

Faith Pulpit

Economic Wisdom as an Analogy to Prudence of Separation, Part 1

Sound economic theory assumes the fundamental and undeniable reality of “limited resources.” Lionel Robbins, former Chair in Political Economy at the London School of Economics, defined economics as “the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.”¹ Robbins wrote, “But when time and the means for achieving ends are limited and capable of alternative application, and the ends are capable of being distinguished in order of importance, then behavior necessarily assumes the form of choice. Every act which involves time and scarce means for the achievement of one end involves the relinquishment of their use for the achievement of another.”²

All economic production consumes human time and labor that could be used elsewhere. All corporations possess a finite number of goods, workers, and capital. All employees possess a finite amount of time. And in macro-economics, any base of consumers (even a national or supra-national one) possesses a finite buying power. Certainly the potential for increased wealth may continue to grow in the future, even exponentially. But in any given point of time, personal wealth is always possessed in a limited fashion. One’s resources can always be numbered, even if the sum includes twelve digits.

In this real world of limited resources, entrepreneurs must manifest prudence in their use of monetary and human capital. The moral philosopher Samuel Gregg explains, “Understanding the price of something, whether it be in time, labor, or money, assists everyone in distinguishing needs from desires, thereby causing us to give some consideration to what our priorities should be. It encourages us to be wise in our choices and thus, indirectly, encourages us to actualize the first of the cardinal virtues: prudence.”³ As Gregg succinctly quips, “It is not possible to choose everything.”³

This economic wisdom concerning “limited resources” may provide an interesting analogy to the logic of separation. Biblical separation is often (and rightfully) explained in terms of the virtue of discernment. We must discern with whom to fellowship and from whom to separate. Scripture, of course, commands ecclesiastical separation from apostates and false teachers (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1; 2 Tim. 3:1–5; 2 John 9–11) as well as from disobedient and errant brethren (2 Thess. 3:14,15; Rom. 16:17–19). This so-called “negative” facet of “separation from” focuses on the character and doctrine of others, so as to ascertain what level of fellowship is biblically appropriate.

This is a scriptural mandate of separation. However, an unbiblical trait that can taint this biblical injunction is the danger of pride. Separatists may falsely think of themselves as inherently better in every way than those with whom they do not fellowship. Yet we all acknowledge that various separatists may be less passionate in their evangelism than a compromising evangelist from whom they rightfully separate. “My brethren, these things ought not so to be.” Nevertheless, my obedience in one scriptural mandate (separation) does not necessarily guarantee my obedience in all others. Moreover, separation can be practiced with a certain level of inappropriate gleefulness rather than appropriate sobriety as one considers Christ’s ultimate desire that His followers be united in the truth (John 17:17–23). We must beware of such unbiblical distortions of this biblical and important doctrine. By definition, a separatism that is not practiced with the fruit of the Spirit cannot be spiritual in its manner of implementation.

Others have correctly stressed that separation also includes a “positive” element of “separation to” God. This scriptural element of separation emphasizes the virtue of holiness. We are to be separated from sin unto our holy God (2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 4:22–24; 2 Tim. 2:19–21), and we are to love the Father and not the world (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15–17). This theocentric approach provides an absolute, immutable standard of value in the Object one embraces. A blazing passion for God and His perfect holiness should continually fuel our motivation for separation.

Such an approach reminds us that we do not only focus on the character and teachings of others (to discern the appropriate level of fellowship), but we are also (and even more fundamentally) to focus on God’s own character. This perspective naturally leads to a proper humility, since all of us fall far short of the holiness and glory of God. We are all endeavoring to reflect God’s holiness to a greater degree, even as He has admonished, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:14–16). Our development of Christ-like character is always a work in progress (2 Cor. 3:18).

Most discussions of separation do not consider a third element, however. One might label this element the “separation for” perspective that emphasizes the virtue of prudence. In ministry, as in all of life, one possesses only limited resources. Individuals and churches have only a finite amount of time, money, and manpower available. The question arises, what is the wisest and most prudent allocation of these limited resources? For which causes, activities, and ministries are we to expend our time and

money? We must consider the “end” of our “means,” the ultimate goal “for” which we endeavor.

For example, every church has a finite missionary budget. What type of missionaries should a congregation support? One might reasonably assume that a local assembly agrees with its own doctrinal statement and philosophy of ministry. It would seem that this church would prudently support missionaries in other locations that closely resemble its own theology and perspectives. Such a focus “separates” (sets apart) and appropriates finite resources for the sake of wise investment.

Or, to adopt another example, youth directors often receive numerous invitations to the various “teen events” that are available in the area. No youth group can reasonably attend all such local and regional events. The wise youth leader builds upon a discernment resulting in a separation from sin and error and a holiness resulting in a separation to God. He then “separates” his limited resources for the best options defined by prudence. He must sift all alternatives through the sieve of his precisely developed philosophy of youth ministry.

Further corollaries of this third facet of separation may clarify the issues. First, we should recognize that this separation (setting apart) of limited resources “for” prudent living may be even more constricting than the explicit prohibitions of Scripture in specific situations. Yet, given a more excellent choice, why should an individual or church choose any lesser alternative? This facet of separation may lead to narrower choices than direct biblical mandates ever would when they are considered in isolation from the live options available.

Second, we must learn to be honest in these specific situations. Rather than disingenuously caricaturing the “questionable” or lesser alternative as a clearly prohibited option, we should paint a fair and true portrait. Much harm can be done when our publicly stated reasons for a choice do not coincide with the true rationale guiding the decision. In some specific cases, we may not honestly assert, “Scripture condemns any fellowship with you.” But we may genuinely respond, “We believe that this would not be a wise use of our resources.”

Third, we must realize that almost all ministries face similar choices, even if they are not principled “separatists.” For example, there are many churches in our local area that will not recommend my educational institution to their young people because we are “too conservative.” They will automatically invite guest authors from other institutions and plan youth trips to other colleges that more closely mirror their own ministries. After all, churches wisely limit the number of services they hand over to guest authors and the number of institutions they visit in any given “college trip.” These churches may, in fact, denounce a biblical doctrine of separation. But, ironically, their allocation of time and effort is a de facto form of “separation” (setting apart) of their limited resources. “It is not possible to choose everything.”

Fourth, since everyone must choose how to use finite resources, this element of separation cannot ultimately stand alone. It must always rest upon and be informed by a sense of separation from false teaching and compromise as well as a sense of separation to a holy God. If a separatism for the sake of limited resources exists in isolation, it can degenerate into a mere pragmatism or utilitarianism. One may practice a form of separatism without a substantive theology of separation.

Fifth, this element of separation for the sake of finite resources should also be applied to “personal separation.” An unexamined life is not worth living, and a life without hierarchical priorities is an ill-used or even wasted life. God desires that our love may “abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment,” in order that we “may approve things that are excellent” and be “sincere and without offence till the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9–11). Christians are often tempted to “push the limits” without “officially sinning,” while we are actually called to embrace “things that are excellent” out of joy and gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ.

Obviously, this element of “separation for” is closely aligned with the biblical concept of stewardship. With only one earthly life to live, we must separate ourselves for the sake of wise eternal investment. Ephesians 5:8–18 clearly establishes this principle of prudence. After issuing a clarion call for separation (5:3–14), Paul exhorts the Ephesians, “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (5:15–18). Avoiding compromise may also prevent a debilitating confusion from entering ministries in which faithful stewards have already invested time, money, and talent.

Works Cited

1. Lionel Robins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1952), 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 14.
3. Samuel Gregg, *Economic Thinking for the Theologically Minded* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 16.

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