
Mammon and Empire: Confronting the Root of All Evil¹

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International development organizations assume that poverty is the core problem to be solved. This article makes the case that wealth is the ultimate problem, and poverty is the consequence. The pursuit of wealth, as defined by market-based societies, is driven by the spirit of Mammon, which is also the spirit of Empire. Faithfulness to the gospel requires wealthy churches, which send missionaries and development workers to poorer regions of the world, to confront Mammon—in themselves and in the world—and to do mission according to the upside-down economics of the kingdom of God. Insofar as they do, they also undermine the power of Empire.

The Problem of Wealth

Wealth is the problem, not poverty. The driving question for community or international development studies seeks to address the problem of poverty. But based on Paul's teaching that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil..." (1 Tim. 6:9), I contend that we do not primarily have a poverty problem; we have a wealth problem. Poverty is the tragic *result* of the problem of wealth.

This is not to say that the question of poverty and poverty alleviation is not within the purview of community and economic development theories and practices. I engaged in community development ministries for ten years in my homeland of the Philippines, and I do not believe it was a complete waste of time. In fact, some families our organization worked with experienced genuine social uplift by virtue of some of the programs we introduced and facilitated. And yet, I am convinced, partly from my experience as a development worker, that if we do not tackle the problem of wealth, then at the end of the day, our well-intentioned development efforts only treat the symptoms and not the root cause of poverty, which explains the frustration and sense of futility that often accompany development work.

When I talk about the problem of wealth in this article, I am talking about *our* wealth. Those who

confess Jesus as Lord in affluent societies—which probably include most, if not all, the readers of this article—must be willing to ask hard questions regarding the wealth they have attained, as well as the current systems that have enabled economic excess for some and debilitating lack for others. "Instead of asking why some people are poor," argues Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, "we would ask why other people are so affluent" (2017, 14). She observes that very little research on affluence has been done in development studies, relative to material produced related to poverty. But this must change. "The ways we create wealth and the US patterns of consumption need to be carefully interrogated and examined to understand how they accelerate the wealth divide [and] arguably create poverty..." (Hinson-Hasty 2017, 15). By redirecting the development question toward the wealthy—toward us—we shift from treating the symptoms to looking at the causes.

When we begin to do that—tackling wealth as the problem—we subvert empire. I will offer a definition of empire soon enough; for now, suffice it to say that when we take on the ideology of Mammon, instead of just the consequences of Mammon, we take on the very driver of the colonial and neo-colonial project. As such, when we critique Mammon and our propensity to bow down to it, we engage in the decolonizing of our development

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and mission practices in the world, as well as the very theologies that drive them. I seek in this article to argue that the pursuit of wealth, as modern market-based economies encourage it, is incompatible with the gospel, and to the extent that the church rejects it in its own practices of international development and mission, it undermines the ideology of empire.

Jesus People in the Midst of Empire

Jesus teaches us plainly that “No one can serve two masters...[that] we cannot serve God and wealth” (Mt. 6:24). Paul translated this teaching in more practical terms as he taught his protégé Timothy in his first letter: “Those who want to be wealthy fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim. 6:9-10). That is the way the passage reads in the New Revised Standard Version.

But once in a great while, I prefer the wording in the King James (KJ) version: “The love of money is the root of all evil,” it says in 1 Tim. 6:10, “which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” The KJ version says that the love of money is not just a root of evil, but *the* root of *all* evil and that people pierce, stab, impale themselves with many deep, heavy, miserable sorrows. Which resonates much more with Jesus’s black-and-white statement about the incompatibility of the love of wealth with the gospel. Jesus was not as either/or about any other matter as he was with the pursuit of wealth or the love of money.

Jesus was clear. Paul was clear. And for the first 300 years of the church’s development, there is no indication that the Jesus people strayed from this teaching, except in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who found out the hard way just how serious the matter of financial integrity was in the church (Acts 5:1-10)! Positively stated, for the first 300 years, the church remained faithful to the economics of the kingdom as they bore witness to the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Granted, the opportunities for the Jesus people to benefit from the economics of Rome were slim to nothing, as they were a marginalized and persecuted religious sect. Forced to the margins, the Jesus people took care of one another in every way. From the margins, the church lived life under the reign of God, bearing witness to an alternative community amid the cruel, unjust, violent life of the empire.

Part of the formation of the alternative community of Jesus people—the church—included a way of viewing and using material and monetary resources, not as conduits through which one gets rich, but rather as the means to ensure that all were taken care of, a

community where no one had need. “There was not a needy person among them,” Luke wrote in Acts 4, “for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (vv. 34-35). As such, part of the witness of the alternative community was to say, in the context of empire, that socio-economic justice is possible in Jesus Christ.

Empire-builders, of course, took (and take) offense at such a notion, because it issues an inherent challenge to the injustices of empire. In the case of market-based empires, the injustice is manifest in the cruel unevenness of wealth and poverty where opportunities for wealth creation abound for the rich and are hard to come by for the poor—this, in stark contrast to the false narrative that equal opportunity exists for all.

Socio-economic injustice was and is the natural consequence of the pursuit of wealth, a cornerstone of market-based societies, because the fittest survive and thrive while the less fit and the unfit have a harder time. The dogged pursuit of wealth (the love of money) creates a system of class in which rights and privileges sit at the top and diminish as they trickle down. In a class system, socio-economic injustice is perpetuated by the rich maintaining their privileged position by keeping the poor in their *underprivileged* position, which is called classism. The alternative community of Jesus people was and is called to demonstrate another way.

In every generation, God’s people need to be reminded of the nature of the church’s most formidable enemy—Mammon, the root of all evil. To be driven by the “love of money” or the pursuit of wealth is to be possessed by the spirit of Mammon. This reminder is not just so that individual believers can repent and adopt simpler and more generous lifestyles, but also so that the faith community can practice socio-economic justice amongst themselves as a prophetic witness against the unjust laws, policies, and practices of Empire.

Mammon and Empire

I contend that Mammon is the ultimate building block of empire throughout time. A simple definition of “empire” would be an ideology manifesting in a political entity (kingdom, nation, state, etc.) that is formed, maintained, and expanded by hegemonic power that is more often than not used to subdue, occupy, and exploit other peoples, lands, and resources. Empire manifested itself with unprecedented force in the colonial era. “In a span of approximately five hundred years—from the late fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century—European nations and, later, North America, used their religiopolitical power and military superiority to extend their respective empires in the Americas, Africa, and

Asia on a grand scale never before experienced in human history” (Tizon 2018, 39). Colonialism was driven by the “four Cs” of commerce, crown, civilization, and Christianization (Tizon 2018, 45)—in a word, empire. While the four Cs of colonialism are not necessarily listed in any particular order, it is no surprise that commerce leads the pack. Empire—whether we call it Babylonian, Roman, Russian, Chinese, or American—forms, maintains, and expands by the power of Mammon.

Mammon enables empire; it drives it, maintains it, and grows it. The spirit of Mammon is the spirit of empire; the power of Mammon is the power of empire. The annihilation of whole cultures, the extermination and exploitation of peoples, and the confiscation of lands have been driven primarily by the pursuit of wealth, by the love of money, by Mammon. Classism drives all the other *isms* that empire creates, including racism. For example, in the case of the United States, the ethnocide of the hundreds of indigenous communities and the importation of Africans who fell victim to chattel slavery were driven by the vision to be “the greatest nation on earth” (read: a wealthy nation of Europeans with unlimited freedom). These overt acts of racism against the indigenous and enslaved Africans were the necessities of classism, the shiny, hypnotic vision of wealth that propelled people forward in pursuit of more—more money, more land, more resources, more luxury—with little regard for anyone or anything else.

When the church challenges Mammon, it challenges empire. Conversely, when it succumbs to Mammon, it perpetuates empire. Such has been the case for the Christendom-soaked church throughout the last two millennia after Constantine. With few exceptions, the 4th century church and onward has not only *not* been a model of anti-empire; it has in fact become a vital part of empire-building.

At this point, allow me to fast-forward to the church’s collusion with the development of capitalism in the United States, which is arguably today’s most powerful empire. Eugene McCarragher’s *The Enchantments of Mammon* masterfully tells of the history of American capitalism—an economic system based on a philosophy of self-gain—making the case that it constituted the core of the making of the nation. This is not a new idea, but McCarragher’s argument that capitalism functions as much like a religion as it does an economic system might be. “Capitalism is a form of enchantment,” he posits, and “...its animating spirit is money” (McCarragher 2019, 5). He builds his case in part by arguing compellingly that the Puritan vision of the “city on a hill” had an unmistakable economic component to it. With the divine vision of the new nation in their purview, the Puritans set out to create “...

a beloved community built on the foundations of capitalist enterprise” (McCarragher 2019, 117).

The illegitimate union between church and state (Christendom) undoubtedly contributed to the making of the Western world, and elsewhere I offer my critique of this marriage (Tizon 2018, 21-35). But the polygamous church had another mistress—the bank! McCarragher continues, “The Puritan errand into the wilderness became an errand into the marketplace, and American life became an experiment in Christian friendship with unrighteous Mammon” (McCarragher 2019, 117).

Max Weber’s seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, connecting Protestant faith and the flourishing of democratic capitalism still occupies a prominent place in Western socioeconomic theory (Weber 1930). The principles emanating from the Reformation provided a way for Christians to see faith, wealth, and philanthropy seamlessly. As Melba Maggay observes, “[Protestants] saw business and wealth creation not as ‘worldly’ but as a vocation under God. Riches were seen as a by-product of obedience, a trust that called for social responsibility” (Maggay 2015, 72). A cruder version of such a notion is, “If you make me rich, God, I will give to the poor.”

Standing firm on the rock of capitalism, the rich and faithful today are those who basically believe that one *can* serve both God and money. In other words, Jesus was wrong! Or at least, he didn’t know, and could not have known, anything about the modern miracle of capitalism. Based on the belief “that human welfare [is] best served when persons with entrepreneurial gifts are freed to be creatively self-centered,” capitalism enables people to love God and get rich too. “From this point of view,” William Pannell reasons glibly, “Jesus was a nice man, but basically naïve” about all things economic (Pannell 1980, 23). Needless to say, such notions make a mockery of Jesus and the good news to the poor that he preached. The church’s affair with Mammon needs to be named, confessed, and discontinued in order to recover the integrity of the gospel and the church’s prophetic witness against Empire.

This is a very tall order in the context of the church’s full embrace of the Market as a way of life. It will take nothing less than deep conversion and a recovery of the mission of the church to demonstrate to empire what life can be like under the reign of Christ. Integral to that picture is socioeconomic justice.

Classism and Mission

I go more deeply into what the church needs to be and do in order to loosen Mammon’s grip on the church for the sake of the world in the book *Christ Among the Classes* (Tizon 2023). For now, allow me to speak specifically about how we need to consider a different way of doing intercultural mission, which, of

course, includes international development. I say, “of course,” since in this article, I simply assume the integral mission approach to the church’s engagement with the world. There is no other legitimate kind of mission, except integral mission! Different names for this approach to mission have emerged in different parts of the world, but they all refer to a single movement that insists on the absolute integration of word and deed, spiritual and social, soul and body, evangelism and justice, church-planting and community transformation (Tizon 2018, 158-164).

Scott Bessenecker calls the aggregate of the church’s worldwide mission the “Christian-industrial-complex” (Bessenecker 2014, 18-19). Taking his cue from former US President Dwight Eisenhower describing the unholy alliance between the military and commerce as the military-industrial complex, Bessenecker identifies an uncanny similarity in the unholy alliance between church and commerce as the Christian-industrial complex.

Bessenecker’s basic thesis is that the modern missionary movement germinated around the same time that “the commercial corporation, as a manifestation of capitalism,” came into prominence. “In this organizational design,” he explains, “money is the central factor in decision-making. Employees are valued mainly for their productivity. Demand can be manipulated by marketing, and consumers are seen exclusively through the lens of their ability to purchase the product” (Bessenecker 2014, 22-23). In time, the way of the corporation became the unquestioned way to get things done, to make progress, to accomplish significant objectives in every sector of society, including the church and its mission.

Bessenecker continues: “At that time it was axiomatic that if someone had a passion to advance anything in foreign lands, even Christian mission, a corporation needed to be formed, complete with investors, boards of directors, executive officers, employees, recruiters, and accountants. The result was a missionary corporation, a Christian version of the for-profit trading company” (Bessenecker 2014, 30).

It is difficult not to be troubled by such insights, and I see much more clearly why many of the problems we encounter in the missionary-host and the donor-recipient relationships have to do with money and power. Indeed, the church has helped to expand empire throughout the world by way of the Christian-industrial complex.

How do we correct this? If corporate capitalism is truly the foundation of the church’s mission, do we need to take a wrecking ball to the whole thing and start over? Perhaps, and we should not rule that out (Mt.

9:14-17)! Deconstructing, decolonizing efforts articulated by the likes of Kwok Pui Lan (2021), Miguel De La Torre (2021), and Randy Woodley (2022) may not be wrecking balls, but they do plant seeds of the kind of revolution that church mission needs.

More modest proposals would include taking seriously alternative mission structures that have emerged on the scene. Bi-vocational ministry or mission, what used to be called tentmaking, has made somewhat of a comeback. K.P. Yohannan popularized the training of local, indigenous missionaries and creative ways to partner with them (Yohannan 2009). Diaspora mission, where Christians who migrate for employment and/or other reasons are trained to bear witness to the gospel in their host countries, represents another radically different approach (Tira and Yamamori 2016).

Specifically for development in mission, Appreciative Inquiry approaches, women’s empowerment, advocacy, reparations, and mutuality in partnership signal positive pathways to less capital-based community transformation. The Zimele Wethu Foundation in South Africa exemplifies these pathways. Zimele Wethu is “a non-profit company committed to creating self-sustaining communities through empowerment.” The poor have been told all their lives that they have little to nothing to contribute to their own betterment, that the only hope of social uplift must come from the outside. The power of the SHG (self-help group) concept lies in its radically different messaging—namely, that together the poor have the resources to increase their capacity to transform not just their own lives but the lives of their neighbors too. In the words of Zimele Wethu’s cofounder and executive director, Audrey Mukwavi Matimelo, “We ... encourage [the poor] to start thinking about how they can change their poverty situation with what they have” (Matimelo 2017). As for how Zimele Wethu partners with outside help, it seeks partners whose financial help goes primarily to training and encouraging its staff and community volunteers, but whose enduring help comes in the form of lasting intercultural friendships.²

Though Zimele Wethu and similar organizations throughout the world, as well as the mission practices mentioned above that represent less-cumbersome alternatives, have not posed a significant threat to the Christian-industrial complex, they demonstrate possibilities and the way of the future. On the other hand, in light of the power of the mustard seed (Mt. 13:30-32; Mk. 4:29-31; Lk. 13:17-19), these practices play their part in subverting the system. In the hands of God, the church’s small acts together become, in the words of Tom Sine, “the mustard seed conspiracy”

² For a more detailed treatment of SHG and how Zimele Wethu implements this effective approach to empowerment, see Matimelo 2016.

(1981), undermining the works of empire until these acts overtake the garden in Jesus Christ.

Challenging the Christian-industrial complex by striving in the Spirit to find less capital-based ways of doing mission and development, as well as remaining faithful to the small but subversive activities of justice in the world, at least begins the process of conversion that the church desperately needs to undergo if it desires to weaken the power of Mammon, and simultaneously undermine the imperial spirit, whose headwinds are blowing more aggressively throughout the world.

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