The classification of countries on the basis of their level of development is a fundamental feature of today’s global thinking. In its simplest terms, countries are classified as “developed” or “developing”. This is further refined by instruments like the Human Development Report (UNDP, 1999) that classifies countries in terms of “high”, “medium” and “low” development.

Whatever refinements are made in the classification, it is the industrialised nations, that are predominantly, though not exclusively, from the Western world, that are classified as the developed nations. As such, they are seen as the most advanced societies that provide the best environment for the nurturing of human life and wellbeing. They provide the model of the good society for others to emulate.

Although it does not rate as the most highly developed country on the official indicators, the economic and cultural power of the United States means that it is most often seen in developing countries as the preeminent model of a developed society. The cultural dominance of the United States in today’s global communications network (UNDP, 1999, pp. 33,34), in particular, means that perceptions of the developed society in the developing world are dominated by images of US culture.

An important question is: Do the developed societies of today’s world provide a satisfactory model of development?

The dark side of today’s developed societies
There is no doubt that there are some very good features of today’s developed societies that contribute to human wellbeing. However, when we look behind the glittering images that are the public face of these societies we find a disturbing dark side that raises doubts about their suitability as models of development.

Growing inequality
Sustained economic growth has been making the developed countries richer. However, the impact on the individual members of these societies is very uneven. While some are becoming very much richer, others are becoming significantly poorer. Richard Freeman (1996) observes:

Over the past two decades, income inequality in the United States has massively increased. This jump owes to the unprecedentedly abysmal earnings experience of low-paid Americans, income stagnation covering about 80 percent of all families, and an increase in upper-end incomes.... These facts are not in dispute. From the Milliken Institute on the right to the Economic Policy Institute on the left, virtually all analysts agree that something has gone seriously awry with our income distribution. Statistics provided by the Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities in the United States—published in The Economist for December 20 1997—showed that over the previous twenty years the income of the poorest 20% of people in the United States had declined by 21% while the income of the richest 20% had increased by 30%.

The picture is even more alarming when we note that there was also a decrease in income, to a lesser extent, for the 40% above the bottom 20%. In other words, there was a significant shift of income from the bottom 60% to the top 40%, with most going to further enrich the richest 20%.

Myers (1998, pp. 62-65) cites a slightly different set of statistics that leads to the same conclusion of an alarming increase in economic inequality. In short, while the country has grown richer, the majority of the people have become poorer. It is not just that the poorer 60% have not benefited from the growth in national wealth; there has been a shift of wealth from the poorest to the richest. This situation is not unique to the United States. To a greater
or lesser extent, the same shift of wealth, and consequent growing inequality, is being repeated elsewhere in the developed world.

**Negative impacts on health**

The dramatic advances that have been made in the treatment and eradication of diseases in the developed world makes it easy to assume that development means healthier people. This is reinforced when comparisons are made with the high levels of infectious diseases that prevail in the developing world.

Yet, in both its 1997 and 1998 World Health Reports the World Health Organization warns of serious, and growing, health problems that are directly associated with development. It points out (1997) that, while infectious diseases are well under control in developed countries, other chronic diseases, directly associated with the lifestyle of developed countries, are a major threat to human wellbeing in these countries. As other countries pursue the same model of development the same health problems are appearing in urban centres of the developing world.

The World Health Organization warns (1997) of the danger of “global epidemics of cancer and other chronic diseases in the next two decades. The main result will be a huge increase in human suffering and disability.” In the 1998 report (1998, p. 202), it points out that the changing patterns of living associated with development “are resulting in an increase in crippling chronic diseases such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and low back pain.”

Clearly, while on the one hand the technological advances associated with modern development provide more effective means for dealing with diseases, on the other hand the human impact of this development generates its own range of health problems that diminish human wellbeing.

**Increase in mental disorders**

The World Health Organization (1998, p. 57) reports significant increases in the incidence of certain kinds of mental disorders, particularly depression, schizophrenia and dementia in developed countries. While it attributes this in part to an aging population this is not the whole story. The changes associated with socioeconomic development are also an important factor.

The increase in depressive disorders, for example, clearly has little to do with an aging population since they “appear to be more common in younger age groups” than among older people. Indeed, there is concern that these are “now being seen at younger ages” than in the past (WHO, 1998, pp. 57, 92).

While childhood infections are coming under control, there is now concern that “the healthy growth and development of many children is threatened by very rapid, often disruptive social, cultural and economic changes. The emerging new morbidity is mainly of a psychosocial nature…” (WHO, 1998, p. 71). This new morbidity that threatens children’s wellbeing is directly associated with the social conditions of developed societies.

Some idea of the magnitude of the mental health problem as a whole may be gained from the fact that, in developed societies, “more working days are lost as a result of mental disorders than physical conditions” (WHO, 1998, p. 92). It also shows itself in what the World Health Organization describes (1998, p. 18) as “worrying trends in mortality from…suicides in young adults, particularly in the developed countries.”

**Escalating violence**

“In all its forms, violence has increased dramatically worldwide in recent decades” (WHO, 1997). Media attention on sensational episodes of violence in developing countries can create an impression that these societies are more violent than those of the developed countries. Yet the statistics provided by the World Health Organization show that it is no less a problem for developed societies. Indeed, while in developing countries it tends to be concentrated selectively in hot spots, in developed countries violence is increasingly pervading the whole society.

**Drug abuse**

The worldwide problem of drug abuse in today’s world is notorious. It is a problem that is especially associated with adolescence and young adulthood when drug abuse most often begins (WHO, 1998, p. 79). A European study has shown that by the age of eighteen more than 20% had tried cannabis. The use of other, harder drugs tends to begin a little later, in the early twenties.
Legislators often try to deal with the drug problem by tougher legislation. While this may have a place, it deals only with the symptom, and not the cause—always an ineffective way to deal with a problem. The basic causes for drug abuse, as identified by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1998, pp. 79,80) are to a significant extent due to social conditions associated with the modern developed society. Drug abuse occurs also in developing countries, of course, but the problem there is largely concentrated in the larger urban centres where the basic features of the social environment are very similar to that of developed societies.

**The crisis of care**

In a penetrating critique of orthodox economic theory, the economists Goudzwaard and de Lange (1995, p. 4) point to what they call the “paradox of care”. Under the heading of care, they include the care of people in hospitals and schools, care of the elderly and emotionally distressed, conservation of soil and water and the development of art and culture.

The paradox is that, while the increasing wealth of developed countries should mean that activities of care can be given a higher priority than ever, they are, in fact, being given an increasingly lower priority.

This is closely related to their later point (1995: 56-59) that human labour is valued by its market value. Labour directed towards care, what they call “transductive labour”, does not have market value because it does not produce goods or services to be sold at profit in the marketplace.

Consequently, we are witnessing a global trend towards the commercialisation of care with a minimising of public support for activities of care. This is leading to the situation where high technical standards of care are available to those with the money to buy it while increasing numbers without the means to buy such care must make do with lowering standards of care. Similarly, the quality of care for the material and cultural environment depends on the ability to give market value to such activities.

Goudzwaard and de Lange (1995, pp. 57,58) argue that, even in terms of market economics, this is a very short-sighted policy since activities of care sustain the stock of material and social resources on which the market depends for its long-term prosperity.

This is supported by the United Nations Development Programme which, in its most recent report (UNDP, 1999, pp. 77–83) devotes a whole chapter to this problem, relating it directly to globalisation. It observes that: “Globalization is putting a squeeze on care and caring labour.” It concludes its comments in much the same way as Goudzwaard and de Lange (UNDP, 1999, p. 83):

*Policies to foster more caring labour appear unproductive or costly only to those who define them as narrowly contributing to GDP or short-term profit. The erosion of family and community solidarity imposes enormous costs reflected in inefficient and unsuccessful education efforts, high crime rates and a social atmosphere of anxiety and resentment.*

Yet, throughout the developed world governments are using their economic power to pressure developing countries to follow similar policies, with even more devastating effect.

**Employment, unemployment and underemployment**

Closely related to their care paradox Goudzwaard and de Lange (1995, pp. 4,5) speak of the paradox of labour. On the one hand, throughout the world, including the developed societies, there is significant unemployment while, on the other hand, there is urgent, and increasing need for labour for such tasks as the “rebuilding of cities, exercising care for people in need, and rehabilitating impaired ecosystems”.

The World Health Organization points out (WHO, 1998, p. 136) that unemployment in developed countries “is…much higher now than it was in 1950-1970. It is 50% higher in the United States and about seven times higher in Germany than in the 1960s.” It goes on to point out that the present trend towards economic globalisation severely limits the ability of individual nations to deal with this problem.

Apart from unemployment, there is also significant underemployment—people who are available for full time work but can only find part time employment. Underemployment tends to be ignored by employment statistics yet, by failing to satisfy basic human needs, the impact on human wellbeing can be similar to that of unemployment. The combined effect of unemployment and underemployment is “massive personal suffering, increased poverty,

Advocates of the current development agenda will argue that, given time, that agenda will dramatically increase employment. Yet the evidence of the past thirty years is evidence of a substantial escalation of the problem.

**A flawed development**

There are certain respects in which Western societies are clearly more developed than those of the developing world. They have long been the centres for the development of scientific knowledge together with a sophisticated technology based on this knowledge. They have developed an unparalleled infrastructure for the development and marketing of products for human use based on this science and technology. In these respects, there can be little doubt that they are the most developed societies in today’s world and probably in the whole of human history.

However, these impressive achievements in themselves do not constitute a fully developed society. A complete development must provide a social environment that promotes human wellbeing in all its dimensions. A careful examination of the dark side of today’s Western societies provides compelling evidence that, with all their achievements, these societies fall well short of this goal.

The deficiencies are not merely blemishes on an otherwise sound social structure; they are not like a little peeling paint on a fundamentally sound building. They are indicative of fundamental flaws in the basic social structure of today’s developed societies. Their development is a flawed development.

A disturbing feature of the situation is the way in which the depth of the problem is disguised. Glowing pictures of economic prosperity, with everyone having access to the glittering array of consumer products, are presented as typical. The problems of deprivation appear, at best, as footnotes, commonly with the implication they are due primarily to flaws in the individuals concerned.

Chris Wheat (*Gods from the ghettos*, Melbourne Age, 16 December 1999) draws attention to the way in which romanticised images of poor black Americans become models for bored and alienated youth in all levels of society throughout the Western world. He notes how commercial interests are quick to exploit this situation in marketing that targets affluent youth. He concludes that this glamorising of the life of the poor has a tendency, for young and old alike, to prevent us from seeing “what is really there—the awful lives of the poor.”

**Myths and reality**

The structure of today’s developed society is fundamentally flawed because of the flawed belief system that supports it. This belief system rests on two fundamental premises:

1. Economic prosperity, evidenced in ever increasing market consumption, is the basis for human wellbeing.
2. Economic prosperity is secured by social policies that give priority to the interests of a self-regulating market.

These are the premises of an ideological capitalism. In its most fundamental sense capitalism describes an economic structure in which the means of production, distribution, and exchange are substantially owned by private commercial interests. It simply defines the basic structure of economic relations in a society and is a view that I personally support.

Ideological capitalism identifies the source of all human wellbeing in economic activity, defined in terms of a self-regulating market characterised by ever increasing growth in consumption. It is no longer simply a way of organising economic relations; it is a religious faith defining the meaning of life in secular language.

The difficulty is that those who hold this faith commonly fail to recognise either its ideological or its religious character. Peter Berger (1991, p. 13), after roundly denouncing the delusive myth of socialism, declares without qualification: “Capitalism, on the other hand, has been singularly devoid of mythogenic capacity. It is a sober, practical, ‘uninspiring’ thing.”

The problem is that myth is not myth for those who believe in it. It is simply the way things are. Others have their myths reflecting an unreal view of the world. We see the world as it really is. A myth, in this sense, is a unifying framework of belief that gives coherent meaning to the diversity of human experiences. It sets normative directions that define the route to human fulfilment.

Most often in human history, the heart of a myth has been a story of the activity of divine beings. In modern secularist societies myth is expressed in secular terms. In either case, a myth has a religious character in the
fundamental sense that it is grounded in a belief in some reality that transcends the everyday particularities of our experience. A sober analysis leads to the inescapable conclusion that today’s faith in market-driven development depends on just such a myth. Some of the elements of this myth are:

**The beneficence of market forces**
While the language of Adam Smith’s (1776) mystical “invisible hand” is no longer current, the argument that “market forces” will ensure that good will come to all from a self-regulating market has similar mystical overtones.

Market forces are real enough, but there is no empirical reason to suppose that they are a beneficent power ensuring that the market serves the good of all. They are human powers employed by humans primarily to advance the self-interest of those concerned. As economists Goudzwaard and de Lange observe (1995, p. 77) “without some form of guidance we cannot expect the market mechanisms to deliver a good outcome.” Any belief in mysterious market forces that override for good this interplay of human powers can only belong in the category of myth.

**The “trickle down” effect**
When social policies are adopted in the interests of increased prosperity for commercial interests, the argument is often advanced that this will ultimately increase prosperity for everyone. This is sometimes described in terms of a trickle-down effect as increased wealth at the top trickles down to the poorest in the society.

The hard evidence shows a reverse flow. Where social policies over recent years have given priority to market interests, there has been a steady flow of wealth to the top. There is no evidence of any “trickle down”— (Freeman, 1996; Myers, 1998, pp. 62-65).

**Consumer benefits from market deregulation**
It is commonly claimed that the removal of state regulation in favour of market self-regulation—deregulation—ensures maximum benefits for consumers by maximising competition and consumer choice.

The reality is that, in the absence of appropriate state regulation, the primary effect of market self-regulation is to concentrate commercial power in an increasingly smaller number of increasingly more powerful multinational corporations (UNDP, 1999, pp. 31,32). Much is made of the increased efficiency that is said to result but the primary goal of this efficiency is the maximisation of profit rather than consumer benefit.

This concentration of power allows large multinational corporations to dominate the market in their chosen field of operations in three ways. Firstly, they are able to dominate the mass media with persuasive images designed to convince consumers that their products and services are the most desirable. Secondly, they are able to use their power to ensure that their products and services dominate displays in consumer outlets. Thirdly, if faced with a serious challenge, their power enables them to engage in a ruthless price cutting war to force smaller competitors out of the market.

The result is a market dominance that severely limits effective competition and consumer choice. Where the state fails to take effective action, it is likely to result in market monopoly.

The large array of products and services on display in the market tends to disguise the limitation of consumer choice. How can choice be limited with such a bewildering range to choose from?

Go into a Nairobi supermarket and you will be faced with the choice of many different brands of hair shampoo. Look more closely and you will find that all the many brands on prominent display are imported products produced by a few powerful multinational interests. It requires a persistent search to find, tucked away in an obscure corner, a locally produced product of good quality at a fraction of the price of the imported products. The multinational products dominate the market, not because they are either better or cheaper, but because of the power of media promotion and display dominance.

Recently we needed a product for a particular purpose in our home. The only products available for this purpose in the many readily accessible outlets in the large city where we live were the products of multinational corporations that did not meet our requirements. We did find what we needed, a product that was better suited to our purpose and half the price of the multinational product. However, the outlet from which we bought it was the only one in the whole country from which it could be obtained.
This is not an attack on multinational corporations or the many good people who work for them. The point is simply that, whatever the merits of market deregulation, the belief that, in and of itself, it benefits consumers through greater competition and choice is part of the myth generated by ideological capitalism.

**Market growth and human wellbeing**

Policies designed to ensure continued market growth are commonly supported with the argument that there is a direct link between market growth and human wellbeing. The argument is that human wellbeing depends on a healthy market and a healthy market depends on continuing market growth. There are three reasons for questioning this.

Firstly, in a finite world of finite resources, it is clearly impossible to sustain continuous market growth over an indefinite period. The point must come when we reach the limit of resources.

Secondly, history provides many examples of healthy markets that effectively met human needs without growth. Even to this day, such markets flourish in Kenya, and other African countries, in the form of village and town markets that play an important role in supplying consumer need and providing rewards to producers. Undoubtedly, today’s mainstream markets of the developed world do depend on growth for sustained market wellbeing. However, this is due to the way these markets are structured and not something inherent in the market as such.

Thirdly, there is no evidence at all that market growth generates human wellbeing. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that the pursuit of increasing consumption subjects humans to stresses that diminish the quality of life (Myers, 1998, pp. 58–61), destroying authentic human relationships that are essential to our wellbeing (Gay, 1998, pp. 32–37). And, as McKibben observes (1998, p. 46), we can achieve an authentic joy only if we are willing to pass up the momentary pleasures that a consumerist market offers.

The idea of human wellbeing through market growth is clearly another component of the myth of today’s ideological capitalism.

**The power of the myth**

Contrary to Berger’s claim, ideological capitalism has generated a myth as powerful and seductive as any generated by socialism. It is a myth that has a powerful hold on today’s world. Its vision of life is guiding development policies around the world, reshaping human societies according to the beliefs of the myth.

Kwame Nkrumah, the first leader of independent Ghana, urged his followers to pursue political power with the words (Kaniki, 1992, p. 309): “Seek first the political kingdom, and all other things will be added unto you.” Today this faith is replaced by a faith that all good will come from the economic kingdom.

The power of this myth is increased by the fact that it is commonly seen as inescapable economic realism rather than myth. The economists Goudzwaard and de Lange (1995) provide compelling reasons for questioning this claim to realism.

Nothing but the power of myth to capture the human heart can explain the passionate tenacity with which social policies based on its belief system are being applied by people of good will in spite of the evidence that these policies are not producing the promised social good. Every myth is founded in a religious trust that can sustain a faith in its ultimate triumph that perseveres even though it is not supported by the immediate evidence.

The central question for the Christian is: Is this myth guiding today’s global development consistent with the faith that we profess?

Unless we are blinded by the power of the myth, it is clear that it is not. Our Lord plainly tells us that “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”—Luke 12:15. Seeking fulfilment in the pursuit of riches and the satisfaction of sensory desire characterises the love of the world that is a fundamental denial of the love of God—1 John 2:15,16. If “….we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich…are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”—1 Timothy 6:6–9.

The cartoonist, Michael Leunig (1998, p. 48), puts his finger on one of the most devastating effects that this myth is having in today’s societies. Having defined the human soul as that part of the human person “where meanings are made, where there is a sense of the eternal, that we are more than this body and this gathering of perceptions”, he goes on to say:
The success of our political and corporate life has been at the expense and neglect of the soul. As a result very sick souls are making important decisions.

Yet, so effectively is the myth being promoted as the cultural norm that even Christian churches and organisations are accepting its basic principles as the basis for their operations. They are adopting organisational structures and modes of operating taken from the practices of the commercial world. They are using the marketing strategies of the commercial world in order to market their message to a market-driven society.

The faith of the Gospel tells us that God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”—1 Timothy 6:17. Yet it also tells us that authentic joy is fulfilled, not in the pursuit of joy, but in following the word of the Lord so that, by abiding in his love, we may love as he loves us—John 15:13; 17:13,14. Human life is not fulfilled through the abundance of possessions or of consumption—Luke 12:15.

Nothing could be further removed from this than the dominant culture of today’s developed societies with their passionate pursuit of consumption, their restless search for instant self-gratification, and their faith in economic prosperity as the source of human good. That many of these societies give token homage to Christian faith does nothing to lessen the contradiction.

If the countries of Africa persist in pursuing this culture as their ideal, it can only result in all the deprivation and distortion of the human person that characterises today’s developed societies. B. Wanjala Kerre, points in the right general direction when he says:

...modern cultural values which have been borrowed from the West can no longer promise humanity a balanced and humane lifestyle.... The good life in the African context will therefore, be one where beside access to food, shelter, clothing and medical care, the individual will have cultivated a balanced view of self in his moral, spiritual and intellectual dimensions of life.

For us, as Christians, to adopt the prevailing culture of the developed world in our pattern of daily living will destroy the effectiveness of our witness to our world, however zealous that witness may be in other ways. In the African context, it will make it impossible for us to serve our neighbours effectively in the common task of building a new and better Africa for tomorrow’s global context.

A normative realism

In today’s world, alternative social agendas are commonly dismissed as impractical and unrealistic on two, closely related, grounds. The collapse of socialist systems is said to have established ideological capitalism as the only credible basis for an effective social order. Related to this, any agenda that challenges the dominant ideology is said to ignore economic reality.

Neither of these is a sound argument. The first embodies a dangerous ideological dogmatism that discourages the fundamental structural critique that every society needs. It assumes that the failure of one alternative means that no other is possible.

The second argument fails to recognise the normative character of economic life as an aspect of social reality. As normative reality, what is, is not what must be. It is only one possibility that must be judged by the normative standard of what ought to be.

In today’s global society, people are encouraged to challenge existing political reality because it falls short of democratic norms. There is no logical reason why the existing economic reality should not likewise be challenged if it falls short of appropriate norms. The refusal to countenance such a challenge can rest on nothing but a dogmatic faith in the myth supporting the existing reality.

In spite of the weakness of the arguments, however, ideological capitalism has such a strong hold on the centres of power in today’s world that an alternative development agenda will not readily gain wide acceptance. This should not be a deterrent to the Christian community. Faithfulness to the Gospel will always put us at odds with the world, whether that world be socialist or capitalist, democratic or authoritarian—John 15:18–25; 17:14–19; 1 John 2:15–17.

In developing an alternative agenda we need to be guided by a normative vision of what society ought to be. This vision can be nothing less than the fulfilled kingdom of God. All our strategies should be directed towards a development of human society that moves in the direction of that fulfilment.
At the same time, an appropriate realism is needed. Utopianism that ignores the realities of the present situation is no more effective as Christian witness than is conformity. We need to be realistic in assessing the nature of the problems, the limitation of resources, and the nature and power of the opposing forces. We also need to be realistic in recognising the interim nature of the present age and our calling in it. Our calling is not to fulfil the kingdom. It is to bear witness, in deed and word, to the fullness that is to come in the final revelation of Christ as the all-conquering Lord of lords and King of kings.

A normative vision
The focus of our normative vision must be a society that, in all its relationships, is governed by unequivocal love for God and neighbour. This love will not be the tawdry substitute for love endorsed by the world that is, in reality, nothing but self-centred desire. It can be nothing less than the love that images the God who is love. A love that freely and gladly gives for the sake of the other—1 John 4:7–12; John 3:16. It is the love that, in humility, regards others as better than ourselves, looking not to our own interests but to the interests of others—Philippians 2:1–8.

It is the love that does not draw the boundaries of giving around those of our own kind but extends also to our enemies—Matthew 5:44–48; Romans 5:10.

While the source of this love is in our relation with God, the evidence of it is in our relations with our fellow humans and with the creation of which God has made us trustees—1 John 4:20–5:5.

Within this focus there will be a place for appropriate economic development. However, this can only be one element in a broadly based development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1999, p. 99) has called for the incorporation of “human development priorities for people in all parts of the world” in the existing market-focused development agenda. While welcome, this does not go nearly far enough. No amount of modification to a market-focused development agenda can lead to authentic development. There must be a radical shift in focus in which market development itself serves the priorities of love.

In order to give substance to the focus on love for God and neighbour, we need to establish four development priorities.

The priority of service
A developed society, governed by the norm of love, will be one that gives priority to service. In today’s world the concept of service is debased by its subordination to market interest. People are trained to provide good service as a marketing strategy for increasing corporate profit. Service is treated as a commercial commodity with market value that is sold to those who can afford it.

All this turns things upside down. In a genuinely developed society focused on love, market interests will be subordinated to the priority of service. Service in the market place will not be a means to an end but the primary goal of commercial life. Profit will have its place as the just reward to which all who labour are entitled but not as the primary goal of commercial life.

The priority of service means that those who have power will use that power to advance the interests of the weak and not to advance their own power, wealth and privilege.

The priority of human care
This calls for a reversal of the current priorities that subordinate care to economic interest. Even in economic terms we cannot afford not to care since a failure to care leads to the progressive degradation of the human resource on which economic prosperity itself, in the end, depends.

Viewed within the focus of love the priority of care is even more compelling since without it love is a hollow mockery. Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan makes this very clear. The priest and the Levite allowed other priorities to turn them aside from the care of their neighbour and, in doing so, showed themselves bankrupt in terms of love—Luke 10:29–37.

It should be noted that authentic care is not a commodity to be bought and sold. It depends on people giving freely to one another. However, there is a financial cost involved and, in complex modern societies, the state has an essential role in ensuring that the available wealth is distributed in a way that ensures that these costs can be met.
The wealth is there. Whether or not we can afford to make it available depends entirely on the priorities we have as a society.

**The priority of loving care of creation**

There is considerable talk today about the need for “sustainable development” in response to concerns that market-driven development is rapidly depleting the earth’s resource. The “sustainable development” argument does not challenge the basic premise of market-driven development. It aims only to modify this by calling for market strategies that recognise the need to sustain limited resources in the process of achieving market growth.

The weakness of this approach is that it fails to address the fundamental issue of the nature of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. It continues to assume that the world around us is a world of resources under our control to be used for the satisfying of our desires.

Oruka and Juma (1994, p. 116) argue that this is the way the relationship is presented in Scripture, and draw on the African religious tradition for an alternative. Paul Collins, himself a Christian, in a stimulating work reads the Genesis account in a similar way (1995, p. 91).

Reading the Genesis command to humans to subdue the earth and have dominion to justify human domination of creation for our own ends fails to take sufficient account of the whole story. Humans are given the command to subdue and have dominion as God’s image. Contrary to Collins’ argument (1995, p. 92), this does not justify the view that God “is almost exclusively a person like us”. Rather, it calls for us, in our lives, to reflect in creaturely terms the character of God as revealed in his relations with his creation.

God is not modelled on what we are. He is the model by which we are to be judged in all our creaturely relations. A proper understanding of the appropriate relation between humans and the rest of creation must be based on God’s relationship to creation.

There is no doubt that this relationship involves the exercise of power. However, it is not a power that is used to advance God’s own interest. It is used always in the interest of the creatures. At its heart, God’s relation to creation is not one of power but of loving care. He is “good to all, and his compassion is over all he has made.”—Psalm 145:9. He “gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry.”—Psalm 147:9. His loving care extends to the most insignificant of his creatures—Matthew 10:29.

If we are to be faithful as God’s image the exercise of the power we are given over creation must be governed by loving care for every creature. It must be exercised in the interests of the creature and not in our own self-interest.

We are called to develop creation and not to try to preserve it in some pristine purity. But it is to be a development of loving care that aims at the enriching of the whole creation and not one that exploits creation for our own ends.

In the mutually supportive relationships that belong to God’s good creation order, it is proper that we look to other creatures for our needs of food, shelter and clothing, as well as for the needs associated with the fulfilment of our callings as trustees of creation. Yet this is not an absolute entitlement. These creatures are not mere possessions to be disposed of at our will. They are creatures to be cared for in love. A failure to do so is a failure in love for the Creator.

The present reality is that there is an alienation in creation that places us in conflict with other creatures. At times this conflict can only be resolved by the use of our power to destroy. Yet, this should never be done without profound grief and repentance for our sin that has made such destruction necessary. The overriding priority is always that of loving care.

**The priority of justice**

Justice is a central theme of the redemptive kingdom of Christ. He comes to “execute justice and righteousness” bringing “justice to the nations”—Jeremiah 23:5, Isaiah 42:1. The pursuit of justice is a fundamental characteristic of all who belong to that kingdom; “… what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”—Mica 6:8. Those who fail to pursue justice, however diligent they may be in their worship, place themselves outside the kingdom in the company of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah—Isaiah 1:10–17.

Justice is the administration of what is due. In Scripture it is not a legal concept nor is it primarily concerned with the punishment of those who offend (von Rad, 1962, pp. 370,371). It is a religious concept focusing on
faithfulness to neighbour as those who live before the face of God in the varied relationships of human life. A just society is one in which the demands of love are met in all relationships.

Biblical justice demands that all who labour, whatever their role, should share in the prosperity that comes from the communal enterprise—Malachi 3:5; James 5:1–6; 1 Corinthians 9:8–10. It does not require that all receive the same amount nor does it support the utopian Marxist principle of “from each according to his ability and to each according to his need”. Each is to receive a share as appropriate to the role of each in the enterprise. But neither does it support the current principle that treats labour as a market commodity to be valued by supply and demand in the labour market. The only just principle for fixing wages is on the basis of sharing the prosperity of the enterprise.

Justice also calls for those who, for one reason or another, are unable to participate in the economic life of the society to be given access to a share in the common prosperity, not as charity or welfare but as a fundamental right—Leviticus 19:9,10.

Biblical justice calls for all to have access to the productive resources of the society, renouncing the use of power to concentrate the ownership of these resources in the hands of a few—Leviticus 25:13–17. Justice means that those with power do not use that power to benefit from the dependency of the weak but use it rather to strengthen the weak without benefit to themselves—Leviticus 25:35–38.

A major concern of biblical justice is support for the weak and disadvantaged against the powerful who use their power to increase and perpetuate the disadvantage of the weak—Isaiah 1:16,17. The use of legal right, social approval and acts of piety to justify the use of power in ways that disadvantage the weak is a denial of the righteousness of God’s kingdom—Mark 12:38–40.

Scripture provides no support for a utopian expectation of a society of perfect equality in which all poverty and disadvantage is wiped out. It does call us, in the clearest possible terms, to stand against all forms of abuse of power in violation of the law of love. We do not need to act unjustly in order to be counted among the apostates of Isaiah 1. We only need to fail to act against injustice in the society around us. There can be no authentic development without this priority of justice.

A practical agenda
To have a clear normative vision is not enough. We need a practical agenda for action that will proclaim to the world, by deeds and words, the nature of the society that ought to be, and that will be in the coming revelation of the triumphant Redeemer.

The way in which the Apostle approached the issue of slavery is an example of the normative realism that is needed. The launching of a campaign for the abolition of slavery in the social circumstances of the first century would have been a futile exercise. Instead, he chose to overturn the system of social beliefs on which slavery depended with the call for masters to treat their slaves justly and to welcome back a runaway slave as a “beloved brother”—Colossians 4:1; Philemon 15–17. In the society of the day, justice was for fellow citizens and brotherhood for those of the same social class.

The need for a realistic approach means that there cannot be a single agenda of action for all circumstances. An effective agenda will be one that is designed to suit the prevailing circumstances in any given situation. There are, however, some common characteristics to be expected of any effective agenda.

A Gospel imperative
During a visit to Cape Town in 1975 I had a very brief discussion with an evangelical pastor about issues of justice under the political regime in South Africa at that time. It was very brief because, after a brief and unsuccessful defence of that regime, he closed the discussion by saying: “I really don’t know much about these things. My calling is to preach the Gospel. I don’t get involved in politics”.

His words reflected a view that has been all too common among evangelicals. So far as agendas of social concern and justice are seen as legitimate at all, they are seen as secondary to the primary calling of evangelism and Gospel proclamation. It is supported by a deeply sincere, and proper, desire to maintain the integrity of the Gospel against the undermining of that integrity by views that reduce the Gospel to a programme of social reform.
Nevertheless, it is a view that itself involves a serious undermining of the integrity of the Gospel. It is founded in an acceptance of the secularist separation of the spiritual and the secular, with the spiritual reduced to the private, inner experience of the individual. The biblical Gospel is certainly the news of personal renewal by grace through faith but this is not an individualistic experience detached from the various social relationships of life.

To treat the public life of society, with its political and economic relations, as an autonomous, secular realm outside the scope of the spiritual kingdom of Christ is a fundamental denial of Christ’s universal lordship. The Gospel, in its biblical fullness, is the message of God’s reconciliation of all things in Christ in which acts of prayer, devotional life, and worship come together with the fulfilment of our calling as trustees of creation in the single, seamless fabric of a life lived in love. The greatest diligence in the nurture of devotional life means nothing if we fail to act against injustice in the society around us—Isaiah 1:10–17.

The Great Commission is not reducible to evangelism in the narrow sense of leading individuals to an acceptance of Christ as Saviour followed only by the nurture of devotional life in the new believers. It is a call to disciple the nations, “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”—Matthew 28:18–20. It is not fulfilled unless the whole purpose of God is declared, including his purpose that we should witness to his kingdom by a pattern of living in the world that gives priority to service, to care, of our fellow humans and all creation, and to justice.

To ask whether we should give priority to evangelism or to the pursuit of justice in society, then, asks the wrong question. It asks a question that is shaped by the wisdom of modern secularism, not by the word of God. They belong inescapably together in the one, life encompassing Gospel imperative.

**Popular initiatives**

“Popular” in this connection means “belonging to the people”. Most approaches to development think in terms of national strategies, centrally planned and directed by experts—even strategies with the stated aim of empowering the people.

Firstly, it is based on an elitist view of society alien to the biblical view of the human person. It assumes that the mass of people are incapable of effective initiatives, requiring the leadership and direction of an elite leadership group if they are to contribute effectively to society. In contrast, God largely bypasses the elite of society, choosing the foolish, the weak, and the despised as the primary agents of his kingdom—1 Corinthians 1:26–31; James 2:1–7.

Secondly, it deprives society of one of its most valuable development resources—the creative initiative of its people. King’s extensive study of Kenya’s “Jua Kali” economy (1996) provides convincing evidence of both the development potential of popular initiatives by the people of Africa, and the limitations on development that result when such initiatives are not effectively incorporated in national strategies.

Thirdly, as a means of Christian witness it is an impractical approach. The powerful grip of the ideals of ideological capitalism in the centres of power in today’s societies makes it unrealistic that we can have more than marginal impact on the thinking driving national strategies. We should by all means do what we can in this area, but a realistic strategy will give the major emphasis to the fostering of small scale popular initiatives. Here the Christian church, as a widely spread network of local worshipping communities, is particularly well placed to make a major impact.

This does not mean that the church, as an institution, should take these development initiatives. It should, however, through its teaching ministry encourage people to take appropriate initiatives as part of their calling as disciples of Christ.

**An integral strategy**

An effective strategy will include economic initiatives but it will not focus narrowly on these in isolation from the other priorities that are integral to effective human development. It will treat economic initiatives as components of a single, comprehensive strategy incorporating the priorities of service, care and justice directed by love of God and neighbour as its central motivating principle.
Go in peace
N.T. Wright (1994, pp. 78–80) points out that, when we proceed with firm resolve to avoid all world conformity, seeking a transformed pattern of living in all things, we will inevitably find that, despite all our best efforts, we remain entangled in what seems to be inescapable conformity.

Wright draws our attention to the response of Elisha to Naaman when, having pledged that he will serve only the Lord, went on to confess that he did not see how he could avoid bowing down before the pagan deity, Rimmon, when his official duties required it. Recognising it as a wrong that he could not see how to avoid, he said: “…may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count.” Elisha’s response was: “Go in peace”.

So when we too find ourselves entangled in what seems to be unavoidable conformity we should join in Naaman’s confession: May the Lord pardon your servant on this one count. Wright then observes:

The good news is that he does. Did Elisha say to Naaman: ‘You’re a half-hearted compromiser, you want your bread buttered on both sides at once, you’re talking out of both corners of your mouth’? No. He said: ‘Go in peace’. That is the word of God to those who are starting to bring their thinking about God and the world into the straight line that flows from the revelation of the saving love of God in Christ. It is the word of God to those who are starting to follow Jesus, and want to do so more and more.

May we, then, go out into the world with single-minded determination to pursue the righteousness of God’s kingdom in every area of life knowing that, although we fall short of that desired righteousness in our practice, while we continue to pursue this goal we go in the peace of God.

References


**Endnote**

1 “Western world”, throughout this paper, is a cultural rather than a geographical classification. It refers to those societies, wherever they are located, whose culture is historically derived from that of Western Europe and exhibits a clear affinity with Western European culture.