

Jesus and Money: A Guide for Times of Financial Crisis

Ben Witherington III

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2010 (187 pages)

Ben Witherington is a scholar who covers various financial topics well in *Jesus and Money*. His book is timely as people are distressed about money and are seeking biblical answers. Witherington works to provide those answers and thereby provide, as the subtitle suggests, *A Guide for Times of Financial Crisis*.

He deals knowledgeably with the Old and New Testament teachings on money and wealth. A strong point of the book is the background he provides so as to add color to the teachings. For example, he acknowledges that money was rarely used in the agrarian society of biblical times except to pay taxes. This context and the biblical principles he derives are accurate and interesting.

An early sermonic and even chatty tone is evident in his excerpt from Wikipedia (22). He then settles into reapplying his own worthy scholarship. This book seems to have been hurried to a timely publication as his footnotes are meager and he relies on his own scholarship with fourteen self-references in nine chapters.

Witherington did not convince this reader that his book was written after the 1820s, when the economic world fundamentally changed. The Bible was written to poor peasants, but the impact of the Industrial and Democratic Revolutions on economic life slowly turned ordinary people into the middle class and then slowly democratized the ownership of wealth. He does not bridge the gap between a land-based agrarian society and a market-based industrialized one.

For example though he warns against anachronisms (92), Witherington argues that the idea of amassing money for retirement is one that is strange to the biblical text and principles. He writes: "They may think that they are laying funds aside for their own last days, but in fact they are hoarding things that will testify against them in the last days" (89, cf. 150).

If you live on a farm that you own, are you "hoarding things that will testify against" you? Of course not, but in a land-based society your land keeps producing after you have quit farming it. This good idea can be transferred over to retirement savings that yield as interest an amount equal to what farm rent might provide. Why is this scorned? His valid point is that we should be generous and not hoarding, but his application suits a world we do not live in.

A focus on scarcity was once fitting and those few who had significant financial surpluses were rich and subject to the severe criticisms that the book of James heaps on them, but the world of stolen land and labor that Samuel warned about (2 Sam. 8:4–10) has virtually ended except in developing countries. Instead, Westerners and a few others must learn to deal with surplus. The time-tested way for savers to get money to entrepreneurs is through the debt of the banking system. It took Christendom a long time to realize that this use of debt and interest is different from usury in an agrarian society.

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.