

Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem With Wealth

By Kevin Hargaden, foreword by William T. Cavanaugh

Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2018. 234 Pages

REVIEWED BY THOMAS HUNTER

By historical and global standards, most western Christians—even public school teachers such as myself—are wealthy. This places us in a tricky situation when we open our Bibles and read numerous warnings against the dangers of wealth, many of which come directly from Christ himself. It is this predicament which Kevin Hargaden seeks to address. Hargaden examines the titular problem with wealth through a macro-level exploration of neoliberalism’s totalizing claims on the present age and an analysis of how neoliberal principles operated in the rise and fall of his native Ireland’s “Celtic Tiger” economy, while seeking to understand how Christians ought to live in neoliberal times. This is an ambitious undertaking, and the result, while frequently insightful and engaging, is a mixed success.

Hargaden’s goal is to provide “a constructive work of Christian ethics that presents a theological analysis of wealth, and by reference to the parables, [chart] an alternative approach to being rich and following Jesus” (p. xvi). In chapter one, “We’re All Neoliberal Now,” Hargaden begins his task by explaining what he means by identifying the present age, and the people who inhabit it, as “neoliberal.” Essentially, *neoliberalism* describes how the logic of the market has wormed its way into every sphere of human existence in the west. Western societies are now oriented towards maximizing production and consumption as opposed to working for the common good. “Society increasingly serves the market, which is a dramatic inversion of the preceding historical settlement” (p. 4). Good neoliberal citizens are engaged in productive (that is to say, monetarily quantifiable) work so that they may consume. They are encouraged to borrow so that they might consume *more*, with little thought to the consequences. Americans might think of the so-called Roaring Twenties, characterized by reckless buying of

goods on credit and speculation in the stock market, as the quintessential example of neoliberalism run amok. Ireland’s Celtic Tiger phase in the late twentieth century operated on similar principles until the financial crisis of 2008 brought it to a halt. Rather than questioning the logic of neoliberalism, however, Ireland enacted austerity laws, bailed out failed banks, and continued the neoliberal cycle. The cycle of production and consumption had to continue, whatever the costs.

One of the great strengths of this chapter is Hargaden’s exploration of how debt supports the neoliberal system. Not only are consumers encouraged to go into debt to enable their consumption, but when the institutions that undergird the neoliberal system fail, the public assumes their debt. The ultimate result was the austerity measures put in place to enable the bailout of Ireland’s failed banks. This cycle of debt, Hargaden notes, is part of why neoliberalism is problematic for Christians. A system which depends on perpetual debt closes off any possibility of grace, all the while encouraging an endless drive for “more” which quickly turns idolatrous (for Hargaden, neoliberalism is inescapably idolatrous; see pp. 27-31).

Chapter one succeeds in its goal of demonstrating that the times in which we live are neoliberal and that the gracelessness and idolatry of this system—on which much of our western wealth depends—are problematic for Christians. In chapters two and three, Hargaden begins exploring how the parables of Jesus can help Christians respond to neoliberalism. First, he draws on Karl Barth (chapter two) and then crafts original parables with the intention of analyzing the end of the Celtic Tiger in concrete *human*, rather than abstract *economic*, terms. Hargaden’s analysis of Barth capably demonstrates how, in Barth’s reading of the parables, “Jesus displays a complicated attitude towards wealth” (p. 66) and “[tells] of a

kingdom that reorients the people who populate it ...so that the accepted norms are called into question” (p. 65). Indeed, rather than providing a detailed economic program, the parables, in Barth’s reading, demonstrate how the new world inaugurated by Jesus smashes our suppositions about economic order. They instead show a world which is radically *different* from the times in which we live. While this chapter lays essential groundwork for Hargaden’s discussion of worship as a response to the problem of wealth in chapter four, focusing exclusively on Barth tends to bury Hargaden’s own voice. Drawing on multiple authors may have better allowed Hargaden to develop his own unique reading of how the parables of Jesus address neoliberalism.

Hargaden brings his voice to the fore of his argument in chapter three, “Telling Stories About Irish Money.” Unfortunately, following his well-crafted parables about several of the major players in the crash of 2008—namely Depfa Bank, Anglo Irish Bank, and Seán Quinn—Hargaden engages in a straightforward explanation of the history of his parable. Although his writing is excellent throughout, his discussion of Ireland’s recent economic policies would be better with additional theological reflection.

Having identified the difficulties which neoliberalism raises for Christians in chapter one and explored how the parables of Jesus rule out simplistic solutions, Hargaden then turns to how Christians ought to grapple with wealth. He describes the conundrum of wealthy Christians who are embedded in a system which they have no hope of overthrowing, and which has its tendrils in everything, including the Church. Hargaden’s examination of how the worship music industry could only exist in a neoliberal market is particularly instructive on this point. Here Hargaden shows that the best, and only truly effective, antidote to the claims of neoliberalism is worship. “To say that worship is the appropriate response is to say that our view of reality is brought into focus by encounter with God...the only way out of idolatry to Mammon is conversion to Jesus” (p. 139). Hargaden sees being formed by worship (which he primarily understands in a liturgical sense) as the means by which wealthy Christians, though embedded in a neoliberal age, will begin living in ways contrary to neoliberalism. This reviewer’s only qualm with chapter four is that some of Hargaden’s statements read as though resisting neoliberalism is the *telos* of worship. “The preached word and the lection read is the most direct way in which the false gospel of neoliberal capitalism is shown to be hollow...” (p. 164). Yes, so long as the

word is not preached and the lection is not read *for the purpose of showing* the hollowness of neoliberalism.

Chapters one, four, and parts of two range from very good to excellent, though after reading *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age*, I am not quite sure of its niche. It may be worthwhile reading for pastors and business people interested in the intersection of Christian life and our present economic system, especially if read in concert with a less contingently focused book on Christian formation (such as James K.A. Smith’s *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*). Despite these caveats, however, Hargaden ought to be commended for calling out a system to which Christians, myself included, all too often capitulate to without reflecting on how it is forming us in its image.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Hunter holds an MA in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary (2019). He is a social studies teacher in Temple, Texas, and lives in Waco, Texas, with his wife and son.