



# Study Guide For A Pronouncement On Christian Faith: Economic Life And Justice

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# **A STUDY GUIDE FOR THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST PRONOUNCEMENT ON CHRISTIAN FAITH: ECONOMIC LIFE AND JUSTICE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

How do Christians deal with the dilemma of poverty and wealth in society? This question has always perplexed the church, leading to a wide range of options in church history: from the voluntary poverty of saints such as St. Francis to John Wesley's call to "earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." A recent moral response to economics proclaims the triumph of Capitalism and calls for the church to ordain business as "a holy calling." (See Stackhouse and McCann's "A Post Communist Manifesto", Christian Century, Jan, 16 1991).

Since the passage of the Pronouncement on Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice by the United Church of Christ General Synod in June 1989, a revolution in global economics has happened. With the disarray of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Capitalism seems suddenly to be without adversaries.

But rather than simplify the economic issue for the church, the fall of Communism makes economic decisions even more perplexing. Why? The capitalist market system that is founded on competition now has no effective competition in global economics to challenge it. This end of competition could be a great relief to the world, as so much of the Communist/Capitalist competition led to apocalyptic weapons development and proxy wars throughout the world.

With the apparent end of the cold war, the need for the moral voice of the church is even greater. Christians in Eastern Europe used to focus their dilemma with this question: "How can we be church in Socialism?" Now it is useful to ask the question, "How can we be the church in Capitalism?"

Unfortunately, western societies have made a radical separation between morality/religion and economics since economics was given the narrow definition as a science over 200 years ago. But what if morality did have a say in economic decisions after being excluded for so long? For starters, we would try to see the market system as a humanly constructed arrangement, not as a gift from heaven or a curse from hell. It has strengths and weaknesses and is subject to a higher moral criteria than profit for a few stockholders. The market system now has little competition from Communism, but the church can not afford to leave the market system or any other economic system free of critique as if it were immune from moral claims or from the judgement of God. If the market or any system will "push aside the needy" (Amos 5:12), then it needs the prophet's judgement and the church's as well. So if morality had a say about the present economic system, where would we begin?

We begin of course with the Bible, to hear again God's Word for our time. The following Bible studies focus on economic issues and develop the ideas proclaimed by the United Church of Christ's pronouncement, Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice.

These six sessions are a beginning effort to make economic issues connect directly to the spiritual, moral life of the church and to help guide our study of how the UCC pronouncement can help us with the new challenges to our lifestyles and values.

A basic assumption here is that affluent Christians want to do justice and not to exploit the poor and that most Christians actively support educational and charitable causes that seek to alleviate the economic plight of individuals. The problem with this approach is that affluent Christians are, like the poor, caught in vast economic structures that preclude the effectiveness of charity and education from making real changes to end poverty.

We are caught in an economic environment that measures our human worth by our personal wealth, status and possessions. Such evaluation is destructive to the rich and to the poor. The shadow side of the value is that the economically marginalized are considered less worthy and are allowed and made to suffer for it. But the Bible forcefully rejects this attitude. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible states it bluntly "you can not serve God and wealth." (Mt. 6:24)

Also the Bible never limits its scope of moral judgement to the behavior of private individuals caring for other individuals. Rather individuals are responsible for corporate decisions and corporate bodies are held accountable for how their decisions effect the poor. See Amos 5:11 where all of Israel is condemned "for they trample on the poor." To serve wealth is to measure all by its standards. To serve wealth means to reject God on private and public levels---period.

So what can we do to get at unjust economic structures? And how can we get at these issues with a spiritually empowering sense of forgiveness and joy that is not paralyzed by guilt and hopelessness? This is our challenge. Our guides for this task are the Bible, first, and then the pronouncement.

The following course is six one hour sessions that help bring to life the United Church of Christ's Pronouncement: Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice and Proposal for Action. Each session begins with a story of economic justice, a summary of a part of the pronouncement, a Bible study, a time for spiritual reflection and prayer, and then a learning experience to help integrate the Bible passage and a part of pronouncement and proposal for action. Each session has a learning objective and suggestions for the leader's preparation in order to guide the participants toward a commitment to act on economic justice.

## **SESSION ONE**

### **"ECONOMICS IS A FAITH ISSUE" PRONOUNCEMENT SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND**

**SCRIPTURE** Psalm 146 God "executes justice for the oppressed"

#### **STORY**

When Cheryl lost her job and could not find another, she decided that her children would be better off if she gave them up for foster care. Then she wondered how she would be treated at church, if they cared, if they would help.

#### **SUMMARY**

For a very long time Christians have considered wealth, poverty, and economics a private affair best left up to each individual or family. But finally we are realizing that "economic justice is a faith issue" just as belief in God is a faith issue. Indeed, the Bible says that if we don't supply the bodily needs of a sister or brother in need, our "faith is dead." (James 2:7)

The past neglect of economic issues by the church has hurt not only the poor, but the affluent as well. Both are captured by the "false values and priorities of materialism." The UCC has firmly decided to try to correct this false separation of faith from economics by proclaiming that "economic justice is a faith issue," just as "God executes justice for all." Our faith in God demands that we execute justice as well.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

- A cordial learning environment will be established.
- Participants will make the connection between faith and economics.

#### **PREPARATION**

- Bring name tags
- Have copies of the pronouncement for each participant ( Order more from the Office for Church in Society, 110 Maryland Ave. NE, Washington, D.C. 20002. (202) 543 1517) .50 each, plus postage.
- Have copies of the Bible, newsprint, easel, marker, writing paper, pencils available.
- Read the whole pronouncement and focus especially on the summary and background.
- Write the three questions of "a time when" from the Continuing section below on newsprint.

## SESSION PLAN

### BEGINNING (20 minutes)

- Pass out name tags and have participants sign and wear them.
- Ask each person to introduce themselves and say briefly why they are in the course and what they expect from it.
- List the following guidelines for nonviolent discussions on newsprint as follows:
  1. It is ok to pass.
  2. No put downs or harsh questioning.
  3. Speak only for yourself.
  4. Say only what is comfortable for you to say.
  5. Respect confidentiality.
- Read aloud the story of Cheryl. Ask if the church should care about Cheryl and her children and if so, how?
- Ask a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 146.
- Call for silent reflection on the scripture and the story.
- Then offer a prayer such as: God of justice, we need Your help to see Your way. Guide us in the path of justice and empower us to join You in bringing about economic justice, Amen.

### CONTINUING (35 minutes)

- Ask participants individually to recall and write down the following:

-a time when they feared poverty and how it felt

-a time when someone helped them financially

-a time when their faith was strongest

(allow 10 minutes)

- Ask people to share their answers in groups of two, but to share only what they are comfortable sharing.
- Bring the groups back together and ask for volunteers to share some of these experiences of poverty, assistance and faith.
- Phase into an open discussion of the connection between faith in God and justice for people.
- Conclude the discussion with the question: How can the church help prevent poverty as in Cheryl's story?

### ENDING (5 minutes)

- Help bring home the point that faith in God is not an abstract concept but a concrete action to change the conditions that impoverish the marginalized, not only after, but before it happens. Faith separated from works, such as economic justice, is dead.
- Assign the reading of parts I, II, III, of the pronouncement for the next session.



## SESSION TWO

### **“ECONOMICS IN THE BIBLE” PRONOUNCEMENT PART III, “BIBLICAL, ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONAL**

**SCRIPTURE** Deuteronomy 15: 4-5 “There will, however, be no one in need among you...”

#### **STORY**

The Marshalls lost their small family farm. They could not compete in the political economy of agribusiness which proclaimed “get big or get out.” They will sell the equipment, move to the city and look for work. They will be forced to live a lifestyle that is foreign to a family that has farmed for over a hundred years.

#### **SUMMARY**

The key to connecting economics to the Bible is the pronouncement’s revival of the ancient meaning of economics as “household management.” That is, the management of all God’s creation so that all have access to what it takes to live. The modern definition of economics is too limited to the “the science of the distribution of scarce resources to meet the needs of society.”

With this key of the ancient meaning of economics, the whole Bible can be seen as a book on economics. God seeks over and over to free people from the unjust economics of Pharaoh, the corrupted kings of Israel, and the decadent Roman economy. Jesus universalizes the pursuit of economic justice by becoming poor, opening God’s household to all and proclaiming the good news to the poor. We are called to make sure that there is now no one in need in all creation.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

- Participants will integrate economics with the Bible.
- Participants will understand that God’s grace and judgment applies to our economic lives as much as to our spiritual lives.

#### **PREPARATION**

- Read again Part III “Biblical, Ethical and Theological Rational”

### **SESSION PLAN**

#### **BEGINNING (15 minutes)**

- Ask someone to read aloud Deuteronomy 15: 4-5.
- Ask participants to meditate on and envision a world in which no one would be in need and to take notes or draw a symbol of such a need-free world.
- Ask volunteers to share their notes and symbols.
- Pray a prayer such as: God of justice, we are privileged as well as defined by our own political economy. Help us to see our economic world from Your perspective seeking always to end poverty so that all will have enough to live.

#### **CONTINUING (40 minutes)**

- Divide the participants into three groups and assign one group to read Exodus 5 and prepare a brief presentation of Pharaoh’s economy. A second small group can read Amos 5 and prepare a brief presentation on the economy of Israel then. A third small group can read Luke 18: 18-30 and prepare a brief presentation on the political economy of the Roman world of Jesus’ day. Encourage groups to plan presentations in the form of skits and roll plays.
- Ask each group to make their presentation.
- Discuss how God seeks the management of God’s household so all will have enough.

#### **ENDING (5 minutes)**

- Summarize the distinction between the new and the ancient meaning of economics.
- Assign the reading of part IV, “Suffering in God’s household.”

## SESSION THREE

### “SUFFERING IN GOD’S HOUSEHOLD” PRONOUNCEMENT, PART IV

SCRIPTURE James 5: 1-6 “Come now you rich people, weep and wail...”

#### STORY

When Selena went to look for a job, all she could find was one paying minimum wage. With three children, minimum wage would not even pay her rent and buy food, let alone pay for clothing and utilities. Even with a minimum wage job, she and her children would be homeless soon.

#### SUMMARY

The “suffering in God’s household” is the hardest part of the pronouncement to read. It is easy for affluent Christians to deny the grim facts of degrading poverty amid dazzling wealth, to deny the economic aspects of racism, to deny the massive costs of the military and how it is used to protect the wealth of a few, to deny how economic decisions of the rich dislocate the poor, to deny environmental destruction caused by our economic choices and to affirm that we are powerless to change this suffering.

By excluding economic issues from faith and morality, we are tempted to wash our hands of any responsibility for the suffering. Even though 40,000 children die daily from preventable causes, according to UNICEF, we are tempted to assume that the poor are responsible for their own problems. Though so tempted, we more likely feel overwhelmed by all this news of suffering. However, a first step out of this powerlessness and hopelessness is learning and accepting the hard facts.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Participants will grasp some of the facts of world poverty.
- Participants will understand that these facts are the result of human economic decisions and can be changed by humans making new decisions.

#### PREPARATION

- Read again the part IV in the pronouncement “Suffering in God’s Household.”

#### SESSION PLAN

##### BEGINNING (15 minutes)

- Have a participant read the Bible passage, James 5:1-6, aloud.
- Then ask each participant to think of people whose “cries must reach the ears of the Lord of Hosts.”
- Ask participants to name the “cries” and list them on newsprint.
- Call for a few minutes of silence and then for voluntary prayers.
- Then offer a prayer such as:  
God, we care about the poor and oppressed, but we forget them too. We feel helpless to help and fearful of our own precarious security. Open our hearts to others and give us the strength to hear these suffering cries and to not turn away.





## **CONTINUING (40 minutes)**

- Assign the six sections of Part IV to six individuals or small groups of participants. Ask each individual or small group to read their section (A,B,C,D,E,or F) and consider the contents and form a response to the question: "Why does this suffering happen?"
- After 15 minutes call the people back together and ask each to share the contents of their section and their answer to the "why" question.
- Then moderate an open discussion pressing each answer of "why" with an additional "why" question. For example, if someone says, "we will always have the poor with us, so what's the fuss?" Ask why? If the answer is that "that is the way it is," then ask "why" again. Continue to press beyond fatalism and toward human responsibility for the economic conditions.

## **ENDING (5 minutes)**

- Make the point that human responsibility for poverty and suffering is not only difficult to hear and easy to deny, it is also hopeful. That is, if humans accept responsibility, then they have the power to change the conditions that cause it and then can begin to alleviate poverty.
- Assign the reading of part V, "The Market Economy," for the next session.

## **SESSION FOUR**

### **"THE MARKET ECONOMY: PROMISES AND PROBLEMS" PRONOUNCEMENT, PART V**

**SCRIPTURE** Luke 16: 19-31 "There was a rich man who...feasted sumptuously every day.  
And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus."

## **STORY**

American Indians, like Mary Red Bear, will decide in a tribal vote soon whether or not they will allow a toxic waste dump to be located on their reservation. To thus poison the land is contrary to all of the tribe's beliefs. Yet the poverty, poor health, and unemployment are so bad on the reservation that Mary Red Bear wonders if it is a lesser evil to allow the dump or to continue to endure the terrible poverty.

## **SUMMARY**

The market economy is not a magical savior of the world. But it is not a demonic evil either. It, like all human constructions, has strengths and weaknesses. It is something we can analyze and make moral judgments about. It is not a taboo to avoid or a holy relic to venerate. The economy is a human responsibility. Indeed, if we understand economics as how we manage God's household, then we have a moral responsibility to shape the economy so that justice reigns. So defined, we are called to analyze the market economy in which we live in our country by judging its strengths and weaknesses. But we analyze it not by its GNP but by its contribution to justice for all.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- Participants will begin to learn to analyze the market economy in terms of justice for all.

## **PREPARATION**

- Reread part V of the pronouncement

## SESSION PLAN

### BEGINNING (15 minutes)

- Ask for a volunteer to read Luke 16: 19-31.
- After the reading ask participants to name modern-day "Lazaruses."  
List the names on the newsprint. Then ask for modern-day "rich people" or institutions like the one in the Bible passage. List them. Ask how this Bible passage applies to today's rich people and Lazaruses.
- Then ask participants to reflect silently on the meaning of this passage.
- Ask for voluntary prayers and end the prayers with one such as:  
God of Abraham and Sarah, most of us are closer to the rich man than to Lazarus. Forgive us for passing him by.  
Open us to hear the wisdom of Moses and the prophets about seeking justice in everything we do, Amen.

### CONTINUING ( 40 minutes)

- Ask participants to roll play a visit to the rich man's brothers. Assuming that Abraham would grant his request and send you as the rich man's envoy to warn his brothers, what would you say to them?
- Ask for two volunteers to represent the brothers. The rest of the group will play the part of the envoys from hades. They should prepare for the roll play by reading the part V of the pronouncement. Take 15 minutes to prepare the rolls.
- Roll play the encounter between the rich man's brothers and the envoys for 20 minutes.
- Debrief the roll play for 5 minutes.

### ENDING (5 minutes)

- Assign part VI, Statement of Christian Conviction.





## SESSION FIVE

### STATEMENT OF CHRISTIAN CONVICTION PRONOUNCEMENT PART VI

SCRIPTURE Luke 6: 20-26 "Blessed are the poor..."

#### STORY

The hut is sinking in the mud near the bridge over the River Guaibe in Porto Alegre, Brazil. A woman social worker is welcomed by five children, the oldest about five years old. The parents have gone out foraging in the garbage heaps. Noticing how poorly the children look, the social worker asks them whether they have eaten recently. "Yes, Miss, yesterday Mommy made little cakes from wet newspapers." "What, little cakes from what?" asks the woman. "Mommy takes a sheet of newspaper, makes it into a ball and soaks it in water and when it is nice and soft, kneads it into little cakes. We eat them, drink some water, and feel nice and full inside." (quoted from Susan George, "Third World Debt: The Moral and Physical Equivalent of War," New Conversations, Summer, 1988, p. 13.)

#### SUMMARY

The Statement of Christian Conviction (pronouncement part VI) has three overall themes: confession of economic injustice, marks of a just economy and how to start implementing economic justice. The confession affirms that most of us are economically privileged, that we have done too little to correct injustice, remain silent and have been complicit in maintaining our privileges and injustice. But we intend to change. The marks of a just economy are a brief ten point summary of what a vision of justice would contain: accountability, basic necessities, community, inclusiveness, equality, redress, environmental protection, human economic rights and peace.

Some beginning steps toward these goals are: individual lifestyle change and citizen action such as lobbying for an economic bill of rights, ratifying UN covenants, participation of the poor, a peace economy, community based development, accountability, environmental stewardship, and restructure of global institutions and restructure of global debts.

#### OBJECTIVES

- Participants will be inspired with realistic hope and commitment for economic justice.

#### PREPARATION

- Reread part VI
- Prepare a role play

#### BEGINNING (15 minutes)

- Read aloud the statement quoted above about the poor Brazilian family.
- Ask for a time of silence. Offer a prayer such as:  
God of justice, we who are privileged tremble when we remember that You seek justice. We also rejoice in Your justice for we all know some kinds of poverty and we affirm the sense of fairness that Your justice assures the world. Empower us joyously to dedicate ourselves to Your mission of justice-seeking in our world, Amen.
- Ask participants to name the things that a just economy would have. List these on newsprint. Examples: no hunger, affordable housing, etc.

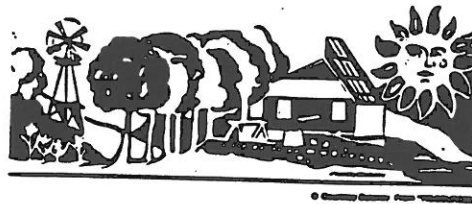
#### CONTINUING (35 minutes)

- Explain that the Beatitudes will be read aloud and suggest that participants listen for some marks of a just economy today in the Beatitudes rather than listening for the rewards of an after life. That is, assume that the blessings listed in Luke will become the blessings of a just economy on earth, now.
- Have a volunteer slowly read aloud the Beatitudes.
- Discuss how the Beatitudes compare to the list that the participants came up with before. How should the list be changed after reflection on the beatitudes? What would it take for the poor to "inherit the earth?" Take 10 minutes for this discussion.

- Roll play a meeting of the Brazilian mother who fed her children paper and the director of the World Bank who has just voted to require a strict austerity program for the restructuring of Brazil's huge debt. Ask for two volunteers to play these rolls and discuss before the whole group what should and can be done to bring economic justice to this Brazilian family. Have them deal with global debt, military, environmental problems, education, jobs, etc. Take 15 minutes for the roll play.
- Debrief the roll play beginning with the players.

#### ENDING (5 minutes)

- Assign the reading of the proposal for action in the pronouncement
- Ask participants to bring suggestions for how their church can implement some of the proposals.



## **SESSION SIX**

### **PROPOSAL FOR ACTION**

**SCRIPTURE** Acts 2:37-47 "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

#### **STORY**

The Reverend Tom Watson had struggled all his life to make ends meet. But a pastor's salary in small churches was so small that he could not pay for his children to go to college. Also living in parsonages all of his ministry meant that he had no equity in a house, and he was near retirement age with no place to live. There was a very small pension because he never made enough salary to get the annuity payments very high.

#### **SUMMARY**

The Proposal for Action intends to lay out the specific ways that the UCC can carry out the pronouncement. It sets the goals of transforming the US market economy and the global economy to ensure justice for all people. Four different levels of the church are called to do specific things in the following areas: worship, study, education, analysis, community organizing and advocacy. The levels of the church that are to act in these areas are the individual members, the local church, the instrumentalities, conferences, associations, seminaries and then the global church.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

- Participants will be committed to action for economic justice.

#### **PREPARATION**

- Reread the proposal for action
- Draw on newsprint a chart of the areas of church action and the levels of the church as shown below.
- Bring 3/5 cards, enough for each participant to have one card.
- Prepare an ending ceremony to commission participants for action.

#### **BEGINNING (10 minutes)**

- Read aloud the scripture passage, Acts 2:37-47
- Ask participants to think about how this passage of scripture applies to Rev. Tom Watson as it is read aloud.
- Ask for a time of silent reflection and voluntary prayer.
- Then offer a prayer such as:  
God of Creation, we want to do Your will but find that it is very difficult when all around us we are tempted by material wealth and we know how both wealth and poverty can corrupt us. Open our eyes and empower us to the wise use of our time, energy and resources to help bring about Your justice.

#### **CONTINUING (35 minutes)**

- Present this chart on newsprint:

	Members	Local Church	Conferences, Associations, Seminaries, Instrumentalities	Global Church
Worship				
Spiritual Discipline				
Study				
Inclusion				
Audit				
Service				
Advocacy				

- Ask participants to divide into four groups according to each level of the church. That is, one group studies what members can do. A second group studies what local churches can do, etc. Ask each to add additional action ideas to each category. (10 minutes)
- Then have each of the four groups report on the actions from the Proposal for Action and their added ideas.
- After each report, list the actions on the newsprint along with the added action ideas.
- Then open up a discussion so that all can make suggestions for all areas of action.
- Pass out 3/5 cards and ask each individual to write down what particular actions they will agree to take.
- Ask for volunteers to share what they are comfortable sharing about their commitments.
- Encourage group actions as well. The class may want to become a task force to audit the church's budget, mission giving, pastor's salary for just action or review community problems and decide on a group action. There are no limits to the needs.

#### ENDING (15 minutes)

- End with a ceremony in which all can participate. A short communion service would be appropriate.
- Read aloud a poem on the meaning of values and success in life such as this poem:

#### Success

To laugh often and much;  
to win the respect of intelligent people  
and the affection of children; to earn the  
appreciation of honest critics and  
endure the betrayal of false friends;  
to appreciate beauty, to find the best  
in others; to leave the world a bit  
better, whether by a healthy child,  
a garden patch or a redeemed  
social condition; to know even  
one life has breathed easier because  
you have lived. This is to have  
succeeded.

by Ralph Waldo Emerson

- Take up an offering of the commitments to action that people have written down on cards.
- Then pray a prayer such as:  
God of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who came among us living in poverty, who had no place to lay his head, we hear your call to care enough for economic justice that we will dedicate ourselves to continue, as Your disciples, to follow his example of caring for the poor and seeking only the riches of Your Realm of justice and peace.

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by Rebecca M. Blank

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**The United States Federal Budget  
for Fiscal Year 1990**

**36% Current Military  
\$334 Billion**  
 Military Personnel \$75  
 Retired Pay \$21  
 Operation and Maintenance \$87  
 Procurement \$81  
 Research and Development \$37  
 Construction \$5  
 Nuclear Weapons (DoE) \$9  
 International Security Assistance \$6  
 Coast Guard \$3  
 NASA (estimated military portion 50%) \$6  
 Other (CIA, President's Fund for Central America, FEMA) \$4

**25% Past Military  
\$228 Billion**  
 Veterans Benefits \$29  
 Interest on National Debt (80% estimated to be created by military spending) \$199

**10% General Government  
\$88 Billion**  
 (Government, Justice Department, International Affairs, Peace Corps and AID programs, 20% interest on national debt, civilian portion of NASA)

**21% Human Resources  
\$197 Billion**  
 (Education, Health and Human Services, Labor Department)

**8% Physical Resources  
\$70 Billion**  
 (Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Interior Department, Transportation, Environmental Protection)

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**100% \$917 Billion**