

When Trade Serves God's Justice...

Biblical and ethical flashlights and suggestions

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by Prof. Dr. Christoph Stückelberger

Trade for People, Not People for Trade



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❖ Introduction – Compelled by the Gospel

The global campaign “Trade for people – not people for Trade” puts human beings in the centre of the concern: How can trade serve children, women and men and not the opposite that people are forced to serve anonymous market rules and regulations? The respect of human-rights in all trade activities is the core message of the campaign. This vision is rooted in Christian convictions and ethical values, as it is said in the “Plan of action” as the basic document of the campaign:

“The Gospel leads Christians to a commitment to a just and equitable society in which every human being has God given significance and dignity. No one should be oppressed or marginalized. Each should be embraced as a member of the same family. The aim of all human activity should be to glorify God in all creation.

“The biblical standards for economic activity, including the trade of goods and services, is justice and taking the side of the poor: fair payment, transparent relationship, no exploitation, and respect for life, ensuring the “care of widows, children and strangers”. This vision should not be reduced to mere equality of opportunity for all individuals to compete without hindrance. Such equality has only helped the clever and the strong to gain more power and a greater share of the world's resources and to create power elites that oppress and exploit others.

“We are inspired by the Old Testament concept of “righteousness”, in which the prophets challenged the injustices of society and international trade (in ancient Tyre they spoke out when the poor went hungry and were exploited by the rich^{1[1]}). We are compelled to action by both the Old and New Testament understanding of justice as taking the side of the poor and oppressed.^{2[2]}

“Trade, therefore, must be an instrument of sustainable, participatory and just community and communion. Justice is inseparable from love and agape (which means creative sympathy for the suffering and the oppressed) -- siding with the poor and furthering the interest of others.”

This text expresses core values for just trade such as: dignity of every human being, poverty reduction, just distribution of wealth, care for the weaker and for the sustainability of creation, and participation in decision-making. The following text shows - selected - biblical roots of these values (chapter.2) and the content of these ethical values and their relevance for a people centred trade.

1[1] Ezekiel 28: 3-18; Isaiah 23:3; Joel 3:5

2[2] Luke 1:51-53; 4:18; 5:20-25; 18:24; James 2:1-7; 4:13-5:6

❖ **The Bible: From Tyre to the Temple – from Wallstreet to the street**

❖ **Tyre – The “Wallstreet” in ancient time**

Trade is not a new phenomenon. Trade existed in all societies, but the radius of trade largely depends on the available transport means, the power structures and the financial facilities. The Phoenician city of Tyre, with its two ports on the Eastern rim of the Mediterranean was one of the major trade centres in Old Testament (OT) times. The main period of long-distance trade lasted from the second half of the 8th century to the first half of the 6th century BC. From Tyre, trade routes led deep into the Arabian heartland and as far as China, North Africa, Spain and the Mediterranean islands. Even in the ancient Orient, long-distance trade produced prosperity and growth. The prophet Ezekiel worked in exile in Babylon from about 597 to 571 BC. He interpreted Tyre's trade in theological terms. The Book of Ezekiel (27.3-28,19) in the OT details the goods and trade routes and praises them in all their splendour. In 585-573 BC, the city had to capitulate before Nebuchadnezzar II, and in 332 BC, it was conquered and razed by Alexander the Great. Ezek. 27f. bemoans the sinking of the grand ship of Tyre and names two causes for the decline of flourishing trade. First, the king, owing to his trade successes, turned himself into God: "your heart has become proud in your wealth. [...] you compare your mind with the mind of a god" (28.5-6). Second, the king abuses his trading power for the purpose of exploitation: "In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence and you sinned" (28.16).

❖ **Oppression, exploitation and no priority for food security**

King Solomon, too, was a trader. He partially owed his power to his policy of occupying significant trade routes and controlling them by military means (II Kings, 10.15). This confirms the natural affirmation of world trade, i.e. long-distance trade that goes beyond domestic trade; yet it also indicates Solomon's dangerous proximity to pure power politics. Trade agreements were a matter of course even in OT times, for instance between Israel's King Ahab and Damascus (I Kings 20.34). The slave trade, an offshoot of trade proper, particularly from Tyre, was heavily criticised in the prophetic tradition: "For you [Tyre] have taken my silver and my gold [...]. You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks" (Joel 3.5-6). Tyre "delivered entire communities over to Edom" (Amos 1.9). Moreover, there is criticism in the OT that profits are made particularly from trade and do not sufficiently accrue to producers. The merchants of Tyre's neighbouring trading city, Sidon, also brought home riches: "your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile" (Isa. 23.3).

There is also a gender dimension in this oppression by trade: The “wise” king Salomo forced the non-Israelite men to work for him to build his temple and serve on his fleet of ships (I King 9, 21– forced labor without sufficient payment. We can imagine that the women have been left alone at home to do the agricultural work and to guarantee food security. Wealth inequality also led to extreme forms of polygamy. It's reported that King Salomo had 700 wives and 300 concubines (I King 11,3) whereas poor farmers could not afford to have one wife and to feed a family.

The primary goal of the trade in tyre was to increase the wealth of the king and to guarantee wealth for everybody. The farmers in Egypt were exploited, their food production was sold

too cheap. International Trade of agricultural goods was the reason for the wealth in Tyre and the poverty in Egypt. But the prophets shouted: food first!

Unfair trade also lead to war and oppressive security systems to protect the trade routes. But the prophets shouted: peace first!

❖ Fair trade and modest faith as solution

After the destruction of the trade metropolis of Tyre – thus according to the prophet Isaiah – there will be opportunity for fairer trade.

- Tyre's "merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to the Lord; her profits will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord" (Isa. 23.18).
- After the fall of Tyre the farmers in Tharsis in Spain were encouraged by the prophet Isaiah to replant their land, and to flood the land like the Nile in Egypt (Isaiah 23,10) instead of producing beaten silver and iron for the traders in Tyre (Jeremiah 10,9). "Food security first" was the slogan of the prophet 750 years before Christ! He showed a way where just trade can contribute to food security and gender justice.

Most important for this new trade policy was to accept the limits of human action. Traders are not like God's! They have to accept to be democratically controlled. Fair trade is rooted in the faith in God as the enabling creator, the liberating and limiting power and the reconciling Christ. In this point the gender perspective means that men and women are called to strengthen together their faith in this liberating God.

❖ Jesus protests "on the street": overthrows the merchant tables

In the New Testament (NT), trade is regarded as a matter of course as much as in the OT. The NT's appeal to change our ways means turning towards God and to the justice of His kingdom. It is in this *spiritual* perspective – in the sense of a perspective that oriented towards God and thus towards fellow human beings in a new manner – that Jesus's casting out of the money-changers from the Temple, which is reported in all four gospels (Matt. 21.12 par), may well have to be seen. In this manner, Jesus directs trade back to its justified but also limited position on the way towards liberation and salvation. Once the view of God and His kingdom of justice is no longer obstructed by the merchants' tables, trade can again be an instrument in the service of justice.

The *prophetic* call for fair trade is renewed in the Epistle of James: "Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out. [...] You have condemned and murdered the righteous one" (James 5.4-6).

Then again, trade is always seen in the *eschatological* perspective – i.e. the perspective that takes into account the final things – of the coming kingdom of God. The parable of the money placed in trust until the return of the king (Luke 19.11-27) makes this appeal: "Do business with these until I come back." (13). The natural activities of this world are supposed to be continued, yet not in one's self-interest but in the service of God. This eschatological perspective casts doubt on putting one's trust in possessions (which are the result of trade) and so makes relative the importance of trade for a life full of meaning and hope. Thus the

Epistle of James warns: "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring." (James 4, 13f.). In the *individualised* view of the virtues catalogued in the NT, the "sanctification of life" does not only extend to relations with the family, with husband or wife, but also to professional ethics, for instance "that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister" (I. Thess. 4, 6).

In Revelations, there is a drastic description of the merchants' despair and the futility of the magnificent trade ships as a result of the decline of Babylon (Rev. 18, 9-19).

❖ **Summarising biblical observations**

1. Trade, both as domestic trade and long-distance (international) trade is regarded as natural and affirmed as a matter-of-course reality in the Bible. Long-distance trade was an important motor for growth and prosperity even in the times of the ancient Orient.

2. Then again, the texts reveal the transitory nature of trade relations – flourishing world trade centres have always come and gone – and the various dangers arising from their abuse. The prophets reveal the tightrope walk of trade: it is judged as favourable, but at the same time criticised if it is associated with expectation of salvation. The prophets revealed the limits of global trade

3. The biblical texts show clear criteria for justice in trade. Trade is fair if

- it is not abused for purposes of power politics (Ezek. 28.,6),
- it does not oppress and exploit anyone, women, children or men (Ezek. 28.16),
- it deals in goods, but not in people, i.e. slaves (Joel 3.6; Amos 1.9),
- grants producers a fair wage (Isaiah 23.3),
- admits of redistribution, and of fair and widespread profit participation (Isaiah 23.18).

4. The NT texts place trade, like any other activity in life, into the perspective of the kingdom of God and His justice. This is also the yardstick against which trade must be measured.

5. Unjust and unfair trade kills lives. Just and fair trade enhances life. So direct and simple – despite all the detailed differentiation – are Biblical business and trade ethics.

❖ **Ethical values: dignity, poverty reduction, just distribution of wealth**

The "Trade for people"- campaign is based on core values which are found in the Judeo-Christian worldview but are broadly shared by other faith based communities and non-religious worldviews, based on fundamental human rights (see briefing paper on human rights).

❖ **Dignity of every human being**

Every human being is created "in God's image" and therefore has an undeniable dignity. That's the reason why the quoted prophets became so angry when the dignity of people have

been violated. All economic activity – including trade of goods and services from low cost countries, working conditions in textile factories and so on - has to respect this human dignity and has the noble goal to strengthen this dignity.

❖ **Poverty reduction**

The Gospel and Christian ethics give a clear priority to the poor. The poor are not saints or better than the rich but God cares for them as the weaker parts of society. This will always require to show compassion for the poorest and intention to improve their prospects. This reflects the Christian belief that the good news of God in Christ is for the poor, and that by putting them first, the future for all of us will be secure. Trade therefore has to contribute to poverty reduction. That is one clear criteria to measure if trade is “for people” or not.

The biblical principle of giving special support to the poorest should be applied to the current global trading system. Instead of expecting traders in the poorest countries to compete on equal terms with those of the richest, trade rules need to give explicit support and “special and differential treatment” to the poor. The Special and Differential Treatment regulations in the WTO system are a beginning in that direction, but not at all strong enough.

❖ **Just distribution of wealth**

A condition of poverty reduction is the just distribution of wealth. Justice is the key value of all biblical values. Equity in which everyone receives a fair share of the earth’s resources, the opportunity to develop and flourish as human beings, and the chance to exercise their responsibilities for themselves and others. This reflects the Christian belief that we are all equally important and dignified, and are intended to live in community, supporting each other, and that we are not divided by huge disparities between wealth for a few and poverty for many. Trade has the important task to increase wealth by making available goods and services. But it has at the same time the task to care and develop regulations that allow all people to participate at this wealth.

❖ **Healing Community**

Just distribution is linked with peace: no peace with extreme disparities of wealth. Only communities, economies and societies which care for the weaker are sustainable and can live in peace. The theological reason for that is that God wants to heal again and again broken communities and human relationship. The fullness of life is not possible alone, but only in a community. “Healing Communities” is the theme of the World Mission Conference in 2005 in Athens. Churches and mission societies are invited to join the trade campaign by emphasising the importance of just trade on the way to become healing communities. To heal the relationship between God and men, between human beings and with the environment includes the struggle for a healing economy and healing global trade.

❖ **Sustainability of creation**

Sustainability in which the resources available to us, material, personal and spiritual, are used carefully and efficiently with respect for their inter-relatedness, without denying them to future generations. This reflects the Christian belief that they are God-given and we do not

own them; however, we are invited, as good stewards of creation and as “guests on earth”, to treat them with respect, and use them well.

Trade is closely linked with environmental issues. Through production and transport of goods and services trade contributes to a great deal to environmental destruction. But “trade for people” can also contribute to heal the wounded creation. It can develop sustainable transport means, can reduce transport by a fair and sustainable allocation of the production as near as possible to the consumers.

❖ **Participation in decision-making**

The dignity of every human being and God’s love which creates healing communities leads necessarily to the value of participation: The dignity is violated when poor people receive - like beggars - food aid without being able to sell their own products and fruits of their work. To respect one’s dignity means to enable him or her to participate in decision-making according to their abilities. Empowerment of the poor is nothing else than to respect their dignity. Democracy in which power and decision-making are genuinely shared, reflecting the Christian belief that all of us are made in the image of God with the ability to make a constructive contribution. No one is wise enough or good enough to have too much control over other people, and everyone has a right to have a say in what happens to them; this is coupled with a responsibility to look after their neighbours.

❖ Where can I go for more information?

An Interfaith Statement on International Trade and Investment, signed by religious institutions in the USA. Available from < iwg@coc.org >

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