

Choosing Life

by John B. Cobb, Jr.

January 14, 2010

John B. Cobb, Jr., Ph.D. is Professor of Theology Emeritus at the Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, and Co-Director of the Center for Process Studies there. His many books currently in print include: Reclaiming the Church (1997); with Herman Daly, For the Common Good; Becoming a Thinking Christian (1993); Sustainability (1992); Can Christ Become Good News Again? (1991); ed. with Christopher Ives, The Emptying God: a Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation (1990); with Charles Birch, The Liberation of Life; and with David Griffin, Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition (1977). He is a retired minister in the United Methodist Church. His email address is cobbj@cgu.edu. This essay was presented at Myra House, Claremont CA, August 31, 2002. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

In the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, after many laws have been laid down, many warnings and promises given, we encounter the climactic exhortation. We have been shown the way of life and the way of death. We are urged to choose the way of life. Judaism has been the vehicle for teaching and practicing this way. Through Christianity and Islam, the basic pattern of life has been taught to billions of others.

Of course, in detail it has changed. Judaism has its own system for continuously interpreting and developing the law that is laid down in the books of Moses. This is true of Christianity and Islam as well. Furthermore, and of central importance for us, in the New Testament generally, and most explicitly in Paul, our understanding of law as such has changed.

Paul taught that the law is holy, that its teachings do indeed describe the way of life. But when we encounter it as a law imposed upon us, instead of giving us life, it kills us. Struggling to obey rules, however good the rules may be, does not enliven us. Paul saw that in Christ we come to understand that the God we seek to obey is Love. We do not have to struggle to meet God's requirements. We can identify with Christ and participate in his faithfulness. In this way we fulfill the deeper intention of the law, that is, we find life in the way of life to which God calls us.

Neither the original exhortation to Choose Life! nor Paul's understanding of the new revelation of the way of life in Jesus is addressed to individuals. Deuteronomy is addressed to the Hebrew people. Paul addresses Christian communities. Of course, individuals are included in both instances. But it is the Hebrew nation that is to live, and we Christians can have life only in community. We need one another and a vital community of faith.

The life that Paul would have us choose is actually for more than just the Christian community. It is for all people. Jesus wanted us to be leaven in the loaf, so that all might benefit from the life he brought the world.

The "all" of which I speak has generally been understood in the church as all human beings. Certainly human beings were primarily in view with both Jesus and Paul. Yet neither of them drew the line tightly. Jesus believed that God clothed the lilies of the field and cared about every sparrow. Paul envisioned a final consummation for the whole world and not just its human inhabitants. In the background of their Jewish tradition lay the Genesis story in which God gave life to many species of creatures, saved them all from the flood, and made a covenant with them. "Choose life!" could not mean choose human life against the lives of other creatures. God is the giver of all life and the lover of all living things.

This wider extension of the life we are to choose has become increasingly important in recent times. We can wish that our ancestors in Christian faith had been more aware of it and committed to it. But we can also understand that they thought that the natural world took care of itself. Until recently nature was so vast in relation to human beings that people hardly thought their choices mattered to nature. The natural world with all its living creatures would take care of itself. Sadly, these attitudes and assumptions were retained even when in fact human actions began to have a large effect on other living things. We now know that nature cannot take care of itself, that human beings can degrade it not only locally but globally, that the species God created and saved from the flood are threatened by human expansion into their habitats, destruction of their food supplies, pollution of their air and water, and excessive hunting and fishing. In relation to them we are not choosing life.

Is it possible that we are in a situation in which we must choose between choosing life for human beings and choosing life for other creatures? The choice is often put before us in these terms, and sometimes this is quite compelling. In densely populated and impoverished parts of Africa, setting aside land for baboons and protecting them may prevent human beings from having the land they need to feed themselves. Forbidding a native tribe in Alaska to hunt whales may destroy its culture.

But these are not the primary issues. If they were, we could make compromises and adjustments that would be reasonably satisfactory. The primary problem is that as a people, as a nation, and globally, we have chosen against God. Jesus was very explicit. We cannot serve both God and wealth. Life is expanded and preserved in the service of God. Our choice has been for wealth. That choice is a choice against life.

Again, the life against which we have chosen is not primarily individual. It is primarily the life of society and humanity as a whole. But it certainly involves individuals.

In the world of business, the prevailing choice has increasingly been to serve wealth above all. The supporters of that choice can appeal to the idea that when each individual and enterprise strives for its own gain all benefit, because the whole economy grows. There is some truth to this. But when this principle is followed consistently it has socially destructive outcomes

I was rather shocked to discover that there is a book by a distinguished economist of the Chicago school explaining to businessmen when they should obey the law and when they should not. Moral issues play no role in his counsel. The issue is simply whether it is profitable to obey. One calculates on the one hand the gain from breaking the law and on the other the probable cost of paying fines. If the former figure is larger than the latter, then the author counsels breaking the law.

Obviously, if one's competitors act on the basis of such calculations, one is pressed in the same direction. Even business people who really want to be ethical and law abiding may be forced to behave immorally and illegally in order to survive in a world that is ruled by the service of wealth. .

Even within the world of business, the ethics of the market place is obviously destructive when it is adopted individualistically by the participants in a business enterprise. A business needs honesty and hard work on the part of its employees. It needs team spirit as well. If each employee relates to the others purely in terms of gaining advantage, the business will fail. When CEOs make choices that enrich themselves at the expense of stockholders and employees, the business will fail. The approval of self-seeking as rational, built into most economic theory, is a truth that works only when business operates in the context of a community that has other values. It works only when integrity and honesty and basic humanity are presupposed within the business community itself. When society as a whole makes wealth the primary object of service, a process of self-destruction sets in. There is no longer any check on corrupt practices. This is the way of death.

Our government would have us believe that in this country we have pulled ourselves back from the brink. I hope so, but I am not sure. The basic ethos of the market is still celebrated and taught. The values and commitments that alone can check it are much less clearly and convincingly communicated. We are still engaged in transferring power from our social and political systems to economic ones, hoping in this way to increase wealth more rapidly. We show few signs of shifting from the worship of wealth to the worship of the God of Life.

Meanwhile the ordering of life to the pursuit of wealth speeds up the separation of the rich from the poor. Israel knew that this is not the way of life for a society. It is the way of death. This is not to say that all differences in material possessions are to be eliminated. It is to say that great riches are harmful to spiritual life as is degrading poverty. The problem is worse, when they exist side by side. To preserve one's riches in the face of the misery of others requires hardening one's heart. That way lies death. To see others living in luxury when one cannot feed one's children causes bitterness and envy. These are the death of the spirit. The social health that is life requires mutual respect and responsibility for one another within a community. Our national and global service of wealth leads away from such health.

Our service of wealth hastens the pollution of the Earth, the exhaustion of resources, the elimination of habitat for other species, the degradation of water, soil, and air. Here, too, it leads toward death. Perhaps this is the most important reason of all for us to turn away from the service of wealth. There is real danger that our decisions now are having irreparable harm. A species once lost is lost forever. Climate changes are likely to be irreversible. Some poisons have half-lives of many thousands of years. Decisions made now in the service of wealth will dreadfully impoverish our descendants.

You and I cannot change the widespread commitment to serve wealth rather than God. We can, however, support one another in the decision to serve God and thus life. Even that is not easy.

I try to serve God. But so much of what I do each day is caught up in the culture and system that is in the service of wealth. I am distanced from direct contact with the poor humans and the other creatures who pay a price for my enjoyments. In particular, the future does not vividly impinge upon me. I enjoy the comfort and privilege that this culture have allowed me to have. Even when I try to act for God and life, my means of doing so are ambiguous. I travel by air and car, speeding up global warming and the exhaustion of resources, in order to attend conferences or give lectures calling for the service of God. I do not want to examine too carefully the sources of my monthly income.

A few individuals make more radical personal decisions. Myra House is a result of such decisions to serve God rather than wealth.

Most of us, however, continue to live in the world that serves wealth surrounded by influences that push us in that direction. That is why the church is so important. Few of us as individuals can stand against the dominant currents of our societies. We need a community of support that directs us in another way.

But the church alone does not suffice. It itself has yielded too much to the pressures of the society that serves wealth. It is too separated from the lives of those who are most injured by that society. It rarely challenges our alienation from the Earth. Just because it opens its doors widely to people at every point on the Christian path, it includes within itself many who still seek to serve two masters. We hardly learn in most of our congregations what it would really mean to choose life.

This is a sad commentary. We are not the first Christians to struggle with the issue of wealth, but it would be hard to find an earlier generation whose struggle has borne so little fruit. At least in North America and Europe, the church has largely come to terms with a society that is madly in the service of wealth. It hopes rather to profit from the increased wealth of the society than to call society to the choice of life.

It is important that we understand something of the history that has brought us to this point of ignoring such central parts of Jesus' message. In a very schematic way, I would like to share with you some comments on that history.

In the early church Jesus' critique of wealth was taken very seriously. Some people did in fact give away their possessions to become part of the Jesus' movement. But the teaching in unqualified form posed an obstacle for people of means. Must a landowner sell his land and a merchant give up his business in order to enter the church? The church wanted to include such people among its members. To require all to be stripped of their possessions might work if Christians expected the end of the world soon but not if the church must settle down to live in society. Nevertheless, the church could not give up its critique of wealth and its dangers.

Two solutions were devised. Some Christians gave up all their possessions and lived as hermits, and later as monks. Others cared for their needs, so that they could direct all their thoughts to God and not be distracted by the complexities of worldly life. This was widely considered the superior form of Christianity.

But for others who had families and social responsibilities that they could not or would not abandon, the teaching on wealth changed. The church did not compromise its opposition to the service of wealth. But it was not, the church decided, the sheer possession of wealth that was spiritually destructive. It was the attitude toward that wealth. If one accepted wealth in a spirit of stewardship, without attachment, its possession could fit into a Christian life. The question was what and whom one served, not the status in society in which one engaged in that service.

Some believe this was an unfortunate compromise of the radical teaching of Jesus. However, I suspect that most of us would have supported that move. Wealth exists. There is no advantage for all of it to be controlled by those who are not Christian. Certainly there is danger that we will be corrupted by its possession. But surely it is also possible to use wealth in the support of life. Learning how to do that may be more important than having the opportunity to devote oneself wholly to less mundane matters.

The Reformers rejected the first option altogether. They were convinced that all Christians should be in the same boat, that all should learn to serve God while immersed in the world. Martin Luther handled significant sums of money, but he did not accumulate it. John Wesley taught that we should earn all we can and save all we can. But he accompanied this positive teaching about how we deal with money by the third admonition. We should give all we can. In his intention, and in his personal practice this precluded amassing funds. Like Luther he handled considerable sums but died with no accumulation.

The followers of Luther and Wesley and other Reformers, however, did not take the third principle quite as seriously as the first two. Some accumulated money. Wesley was personally distressed that many of his converts became comparatively wealthy. He feared that with the new interest in handling and increasing their capital, they would be divided between the service of God and the service of wealth. He thought this would destroy the spirit of early Methodism. One can argue that he was right.

The greatest change, however, came about through another development in the eighteenth century. Prior to that time most ethical teaching assumed that the amount of wealth available in a community was more or less fixed. It could be increased as population grew, providing more labor. But then it must be shared among more people. This meant that the increased wealth of one person was at the expense of fewer possessions for others.

In such a society, greed was unequivocally wrong. It was the aim to secure more for oneself at the expense of others. That does not mean that it was rare, but it does mean that those who made themselves wealthy were not admired. Most admired were those who voluntarily adopted a life of poverty.

We should also recognize that what is socially approved and admired does affect the choices of many people. Denouncing greed as a sin did not eliminate it. But it is safe to say that it reduced its role in society.

What was discovered in the eighteenth century was that there was a way to increase the wealth available to the society. This was to make workers more productive, that is, to increase their hourly production. Two methods were employed. The first was simply organizing their labor so that each performed a repetitive task, with others performing the other needed tasks. Instead of individual artisans producing shoes and hats, workers could be placed on an assembly line. The same number of hours of labor resulted in far more shoes and hats.

The second method was to substitute fossil energy for human labor. Machines powered by coal could now do much of the work that had previously been done by human beings. Human beings could manage these machines, and thereby produce far more in a given period of time.

Christian opposition to greed and wealth had never been based on the view that meeting human needs was undesirable. Quite the contrary, the creation was good and to be used by humans. The discovery that more human needs could be met was good news for Christians.

But the price of that gain was high indeed. In addition to justifying greed, industrialization is dehumanizing to its employees, and it alienates society from the natural world. Let's look at the first two negatives before returning to the problem of greed.

When artisans make useful objects, they are personally involved in every stage of their work. What they do involves a measure of creativity. They can take pride in what they produce. Today many enjoy craftsmanship as a hobby that is humanly fulfilling.

The assembly line changes all that. Each worker performs one routine and boring operation. There is no creativity possible. There can be no sense of pride in the product. In short, work ceases to be a calling through which one contributes one's skills to society and receives appropriate respect and reward. Instead, work becomes a chore performed

Out of the necessity to earn a livelihood.

Industrialization also alienated people from the natural world. Previously, the great majority of people had lived on farms or in villages closely related to farming. The soil and the plants that grow in it along with the seasons and the weather were the stuff of continual urgent preoccupation. When land was eroded or poisoned, those who lived there were immediately, painfully aware. When land was carefully tended and improved, prosperity followed. That human life is intricately involved with nature was not an abstract idea to be considered but an evident fact daily experienced.

Industrial work, on the other hand, put an end to this close relationship for those who worked in factories and for many others besides. In the factory bits of the natural world appear as resources for industrial use. As cities grow, more and more people know nature only in tiny yards and gardens, which are luxuries on which their lives do not depend. Growing a few plants is an option for those who happen to enjoy them. Changes in weather are of importance for how we dress and how high our utility bills will be. In fact, our destiny is still inseparable from the fate of the Earth, but we know this only abstractly.

The nature of human morality was changed. The best way to make the needed changes was for ambitious people to act in those ways that would increase their personal wealth. The motivation for building a factory was to become richer. The greed, heretofore universally condemned, turned out to be a valuable motivation. It was renamed "rational self-interest", and society soon came to hold it in high esteem.

This change was a source of great confusion in the church. One response was relatively clear. In this view society as a whole, rather than individual entrepreneurs, should create the industries that would increase the goods available to all. There would then be no need to affirm greed as a motive.

It was believed by socialists that this procedure would also solve the problem of distribution. Although industrialization increased the total wealth, it increased the wealth of entrepreneurs and capitalists far more than that of workers. It changed the class structure of society from its earlier feudal form, but it did not eliminate that structure. If society as a whole owned the factories, it could distribute goods to all in a more equitable fashion.

Despite the theological appeal of socialism, it did not carry the day in Christian thought. Probably the main reason was the influence in the church of those who profited from the system of private ownership. But there was also doubt that the task could be well handled by government and fear of

concentrating too much power in the hands of government. We now know that the concerns of those who opposed a thoroughgoing socialism had good foundations.

The primary teaching of the church on economic matters turned to alleviating the lot of the poor through charity and legislation. If the market were simply left to itself, each factory owner would pay employees as little as possible and work them as hard as possible with little concern for their well being. Market principles in themselves provide no basis for doing otherwise, and if one's competitors are able to pay less and so reduce the price to consumers, one is forced to adopt the policies that make that possible. In fact this led to employing quite small children and to extremely long hours of labor in quite terrible conditions. The early years of the industrial revolution in England contain many horror stories.

The church helped to change this by getting the government to restrict child labor and reduce hours of work for all, and by insisting on improved working conditions. When these requirements are placed on all producers, they harm none of them. This is the needed "level playing field."

But the church became largely silent on the subject of the rational self-interest that society now adopted as its norm. It still encouraged generosity, but not giving away everything that one did not need. It ceased to oppose the accumulation of capital. In general it abandoned the effort to speak on economic issues, leaving that to professional economists who were committed to rational self-interest. The church ceased to explain the meaning of the choice to serve God and life instead of wealth and death.

Myra House gives us a vivid example of what that choice can mean. No one supposes that we should all try to create Myra Houses. But its establishment illustrates in a concrete way what it means to order our lives to life rather than to wealth. It is a costly decision by the standards of a society oriented to wealth. Many can hardly understand it.

The purpose of Myra House, of course, is not just to show what can happen when a Christian family decides to reorient its life to life. It offers us a brief glimpse of a style of life that supports life. It is enlivening for us as individuals. It shows us how to reduce the pressure we put on natural resources and sinks. And it gives some clues to that other way of organizing society that would follow from a broader choice of life.

Myra House brings us closer to the natural life from which we have been separated by urban industrial civilization. A retreat here is also an experience of working in the land. We are reminded

of our interdependence with soil and the vegetation it makes possible. We reconnect with our own roots.

Myra House does all this in a very Christian way. We are not confronted here with a new set of laws. To observe and participate in life in Myra House is to be drawn to new possibilities. We can see the attractiveness of the way of life. We are pulled by the beauty of the consequences of the choice of life not driven by the threat of the consequences of choosing death. We are enlivened rather than being killed by the struggle with guilt.

Viewed 2778 times.