siena described the scene:

Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another, for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and sight. ... Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices ... and they died by the hundreds both day and night. ... I, Agnolo di Tura, the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands. And there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city. There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

How did survivors respond? The Florentine author Boccaccio offered readers an escapist world of denial, fantasy, and indulgence. Others relentlessly (often religiously) reminded people of impending death in literature, the visual arts, dance, and by penitential flagellation. Still others became profiteers in a time of economic scarcity and institutional malaise.

Unflinching ministry

Catherine would have none of this. Instead, she faced the grim realities and found hope in God as the greatest Reality of all. The result was a courageous, compassionate, and creative path of ministry. Catherine's devotion to the sick was as contagious as the Plague itself, charismatically drawing others to touch lives and transform situations. In the midst of poverty, terror, and stench, she and her entourage spread the aroma of Christ through selfless service.

Catherine resolved to love as Jesus loved in all circumstances. While tending to a widow with breast cancer that had eaten away her flesh, for example, Catherine was overwhelmed by nausea due to the horrible odor. So she forced her face into the oozing, open sore—skin on skin—reprimanding herself, "Ah, you presume to abhor this sister, who has been redeemed by the blood of the Savior, do you—you who could fall into the same sickness or an even worse one? As God lives you shall not remain unpunished!" Despite the patient's horror, she would not retreat until the Spirit had conquered the rebellion of her flesh.

While many she touched were overcome by physical ills, others struggled with injustice and the ills of a devastated society. One prisoner, caught in the grip of a system plagued by rivalry and power plays, sought Catherine's company in the moments before his beheading. "I have just taken a head into my hands and have been moved so deeply that my heart cannot grasp it," she told her confessor Raymond of Capua. "I waited for him at the place of execution ... he arrived like a meek lamb and when he saw me he began to smile. He asked me to make the sign of the cross over him ... I stretched out his neck and bent down to him, reminding him of the blood of the Lamb. His lips kept murmuring only 'Jesus' and 'Catherine,' and he was still murmuring when I received his head into my hands ... my soul rested in peace and quiet, so aware of the fragrance of blood that I could not remove the blood which had splashed onto me."

Preachin' it to the Pope

Catherine's courage and compassion spilled into other activities as well, changing views of women's roles in the process. She was unconcerned about making a mark as a **woman in ministry** and more

consumed by Christ's call for her to be a **woman who ministers**. As Pope Paul VI said when he named Catherine a Doctor of the Church in 1970, hers was a "charism of exhortation." She believed that purposeful, articulate communication was the key to personal care and conflict resolution alike.

It was Catherine who boldly informed Pope Gregory XI of the "rotten members who rebel against you." She commanded him to leave Avignon, where the papacy had become a French puppet, and return to Rome: "Be manly and not fearful. Answer God who is calling you to take possession of the place of the glorious shepherd, Saint Peter, who you represent. Restore to Holy Church the heart of burning charity which she has lost: she is all pale because iniquitous men have drained her blood. Come, Father!"

Such exhortations to the pope were a small part of Catherine's extensive correspondence. Her nearly 400 surviving letters and other writings bear witness to her widespread influence. She asked questions that others did not dare to ask, and demanded responses. Her communications raised popular awareness, rallied support for change, fostered reconciliation and healing, and unified Christians in service.

Living and Loving for God

The title of Catherine's most famous work, *The Dialogue*, expresses her life's theme. Catherine actively sought to restore wholeness and find the best possible outcome in each situation—a ministry made possible by her rich, deepening dialogue with God. In *The Dialogue* she records the Lord's innermost conversations with her: "Your love should be sincere: you should love your neighbors with the same love with which you love Me."

In the fearful chaos of her own "Dark Ages"—fraught with plague, schism, poverty, and fragmentation—Catherine's voice emerged with clarity and compassion. Her own mother, who had previously thwarted Catherine's attempts to live unconventionally for God, joined the Dominican Third Order after being widowed, and worked closely with Catherine and imitated her life. Catherine's life challenges us today as it exemplifies P. T. Forsyth's advice: "You must live with people to know their problems, and live with God in order to solve them."

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John Wycliffe

"Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on his sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by his righteousness."

John Wycliffe left quite an impression on the church: 43 years after his death, officials dug up his body, burned his remains, and threw the ashes into the river Swift. Still, they couldn't get rid of him. Wycliffe's teachings, though suppressed, continued to spread. As a later chronicler observed, "Thus the brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon; Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; and they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine which now is dispersed the world over."

"Master of errors"

Wycliffe had been born in the hinterlands, on a sheep farm 200 miles from London. He left for Oxford University in 1346, but because of periodic eruptions of the Black Death, he was not able to earn his doctorate until 1372. Nonetheless, by then he was already considered Oxford's leading philosopher and theologian.

In 1374 he became rector of the parish in Lutterworth, but a year later he was disappointed to learn he was not granted a position at Lincoln nor the bishopric of Worcester—setbacks that some have seized upon as motives for his subsequent attacks on the papacy.

In the meantime, Rome had demanded financial support from England, a nation struggling to raise money to resist a possible French attack. Wycliffe advised his local lord, John of Gaunt, to tell Parliament not to comply. He argued that the church was already too wealthy and that Christ called his disciples to poverty, not wealth. If anyone should keep such taxes, it should be local English authorities.

Such opinions got Wycliffe into trouble, and he was brought to London to answer charges of heresy. The hearing had hardly gotten underway when recriminations on both sides filled the air. Soon they erupted into an open brawl, ending the meeting. Three months later, Pope Gregory XI issued five bulls (church edicts) against Wycliffe, in which Wycliffe was accused on 18 counts and was called "the master of errors."

At a subsequent hearing before the archbishop at Lambeth Palace, Wycliffe replied, "I am ready to defend my convictions even unto death.... I have followed the Sacred Scriptures and the holy doctors." He went on to say that the pope and the church were second in authority to Scripture.

This didn't sit well with Rome, but because of Wycliffe's popularity in England and a subsequent split in the papacy (the Great Schism of 1378, when rival popes were elected), Wycliffe was put under "house arrest" and left to pastor his Lutterworth parish.

Disputing the church

He deepened his study of Scripture and wrote more about his conflicts with official church teaching. He wrote against the doctrine of transubstantiation: "The bread while becoming by virtue of Christ's words the body of Christ does not cease to be bread."

He challenged indulgences: "It is plain to me that our prelates in granting indulgences do commonly blaspheme the wisdom of God."

He repudiated the confessional: "Private confession ... was not ordered by Christ and was not used by the apostles."

He reiterated the biblical teaching on faith: "Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on his sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by his righteousness."

Believing that every Christian should have access to Scripture (only Latin translations were available at the time), he began translating the Bible into English, with the help of his good friend John Purvey.

The church bitterly opposed it: "By this translation, the Scriptures have become vulgar, and they are more available to lay, and even to women who can read, than they were to learned scholars, who have a high intelligence. So the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden underfoot by swine."

Wycliffe replied, "Englishmen learn Christ's law best in English. Moses heard God's law in his own tongue; so did Christ's apostles."

Wycliffe died before the translation was complete (and before authorities could convict him of heresy); his friend Purvey is considered responsible for the version of the "Wycliffe" Bible we have today. Though Wycliffe's followers (who came to be called "Lollards"—referring to the region of their original strength) were driven underground, they remained a persistent irritant to English Catholic authorities until the English Reformation made their views the norm.

1302 Unam Sanctam proclaims papal supremacy

1309 Papacy begins "Babylonian" exile in Avignon

1321 Dante completes Divine Comedy

1330 John Wycliffe born

1384 John Wycliffe dies

1415 Jan Hus burned at stake

John Huss 1369-1415 (also spelled John Hus or Jan Hus)

"Lord Jesus, it is for thee that I patiently endure this cruel death. I pray thee to have mercy on my enemies."

Early in his monastic career, Martin Luther, rummaging through the stacks of a library, happened upon a volume of sermons by John Huss, the Bohemian who had been condemned as a heretic. "I was overwhelmed with astonishment," Luther later wrote. "I could not understand for what cause they had burnt so great a man, who explained the Scriptures with so much gravity and skill."

Huss would become a hero to Luther and many other Reformers, for Huss preached key Reformation themes (like hostility to indulgences) a century before Luther drew up his 95 Theses. But the Reformers also looked to Huss's life, in particular, his steadfast commitment in the face of the church's cunning brutality.

From foolishness to faith

Huss was born to peasant parents in "Goosetown," that is, Husinec, in the south of today's Czech Republic. (In his twenties, he shortened his name to Huss—"goose," and he and his friends delighted in making puns on his name; it was a tradition that continued, especially with Luther, who reminded his followers of the "goose" who had been "cooked" for defying the pope).

To escape poverty, Huss trained for the priesthood: "I had thought to become a priest quickly in order to secure a good livelihood and dress and to be held in esteem by men." He earned a bachelor's, master's, and then finally a doctorate. Along the way he was ordained (in 1401) and became the preacher at Prague's Bethlehem Chapel (which held 3,000), the most popular church in one of the largest of Europe's cities, a center of reform in Bohemia (for example, sermons were preached in Czech, not Latin).

During these years, Huss underwent a change. Though he spent some time with what he called a "foolish sect," he finally discovered the Bible: "When the Lord gave me knowledge of Scriptures, I discharged that kind of stupidity from my foolish mind."

The writings of John Wycliffe had stirred his interest in the Bible, and these same writings were causing a stir in Bohemia (technically the northeastern portion of today's Czech Republic, but a general term for the area where the Czech language and culture prevailed). The University of Prague was already split between Czechs and Germans, and Wycliffe's teachings only divided them more. Early debates hinged on fine points of philosophy (the Czechs, with Wycliffe, were realists; the Germans nominalists). But the Czechs, with Huss, also warmed up to Wycliffe's reforming ideas; though they had no intention of abandoning traditional doctrines, they wanted to place more emphasis on the Bible, expand the authority of church councils (and lessen that of the pope), and promote the moral reform of clergy. Thus Huss began increasingly to trust the

Scriptures, "desiring to hold, believe, and assert whatever is contained in them as long as I have breath in me."

A political struggle ensued, with the Germans labeling Wycliffe and his followers heretics. With the support of the king of Bohemia, the Czechs gained the upper hand, and the Germans were forced to flee to other universities.

The situation was complicated by European politics, which watched as two popes vied to rule all of Christendom. A church council was called at Pisa in 1409 to settle the matter. It deposed both popes and elected Alexander V as the legitimate pontiff (though the other popes, repudiating this election, continued to rule their factions). Alexander was soon "persuaded"—that is, bribed—to side with Bohemian church authorities against Huss, who continued to criticize them. Huss was forbidden to preach and excommunicated, but only on paper: with local Bohemians backing him, Huss continued to preach and minister at Bethlehem Chapel.

When Alexander V's successor, the antipope John XXIII (not to be confused with the modern pope by the same name), authorized the selling of indulgences to raise funds for his crusade against one of his rivals, Huss was scandalized and further radicalized. The pope was acting in mere self-interest, and Huss could no longer justify the pope's moral authority. He leaned even more heavily on the Bible, which he proclaimed the final authority for the church. Huss further argued that the Czech people were being exploited by the pope's indulgences, which was a not-so-veiled attack on the Bohemian king, who earned a cut of the indulgence proceeds.

Scripture rebel

With that Huss lost the support of his king. His excommunication, which had been tacitly dropped, was now revived, and an interdict was put upon the city of Prague: no citizen could receive Communion or be buried on church grounds as long as Huss continued his ministry. To spare the city, Huss withdrew to the countryside toward the end of 1412. He spent the next two years in feverish literary activity, composing a number of treatises. The most important was *The Church*, which he sent to Prague to be read publicly. In it he argued that Christ alone is head of the church, that a pope "through ignorance and love of money" can make many mistakes, and that to rebel against an erring pope is to obey Christ.

In November 1414, the Council of Constance assembled, and Huss was urged by Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund to come and give an account of his doctrine. Because he was promised safe conduct, and because of the importance of the council (which promised significant church reforms), Huss went. When he arrived, however, he was immediately arrested, and he remained imprisoned for months. Instead of a hearing, Huss was eventually hauled before authorities in chains and asked merely to recant his views.

When he saw he wasn't to be given a forum for explaining his ideas, let alone a fair hearing, he finally said, "I appeal to Jesus Christ, the only judge who is almighty and completely just. In his hands I plead my cause, not on the basis of false witnesses and erring councils, but on truth and justice." He was taken to his cell, where many pleaded with him to recant. On July 6, 1415, he was taken to the cathedral, dressed in his priestly garments, then stripped of them one by one. He refused one last chance to recant at the stake, where he prayed, "Lord Jesus, it is for thee that I patiently endure this cruel death. I pray thee to have mercy on my enemies." He was heard reciting the Psalms as the flames engulfed him.

His executioners scooped up his ashes and tossed them into a lake so that nothing would remain of the "heretic," but some Czechs collected bits of soil from the ground where Huss had died and took them back to Bohemia as a memorial.

Bohemians were furious with the execution and repudiated the council; over the next several years, a coalition of Hussites, radical Taborites, and others refused to submit to the authority of the Holy Roman emperor or the church and fended off three military assaults. Bohemia eventually reconciled with the rest of western Christendom—though on its own terms (for example, it was one of the few Catholic regions that offered Communion of both bread and wine; the rest of Christendom simply received the bread). Those who repudiated this last compromise formed the *Unitas Fratrum* ("Union of Brethren"), which became the foundation for the Moravian Brethren (Moravia is a region in the Czech Republic), who would play an influential role in the conversion of the Wesley brothers, among others.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/martyrs/huss.html>

1378 The Great Papal Schism

When two popes, and later three popes, vied for supremacy, the medieval church entered a dramatic, forty-year crisis of authority.

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“On Friday, St. George’s Eve, there was another session,” wrote an observer of the Council of Constance. “In this session Our Holy Father Pope Martin gave to all who were present at the Council of Constance permission to leave and likewise absolution from penalty and guilt. Afterward he gave the people his blessing in the upper court. Our lord King stood beside him, dressed as an evangelist, wearing his imperial crown and holding the orb in his hand while a man held a naked sword before him. Cardinal Conti proclaimed to the people in Latin the indulgence of seven years for mortal sins and seven Lents. Master Peter repeated it in German, and everyone was given permission to go home.”

This passage, from Ulrich Richental’s *Chronicle of the Council of Constance*, describes the closing session of that great council. The session took place on April 22, 1418, at a moment when the new pope, Martin V, with plague moving in on the city, was anxious to speed the council fathers on their way and make his own departure.

Constance may not exactly be a household word—not even in the history of representative assemblies—but in size alone it was one of the most imposing of medieval gatherings. Nor was it distinguished by size alone. It was the greatest and certainly the most memorable of the general assemblies held by the medieval Latin Church (i.e., the Western church). When it assembled in 1414, it did so at a time of supreme crisis in the life of that church, when what later came to be known as the Great Schism of the West had endured for almost forty years.

Causes of the Schism

In 1377, after the papacy had been resident for almost seventy years at Avignon, under the shadow of French royal power, Gregory XI had finally succeeded in bringing it back to Rome. He had done so despite the hostility of some of the Roman nobility and some of his own cardinals. When he died in March 1378, six of the twenty-two cardinals were still in residence at Avignon, where a considerable part of the papal bureaucracy was still functioning.

With Gregory XI’s death, the Romans feared the election of a French pope and the removal of the papacy back to Avignon. As a result, the papal election that took place in April did so amid considerable confusion—rioting outside the conclave and dissension within. It ended with the election of a compromise candidate, Urban VI (1378–1389), an Italian who had served at Avignon.

But Urban VI’s subsequent violent and abusive treatment of the cardinals caused them to fear for their lives and suspect him of insanity. That, combined with the turbulent conditions surrounding his election, gave rise to doubts about the validity of Urban VI’s title. The cardinals publicly repudiated his election and selected one of themselves as Clement VII (1378–1394). By the summer of 1379, having failed to capture Rome, Clement took up residence at Avignon, and the stage was set for two rival papal “obediences,” Roman and Avignonese.

As their previous political and diplomatic alignments might have suggested, France, Castile [a

Spanish kingdom], and Scotland backed Clement. Meanwhile, England and much of the German Empire sided with Urban. As a result, neither of the rival claimants had a decisive edge of power. Neither pope being able to dislodge the other, and neither being willing to relinquish his claim, there began the most serious schism ever to disrupt the unity of the Latin Church.

Over time, loyalties hardened, and the rival papal courts strove to perpetuate their claims. At Rome, Boniface IX (in 1389), Innocent VII (in 1404), and Gregory XII (in 1406) were elected to succeed Urban VI. At Avignon, Benedict XIII was elected in 1394 to succeed Clement VII. The understandable results were widespread administrative confusion and jurisdictional conflict, as well as a mounting and debilitating spiritual anxiety.

The Council of Constance

Many attempts were made to end the schism, yet the most promising had led only to the addition (at Pisa) in 1410 of yet another line of claimants to the papal title. The intolerable situation of three rival popes ultimately led, through a complex process of ecclesiastical and secular diplomacy, to the Council of Constance. Although the council was summoned (under imperial pressure) by the Pisan pope, John XXIII (1410–1415), in its determination to end the schism, it did not hesitate to depose him along with his Avignonese rival, Benedict XIII, and to accept the “resignation” of the Roman claimant, Gregory XII. The council then proceeded to elect a successor, Martin V (1417–31), the first pope in forty years to be able to command the allegiance of the whole Latin Church.

The achievement of the council was considerable. Not only did it end years of turbulence in the church, but it did so by asserting these historically significant beliefs:

- the pope, however divinely instituted his office, was not an absolute monarch but in some sense a constitutional ruler;
- the pope possessed a merely ministerial authority delegated to him by the community of the faithful and for the good of the whole church;
- the community of the faithful had not exhausted its inherent authority in the mere act of electing its ruler but had retained whatever residual power was necessary to prevent its own subversion or destruction;
- the community of the faithful could exercise power via its representatives assembled in a general council—even, in certain critical cases, against the wishes of the pope and, if need be, it could judge, chastise, and even depose a pope.

The Great Schism of the West thus set forth a greatly expanded authority for general councils of the church. As the miseries of the schism receded into the background, however, a resurgent papacy succeeded in marginalizing this “conciliar” consciousness in the life of the church. But a strengthened role for councils never wholly disappeared, and, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), it has shown unambiguous signs of renewed vitality.

Thomas à Kempis 1380-1471
Author of the most popular devotional classic

"We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do."

Sir Thomas More, England's famous lord chancellor under Henry VIII (and subject of the film *A Man for All Seasons*) said it was one of the three books everybody ought to own. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, read a chapter a day from it and regularly gave away copies as gifts. Methodist founder John Wesley said it was the best summary of the Christian life he had ever read.

They were talking about Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, the devotional classic that has been translated into over 50 languages, in editions too numerous for scholars to keep track of (by 1779 there were already 1,800 editions).

Little is known of Thomas himself, and he is known for little else—though this one contribution to history seems to be enough.

Humility first

Called the "calamitous century," the fourteenth century into which Thomas Hemerken was born felt the shadow of the apocalypse. Constant wars and repeated bouts of the Black Plague drove population down. The Great Schism tore the church apart, seating one pope in Rome and another in Avignon. In rural areas, roving marauders knew no restraints, and peasant revolts kept urban centers reeling with confusion.

Early on Thomas gave himself to a Dutch Augustinian monastery associated with a group called The Brethren of the Common Life. There he became the prior's assistant, charged with instructing novices in the spiritual life. In that capacity, he wrote four booklets between 1420 and 1427; they were collected and named after the title of the first booklet: *The Imitation of Christ*.

In *The Imitation*, Thomas combines a painfully accurate analysis of the soul with a clear vision of the fullness of the divine life. He does not describe the spiritual life in a linear way, as if one step precedes another, but instead repeats and embellishes themes, like a symphonic composer.

In the first treatise, "Useful reminders for the spiritual life," Thomas lays out the primary requirement for the spiritually serious: "We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ."

The highest virtue, from which all other virtues stem, is humility. Thomas bids all to let go of the illusion of superiority. "If you want to learn something that will really help you, learn to see yourself as God sees you and not as you see yourself in the distorted mirror of your own self-importance," he writes. "This is the greatest and most useful lesson we can learn: to know ourselves for what we truly are, to admit freely our weaknesses and failings, and to hold a humble opinion of ourselves because of them."

Furthermore, humility leads us to embrace the path of suffering: "Plan as you like and arrange everything as best you can, yet you will always encounter some suffering whether you want to or not. Go wherever you will, you will always find the cross... God wants you to learn to endure troubles without comfort, to submit yourself totally to him, and to become more humble through adversity."

Trust not yourself

Thomas goes on to tell his novices how to handle criticism, failures, sensual desires, and the difficulties of obedience—always with an eye to the paradoxes of the deeper Christian life. For example, in chapter 20 of the first book, he writes, "If you aim at a fervent spiritual life, then you too must turn your back on the crowds as Jesus did. The only man who can safely appear in public is the one who wishes he were at home. He alone can safely speak who prefers to be silent. Only he can safely govern who prefers to live in submission, and only he can safely command who prefers to obey."

The first two treatises are written as sermons or reflections. In the third treatise, "Of Inner Comfort," Jesus and the Disciple talk together about the spiritual life, and in the fourth treatise, "The Book on the Sacrament," Thomas discusses how the Eucharist can help the faithful draw nearer to Christ.

Throughout the book, Thomas's advice is consistent: Do not trust yourself, do not indulge yourself, do not put yourself forward; instead put your full trust in God and, out of love for God's will, yield to all the circumstances of life into which God places you.

The Imitation was published in Latin, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and English by the end of the fifteenth century, and it remains one of the most popular devotional guides to this day.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/innertravelers/kempis.html?start=1>

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 28: 100 Most Important Events in Church History

1456 Gutenberg Produces the First Printed Bible

Using his revolutionary invention—printing from movable type—he made the Scriptures potentially accessible to every person.

Last year saw a curious item: the entire Bible on a hand-held computer. The technological wonder can look up chapters and verses instantly and project them on its screen, saving the reader from flipping pages. Whether or not this invention will replace printed Bibles, however, it pales before the technological breakthroughs of a German printer over five hundred years ago. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a modern church, or world, apart from the mass-produced printed page he made possible.

In Search of Efficient Printing

Christianity, following Judaism, has always been a religion of the Book. For centuries scribes dedicated themselves to copying the Scriptures by hand—primarily on papyrus or animal skin parchment. With the rise of monasteries, copying the Scriptures became the occupation for some monks. But it was truly a labor. The idea that every believer or family could have a Bible was unthinkable.

In the 1440s, the German Johann Gutenberg began experimenting with novel, mysterious ways of approaching printing. So did many other Europeans, all looking for a faster, cheaper way to produce books. Usually, if Europeans didn't write by hand, they used hand stamps or woodcuts—an improvement, but still painfully slow. And the printing methods used in the Orient, primarily block printing, were unknown in Europe.

Gutenberg had an advantage: he was skilled in engraving and metal working. While living in Strasbourg, Gutenberg perfected several unique ideas: a hand-held mold that could adjust to cast any letter accurately and in large quantities; a durable tin alloy that melted and solidified quickly and without distortion; an oil-based ink; and a modified printing press. By about 1440, he had assembled the necessary components for mass-produced printing, but if he printed anything in Strasbourg, it has not survived.

By 1448, Gutenberg returned to his hometown of Mainz and borrowed money for his printing business. He failed to repay the sizable loans, and in 1455, his creditor and partner foreclosed, taking possession of Gutenberg's typefaces for two projects underway: a Bible printed in forty-two lines per page, and a psalter. Thus, no printed material that bears Gutenberg's name has survived. Nor is there an authentic portrait of him or a copy of his autograph.

The Famous 42-Line Bible

By the following August, however, a copy of Gutenberg's forty-two-line Bible—specifically, Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate—was completed. The Bible, which was printed simultaneously on six printing presses, was stunning. (*See graphic in From the Editor.*) Some collectors say this first printed book is also the most beautiful ever printed, and they pay astounding sums for the forty or fifty copies that survive of the original two hundred. Gutenberg's typeface was not like ours; rather, it resembled the ornate handwritten letters the scribes had used for ages. Each chapter began with a large illuminated initial. Later, in the interest of economy, more straightforward typefaces developed—easier to cast, easier to read, but less beautiful.

Gutenberg's techniques remained a guarded trade secret in Mainz—but not for long. By the time Martin Luther was born, in 1483, every large European country had at least one printing press. Within fifty years of Gutenberg's first Bible, more copies of books were produced than in several of the previous centuries together.

Revolution and the Reformation

Gutenberg's new process sparked a revolution in society and the church. Books could now be produced in quantities and at prices that made them available to many people, not merely to scholars and monks. The resulting explosion of knowledge continues to accelerate in our day.

In the church, the Protestant Reformation might have been impossible in the pre-Gutenberg age. (Indeed, the Reformation became, in some ways, a war of books, each party pointing out the errors of the others.) Everything the Reformers said about the priesthood of all believers was rooted in the assumption that people could have access to the Bible in their own language. Thus, Luther and the other Reformers worked to translate the Scriptures so that no priest, pope, or council needed to stand between the plowboy and the Word of God.

The chief book being printed was the Bible, thus spreading Christian teaching. As more were printed, more people became readers, and readers demanded more books, thus spreading literacy. And even for the illiterate, the Bible became more accessible, because the pastor could read from, and preach about, a Bible that was more readily available.

Christianity, the religion of the Book, was becoming universal in a new way. Religion did not have to end at the church door; thanks to the possession of Bibles, every household could become a training ground for faith.

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Christianity and Prosperity

By David Feddes

Christianity often produces prosperity. Many Christian individuals are more prosperous than they would have been without Christianity, and many nations influenced by Christianity are more prosperous than nations that don't have Christian roots or influence.

Christianity often produces prosperity. Doesn't that seem odd? After all, Jesus had no property of his own and was more at home among the poor than the rich. How could someone who lived in poverty cause so much prosperity?

We're going to explore how Jesus' influence often leads to affluence at a personal and national level, but first let's be clear that Jesus isn't mainly about making money. Jesus said in no uncertain terms that nobody can worship God and worship money at the same time. Anybody who tries to use Christianity as a way to get rich is denying Christ and betraying the gospel. Let's be equally clear that getting rich is no sure sign of God's approval or of good conduct, and being poor is no sure sign of God's rejection or of bad conduct. Jesus and many of his holiest followers have lived in poverty.

Prosperity is not the main goal of faith in Christ, and prosperity is not proof of a relationship to God—and yet it remains true that Christianity often produces prosperity. Christ's influence often brings affluence. This is true at an individual level and at a national level.

At the individual level, people who trust Jesus and live by the Bible often avoid problems that cause poverty and live in a way that makes them more productive and prosperous. For example, Jesus taught that sex belongs only within marriage and that marriage is a lifelong commitment. This doesn't just affect relationships and feelings; it has a big economic impact. Someone has observed that in North America, you only need to do three things to avoid poverty: finish high school, marry before having a child, and marry after the age of 20. Among those who follow such advice, only 8 percent are poor, while 79 percent of those who do not are poor. When Jesus' followers have strong marriages and stable families, the economic benefit is huge. The Christian view of the family is best not just morally and spiritually but usually better financially as well. When the Bible teaches family stability, hard work, wise use of time, trustworthiness, and freedom from drunkenness, such teachings prevent poverty and lay a foundation for prosperity.

Christianity often produces prosperity not only at a personal level but at a national level as well. All nations have some rich people and some poor people, but the nations with a large middle class and a prosperous overall economy are mostly countries with a heritage of faith in Jesus and the Bible. The United States, Canada, and the nations of Western Europe have strong economies closely related to centuries of Christian influence. In recent times many have turned away from faith in Christ, but there's no denying that Christianity helped shape the practices that built these economies. In South Korea millions of people have become Christians in the past hundred years, and the economy has also grown dramatically. A nation such as Japan is an economic power though it's never had many Christians, but when did Japan's

economy grow strong? After it became linked with the economy of the Western world and adopted Western business practices with Christian roots.

The economic impact of Christianity isn't always obvious or immediate in a nation. It often takes time for a nation's overall system to change and for a productive middle class to prosper. Likewise, the economic impact of abandoning Christ isn't always obvious or immediate in a country's life. It often takes time to totally squander the spiritual and intellectual capital built up by past generations. Decay is often slow but real, just as growth is often slow but real.

Jesus compared God's kingdom to a seed which grows into a tree and offers shelter to nations. Jesus also compared God's kingdom to yeast which gradually changes a huge lump of dough. A seed doesn't become a tree in a moment, and yeast doesn't cause bread to rise instantly, but over time the results are real. So it is with Jesus' impact on the world and on all aspects of life. Jesus has been a world changer not just in personal piety and religious practices but in every part of human life, including work and economics. God's kingdom in Christ is first of all about living under God's love and rule, not about prosperity, but it often produces greater prosperity as a result of being more in tune with God's design.

Worthwhile Work

One key way Christianity has produced prosperity is by making work worthwhile. If people see work as honorable and profitable, they are more likely to work hard and be productive, and their overall economy is more likely to grow. As an economy grows, more and more wealth is created, and more and more people have a chance to prosper.

How likely is an economy to grow if everybody despises work? What would happen if wealthy people thought work was beneath them and if poor people did only as much work as they were forced to do? That was pretty much the situation among the dominant cultures of Greece and Rome when Jesus came into the world. Professor Alvin Schmidt makes this point in his book *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*. The Greek philosopher Plato said that work and craftsmanship should be for slaves, not for thinkers and free men. The Roman writer Cicero said that working to earn a living was unbecoming to a freeborn man and that it was vulgar and low to be paid for "mere manual labor." In the Greco-Roman world, the leading citizens thought themselves too lofty to work, and the working classes toiled along without much incentive. Most workers were slaves, so work didn't pay off. It didn't make them feel significant, and it didn't help them to prosper.

Christianity saw work in a very different way. Jesus himself wasn't too high and mighty to work hard. Jesus was a carpenter who sweated and got his hands dirty. The apostle Paul, the leading missionary after Christ, didn't just preach sermons and write deep theology. He worked as a tentmaker and paid his own bills. Christ and his apostles worked willingly, and their example renewed the dignity of work and made it worthwhile.

Christians were taught that when God created the first humans, he put them to work. After Adam and Eve sinned, work became harder and more painful, but it remained part of humanity's God-given mandate. With the coming of Jesus, God's call to work became even clearer and more compelling. Christians were told, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart... It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23-24). Every task, no matter how lowly it seemed, no matter how poor the pay, was worth

doing if it was done as an act of obedience and service to Jesus Christ. Christians were taught to see every legitimate occupation as a calling from God and every task as an opportunity to honor God. The goal was not first of all to get rich but simply to do everything with excellence for the Lord's sake. Even slaves could find dignity in their work if they were doing it not merely for a bossy master but for the Lord. The Christian work ethic sought to honor the Lord by working with diligence and excellence.

Amid a culture that despised work, Christianity taught workers to do their best. What's more, in a culture that cheated workers of fair wages and had many slaves, Christianity taught slave owners and employers to provide workers "with what is right and fair" (Colossians 4:1), rather than cheating them of wages they had earned. Jesus himself said, "The worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7) and Paul echoed this (1 Timothy 5:18). Jesus' brother James thundered against rich people who didn't pay their workers what they deserved (James 5:4). Work should be rewarding not just spiritually but financially.

Christianity produces prosperity not by siding with the rich against the poor but by honoring work and ordering fair pay for workers. This benefits everybody. Workers benefit by getting more respect and better pay, employers benefit by having workers who are more motivated and productive, and the entire economy benefits by an increase in overall wealth and buying power that opens up even more business opportunities for employers and more job possibilities.

Personal Property

Another way Christ and his followers produced prosperity was by protecting personal property. When God gave the Ten Commandments, he said, "You shall not steal," and Jesus repeated this command (Matthew 19:18). That command against stealing is the divine defense of private property. Stealing is taking what rightfully belongs to someone else, so when God says not to steal, he defends the right to enjoy the fruit of one's own labor and to own personal property. God also commands, "You shall not covet." This requires us to respect someone else's property and not to resent that he has property we don't have.

The Lord doesn't give exact instructions on every detail of government and economics. If we happen to like one particular system, we shouldn't think that such a system has God's full and exclusive approval. Still, God does reveal some principles that every economy must honor and no system can afford to violate. One of those principles is the right to personal property.

Ever since Plato there have been thinkers and activists who have suggested that many problems could be solved by abolishing private property. Various governments throughout history have seized property from individuals without permission or compensation. This reached its most widespread expression in the form of communism. Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, "The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property." In communist and socialist systems, individuals own nothing; government owns everything. The stated goal is to help workers, but what's the point of working hard if you can't keep any of your pay and can't keep anything you bought with the money? An old joke says that in communist countries the people pretend to work and the government pretends to pay

them. Abolishing private property is a recipe for perpetual poverty for almost everybody, except an elite few who run the system for their own benefit.

Far wiser and more in tune with the Bible was Abraham Lincoln when he said, "Property is the fruit of labor...property is desirable...is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another; but let him labor diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built." Lincoln fought slavery and against gaining wealth unjustly, but he also stood for the value of work and the right to property. Such principles, rooted in the Bible, have brought much prosperity to people and to nations.

But, you might wonder, what about the Christian emphasis on generosity and helping the needy? Well, Jesus did indeed teach generosity, but how can you be generous if you have nothing of your own to give away? And how does it help the needy to lock them into a system that stifles initiative and productivity and makes almost everybody more needy? The first Christians were generous in sharing their possessions, and many Christians since then have been generous too. Such generosity is one of Christianity's great contributions to the world. But there's a huge difference between the personal generosity of Christianity and the government-enforced confiscation of socialism. Even when some Christians at various points in history have decided to give up personal property and share everything with others in a community of Christians, this has always been voluntary, not compulsory. Socialism says, "What's yours is mine" and takes it by government force. Christian generosity says, "What's mine is yours" and gives it in Christian love.

Private property is just another word for freedom: freedom to make choices about the goods God has entrusted to you. Wherever private property is abolished, freedom is also abolished. Indeed, economic freedom exists only to the degree that property is not taxed. If 40 percent of your income goes to pay taxes, it means that you have 60 percent economic freedom. Government officials decide what happens to 40 percent of your money, and you decide what happens to the other 60 percent.

This doesn't mean that all taxation is wrong. Christ and his apostles told Christians to pay their taxes to cover the expenses of governing (Matthew 17:27, 22:21; Romans 13:6-7). The Bible doesn't set the exact percentage of taxes that is proper; the Bible doesn't say how much government is too much; but the Bible leaves little doubt that government's power must not be absolute and that taxation must not be so excessive that it destroys the freedom and dignity of individuals and families to make significant decisions about their own income and property.

It turns out that economies tend to flourish when people are free: free to own property; free to make their own choices about spending, saving, and investing, rather than leaving everything to government; free to invest in family and business and community rather than handing everything to the government. Why do people generally become more prosperous when they're free to pursue the goals they've chosen rather than goals government has imposed on them? It could be blamed on greed, but it could also be credited to the resourcefulness of the human spirit set free. No doubt both factors are often at work in a free economy—sinful greed as well as liberty and dignity—but at least there is real, human choice rather than an inhuman system that destroys all

personal choice in financial and economic matters. By emphasizing individual dignity and protecting personal property, the Christian faith has produced prosperity.

Reward and Responsibility

Still another way Christianity has produced prosperity is by stressing responsibility and reward. When people are free to reap the rewards of wise financial decisions, they also have the responsibility to accept the consequences if their investment choices are foolish. If they deserve a fair wage for hard work well done, they also deserve hardship for laziness. In short, choices have consequences.

Among the early Christians, there were a few foolish folks who thought it would be marvelously spiritual to stop working and just wait for Jesus to return and bring heaven to earth. But Christ spoke through his apostles and told these lazy people to get working if they expected to eat. God's promises for eternal life and Christ's return were no excuse to be irresponsible or to exploit the generosity of others. Jesus' followers were told, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands ... so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Christianity taught help for the truly needy but not for the lazy.

Any system that seeks total equality of result, that tries to give lazy people the same income as hard workers, or that tries to make foolish investments pay the same as wise ones, will hinder prosperity. It hurts productivity to reward unproductive behavior. This doesn't mean there should be no forgiveness or second chance for those who have blown it in the past, but it does mean that an entire system built on the goal of equal income, regardless of people's effort or wisdom, will stifle productivity. A system that subsidizes laziness and foolishness as a matter of policy will make poverty worse, not better. But a system based on the biblical principles of reward and responsibility, where actions have consequences, tends to make people more diligent and intelligent, and this leads to an overall increase in the productivity and prosperity of society.

Another word for all of this is justice. When an entire society is shaped by standards of economic justice, prosperity grows because people see that it usually pays to work and play by the rules. But when there is injustice, when some people warp the system for their own benefit at the expense of others, it stifles economic incentive for most people.

Christianity has increased prosperity in many places by making unjust societies more just. It hasn't always been easy. We've seen the positive economic impact of Christianity on individuals and societies, but it must also be said that when people become Christians in a society that remains unjust, they often become poorer because of persecution and injustice and because the economic system of their society hasn't yet developed sound structures grounded in basic economic justice. However, when Christian principles gain wider acceptance and a majority of people live by them, then justice prevails and a wise, diligent, moral person will often reap economic rewards.

Moral Capital

For societies to flourish financially, it's important to have not just financial capital but moral capital. If people are trustworthy and truthful, business contracts can be made. But if nobody trusts anybody and contracts mean nothing, business can't really

flourish. The Bible says, “You must have accurate and honest weights and measures” (Deuteronomy 25:15). If standards and measurements and bookkeeping practices are honest, people can buy and sell and invest and do business with considerable confidence. But if people and companies provide false advertising or phony accounting, there is serious economic damage. The collapse of Enron Corporation in an accounting scandal is a case in point. As long as such deceptions are the exception and not the rule, an economy can keep moving ahead. But when there’s widespread dishonesty and distrust, when consumers and investors have no confidence in the information they receive, economic damage is unavoidable. In some countries today, the main economic crisis is really a moral crisis: nobody trusts anybody, investors stay away, and the economy keeps going down.

Throughout history, followers of Jesus Christ have had a sense of a higher calling and a higher standard. At times that calling has been ignored and the standard violated, but over time the influence of Jesus Christ has had a profound and positive effect in making people more honest and trustworthy, more diligent and responsible, more stable and frugal, more energetic and venturesome. Christians have been leaders in free enterprise and have come up with such innovations as the system of double-entry bookkeeping which balances assets and liabilities and led to the use of spreadsheets.

None of this is to say that Jesus’ main work was to lead business seminars or to help people fatten their bank accounts. And the fact that God-given principles can produce prosperity doesn’t remove the danger of loving prosperity more than God. Again and again throughout the Bible, the Lord tells his people that when they prosper under his blessing, they will be tempted to forget the Lord and to set their hearts on worldly wealth or to “think that godliness is a means to financial gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). I would be horrified if anyone reading this came to the conclusion that God is a gimmick to make money.

There’s no denying that faith in Christ often makes people more responsible and successful, and Christian principles have helped many societies to flourish financially. But to love treasure on earth more than treasure in heaven is a deadly mistake. Christ is indeed a world changer, with a huge impact in all areas of life. But it all begins in the human heart, and its ultimate focus is on eternal life in Christ. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). He said not to worry about material things but to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

It’s good to highlight the way Christ and his principles have changed the world economically, because we should thank the Lord for every gift and give credit where credit is due. But having considered some economic fringe benefits of Christian influence, always keep at the center the amazing gift of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus. And follow wherever he leads, whether it brings you poverty or prosperity.