

While Witherington applies the “rich man” passages to modern Christians, the rich then were the landed elite. He warns against wealth (151) but ordinary middle-class Westerners are all wealthy and yet have little in common with either the rich or the poor of Israel. Western Christians are still looking for moral guidelines that allow for the common use of money, for the prevalence of people putting their savings in banks, and for ordinary Christians to be members of the middle class.

The final chapter is a sermon-like list of familiar ideas on living simply. I have often wondered why people who evince a strong commitment to living apart from consumption (which he calls *conspicuous* à la Veblen, though *consumerism* is more fitting and worthy of his criticism) do not join a flourishing Amish community or move to the Ohio River Valley to emulate the prolific Walter Berry. It is worth considering that a world of such simplicity might not support even half of earth’s current population.

Witherington, in this otherwise fine book, has missed an opportunity to make a thorough application of his good and biblical ideas to our world. Today, Western Christians are typically prosperous enough not to live hand-to-mouth. Instead, we can save in an economy that thrives on investment in diverse market opportunities rather than on the mere fertility of the land.

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Ecumenical Babel: Confusing Economic Ideology and the Church’s Social Witness

Jordan J. Ballor

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Jordan Ballor’s *Ecumenical Babel* is primarily a severe critique of the economic thought of three principal ecumenical organizations—the Lutheran World Federation, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Council of Churches. He acknowledges the imperative of Christian unity to which the ecumenical movement is properly addressed, and hopes, reasonably enough, that his book will make a contribution to restoring the movement to a more fruitful course. In pursuing that end, however, he can be less than irenic, even caustic. There is his title, of course, and phrases such as “an ecumenical-industrial complex,” and summary negative judgments such as: “The ethical ideas being spread in the ecumenical quest for relevance . . . have long ceased to be those of traditional Christianity.” He echoes approvingly some of the movement’s (especially the WCC’s) most severe critics, above all Ernest Lefever, whom he quotes at great length. He also grants the good work of much ecumenical dialogue, for example, in theology; his critique here is focused on economic judgments only. He wants reform of these main ecumenical organizations, not their abandonment—but he is fairly pessimistic that this can happen, thus at the same time hoping that Christians can bypass them and further the ecumenical cause in other ways.

Some parts of the book revive old material for new uses, which I will admit charmed me, since I was an active participant at the time. One of his principal sources is Paul Ramsey's *Who Speaks for the Church*, which was written in response to the 1966 WCC Conference on Church and Society, in Geneva, where Ramsey was in attendance and where I was rapporteur and editor for the second section. Because I was sympathetic to Ramsey's reaction, we exchanged thoughts afterward, and he sent me his draft manuscript for suggestions. A brief synopsis of our correspondence went into his book, the point being, as he conceded, that there are places where the Church's witness needs to be specific to social issues: for instance, "at the gates of Auschwitz," or even more broadly, in the opposition of the church to the Nazi regime. The difficulty is to know how far it is legitimate to extend ethical revulsion at particular matters into policy judgments without disabling legitimate differences of opinion among equally committed Christians.

Ballor's book is Ramsey redivivus on this point, but it is meant to extend it and claim its relevance for a new time with new materials illustrative of the problem. He shares the economic critique of Lefever that the WCC is dominated by neo-Marxist liberation theology in economics, an ideology that trumps more basic Christian thinking about society and denies the validity of other views, especially free-market thinking, for which a Christian case can also be made. This is a legitimate point. Many of us who were insiders in the 1960s and 1970s found ourselves later much disturbed by the subsequent style and substance of ecumenical social witness, and, "old Turks" that we were, we remonstrated with the then-leadership (to little effect, I fear). However, in protesting, Ballor also joins the politically and economically conservative critics in a way that risks cultural identity on the other side of the political spectrum. He acknowledges this briefly, almost in passing, but claims that in a market economy even sins such as excessive self-interest are controlled by the system. One could say (as he does) that God is using even these corruptions for the overall benefit of humankind—which comes uncomfortably close to saying that free-market capitalism is really an expression of divine favor. That then looks as though he is offering a counter-ideology to the one he accuses the ecumenical groups of favoring, but he makes the same mistake he sees in them: He bestows divine blessing on an economic system. A step back is in order. No one will say now that controlled economies are free of corruption, even gross corruption. That does not mean that their opposite, the free-market economy, gets a clean bill of health. One can hardly blame religious ethicists who refrain from blessing any one system of economic thought and who find moral faults in all of them.

When it comes to ethical methodology, Ballor is right to point to the considerable peril of doing ethics contextually, the WCC's Protestant style, in contrast to the Catholic preference for finding broader and permanent principles in natural law (a route that has its own perils to be sure). An ethical method that tries to discern the divine imperative in events of the time is liable to read those signs through its own biases, which, even controlled by a perception steeped in the discipline of the Word, may easily confuse its own viewpoint or ideological bent with the insights of transcendence. That does not necessarily make the statements of the WCC to particular situations wrong, though Ballor thinks they usually are. The larger point is that even if they are right, they are contentious and too specific

to trigger correctives as demands of Christian faith. We cannot elevate specific social, political, and economic judgments to the status of creedal affirmation.

Yet, hearing the anguish of the poor and dispossessed, as one does painfully in WCC engagements, one may be pardoned for thinking one hears the voice of God somewhere in that anguish. The “preferential option for the poor,” a Catholic slogan originally, is apposite here, and it is certainly supported in the New Testament. Is it unfair or unjust if the poor lack or suffer? Ballor is not terribly sympathetic to this idea, suggesting that merit or desert must be weighed into any calculation of justice. He surely does not intend it, but there is a disturbing opening here to blaming the poor for their own poverty, a subject much discussed and not easily accepted by the Christian conscience. It would be hard to argue that a sharply rising gap between rich and poor is an expression of just desert at either end of the scale.

At the end of the book, Ballor comes to an ecclesiastical argument, which he has foreshadowed at numerous places earlier. The question is whether the ecumenical organizations severally or the movement generally ought to have status as a church or as the Church speaking with magisterial authority. He seems to favor a move in this direction, referring to “the unrealized potential of the ecumenical movement to be of service *as a church* to the Christian community.” However, the self-understanding of the WCC is as an organization of churches, not a church itself. Its statements have a self-consciously different authority than would, for example, a papal encyclical. It means to refer its work back to the churches for their use though, as Ballor justly points out, in practice it cultivates an appearance of speaking as the churches’ representative, speaking *for* them to the world rather than *to* them for their own reception.

Ballor argues instead, invoking the distant voice of Bonhoeffer, that the movement is or ought to be an “institutional form of *the church*,” that it should be so or else lose all authority. That, of course, would require it to be “appropriately circumspect in its ethical pronouncements on specific matters of public policy.” Precisely. That is the significant transformation that this book urges.

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