

REVIEW OF RICHARD HIGGINSON, *FAITH, HOPE AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY*, IVP, 2012

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This is a rare and excellent book. Many books have tried to describe what they claim is the Bible's blueprint for social and economic justice. A notable recent example would be Tim Keller's 2012, *Generous Justice*, Hodder and Stoughton. Higginson's book, however, is one of the few that also engages with real business life. It derives from the author's twenty plus years' experience as part of the Ridley Hall Faith in Business Project.

The author outlines five key principles which should enable economic life to be a power for good; enterprise, poverty reduction, integrity, sustainability and discipleship. Hitherto, in Higginson's view, there have been some harmful applications of theology to business life, e.g. prosperity theology, excessive negativity about market capitalism, and a sacred-secular divide. In just over 220 pages a dizzying range of important subjects are considered, often in a new light; renewable energy relative to fossil fuels, developing alternatives for those working in the "vice trade", the causes of the 2007-8 banking crisis, why bankers should not be treated like New Testament tax collectors, principles for executive reward and salaries, should the Old Testament "ban" on interest payments still apply, micro-finance and the notion of a "just price".

His book is structured around a seven part "drama" which he feels runs through the Old and New Testaments. The thread connecting up the drama is hope and the seven parts are:

- Creation: God as the ultimate entrepreneur
- Fall: Leading to exploitation and greed (hence, for example, frustration in work, suicides at Foxconn, the banking crisis etc.)
- The Law to Israel: A way to minimise the negative impact of debt and corruption
- The Coming of Jesus: His word to the marginalised
- Christ's death and resurrection: "Death" at work (e.g. industrial accidents, 9/11, corporate collapses)

- Living as a people of hope: Three case studies (the monasteries, enlightened nineteenth century Non-conformist entrepreneurs, the implied message of the Anglican Communion service)
- Coming Kingdom: There is a great transformation coming and it begins even now.

Higginson's style and approach is very measured and careful but he is not afraid to define a position. Along the way he probably annoys pretty much everybody in some way whether they come from the economic/political left, right or centre! He does, for example, advocate a progressive shift to renewables (as opposed to an abrupt switch out of fossil fuels or plain climate change denial); sometimes, he thinks, it can be a sin against God's purposes to leave resources in the ground and sometimes it can be a sin to exploit them too quickly. He does think Calvin was basically right to permit the payment of interest on commercial loans. He is relatively supportive of the Wilkinson and Pickett "spirit level" thesis regarding inequality (perhaps too much so, in my opinion, is it really fair to describe the UK and US as characterised by "extreme inequality" although certainly inequality has increased?).

Regarding micro-finance, he makes an interesting application of the theology of the Fall; even good ideas and institutions can often be corrupted by human greed and sinfulness. He also provides a very interesting discussion of how Christians might act in countries where bribery and corruption are pervasive (he does not consider the possibility whether Western laws against bribes may have the unintended consequence of reducing investment into those countries). Interestingly, Higginson thinks there is a place for Christians to be involved and hence be salt and light in alternative business models (e.g. co-ops and social enterprises) as well as existing large companies.

What for Higginson determines what is or is not a "Christian policy"? It is not straightforward to answer that question because, as far as I can see, he does not attempt to set out an explicit and systematic answer. To be fair to him, he would perhaps say that he was writing as a practical person to other practical people, having dealt with many Christians who have been embedded in business life, and he was not attempting to write as a theoretical economist. That all said, Higginson clearly accepts the propositions of orthodox and indeed evangelical Christianity that the ultimate source of authority is revelation in the Bible but with a very substantial place left for, as a guide, to tradition and the accumulated wisdom of the church over the centuries. He does imply that the best way to apply Biblical revelation is as a multi-part drama.