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Against the Tide: Christian Self-limitation

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The modern rejection of limitation

Adam Smith, in a frequently quoted passage from his influential 'Wealth of Nations', wrote:

A man must be perfectly crazy, who, when there is a tolerable security, does not employ all the stock which he commands, whether it be his own, or borrowed of other people ... in procuring either present enjoyment or future profit.¹

As is well-known, he is often regarded as the 'father' of capitalism and so of the consumerism which is so much a part of the modern Western lifestyle, although it may well be argued that the capitalist spirit and all that it entails is basic not just to the modern Westerner but to humanity in general. All Adam Smith did was to make such attitudes respectable. These attitudes of course do not pertain only to economics but to every part of life; to give just one example, modern science, once it has discovered by research that some part of technology is possible, tends to feel that it should be done irrespective of the consequences. Examples of this are legion, such as the dynamite of Nobel, who believed that it was so destructive that it would never be used. He would have been appalled by another example, that of nuclear explosives. It is a frequent cause for amazement that after Hiroshima and Nagasaki these have not in fact been used, although again the current proliferation gives increasing concern.

There is a total rejection of the idea that a situation can ever be seen as satisfactory. The capitalist spirit demands that there be continual

¹ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (London, 1901), 115.

change and progress, never suggesting that there is a goal which may be attained. On the personal level, there is no hint that personal possessions and lifestyle are sufficient, but that on the contrary, these should always be enhanced. In brief, there is a rejection of any idea of adequacy in any situation; there is a constant demand for more.

The basic point here is the modern attitude which refuses to suffer limitation voluntarily, and does all that it can to overcome limitation imposed from without. This is much in keeping with the Enlightenment viewpoint of Adam Smith. According to this, the worth of the individual is so esteemed that it should not in any sense be restricted, and at the same time there is the belief that everyone is essentially good and rational, so therefore limitation is not necessary. Indeed, limitation would be wrong as it would prevent further good from being done. This view of the inherent good of the individual stands in contrast to the traditional Christian understanding of basic sinfulness. Ironically, Calvin, who stressed human depravity, is often regarded as one source of a capitalistic attitude by contributing to a so-called Protestant Work Ethic which fostered early capitalism.² Certainly the Reformed attitude does stand in stark contrast to the medieval world-view which valued stability and so felt that all should be limited to the role in society that they were given by birth. In order to maintain that stability, the limitation of the individual was essential. What is often not appreciated however is that although the industry of the Protestant ethic led to the prosperity of early capitalists, the ethic also included self-limitation, even a frugality.³ The personal practice of this naturally led to more being available for investment and thus contributed to prosperity. It is this aspect that is so foreign to the modern capitalist attitude, which follows Adam Smith rather than Calvin. Indeed Calvin would hardly have encouraged the former, because ultimately this would impinge upon the sovereignty of God. For him, personal self-limitation was an essential complement to the majesty and omnipotence of God.⁴

Self-limitation in imitation of God

Yet it must be suggested that personal self-limitation in a Christian is not only a complement to the majesty of God, but is also to be seen as done in imitation of him. It is because God limits himself that Christians should also limit themselves. Self-limitation is of course inherent in creation; as soon as God chose to create an entity with at least some

2 G. Poggi, *Calvinism and the capitalist spirit: Max Weber's Protestant ethic* (Amberst, 1983).

3 Poggi, *op. cit.*, 41.

4 J. J. Davis, *Your wealth in God's world: does the Bible support the free market?* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1984), 99.

aspects of independent existence, he effectively restricted himself.⁵ This is sometimes described as 'zimsum'; the infinite God concentrated himself to give freedom to the creation, for otherwise there would be effective pantheism. Such a self-limitation is in any case not incompatible with the idea of infinity.⁶ The same is true of Christ, who limited himself in incarnation and then to death, the notorious emptying, the 'kenosis' of Philippians 2:7. Such limitation is not divestment of deity, as the older kenoticism believed, but Christ's self-limitation was necessary for him to be human.⁷ Moltmann⁸ thus comments that it is in this example of self-limitation that Christ becomes a valid example for us. We follow him in our voluntary subordination to the will of the Father. Thus just as self-limitation is a necessary part of creation, and a necessary part of redemption, the enabling of a new creation or new birth (2 Cor. 5:17), so it should also be a part of the outworking of that new creation in Christian life.

It must also be observed at this point that self-limitation by people would be consistent with God's intention in other contexts. He commands restriction of time spent on work to six days of the seven, a restriction of personal rights of ownership in such regulations as the Jubilee (Lv. 25) and not harvesting a field totally in order to leave food for the poor (Lv. 19:9). Self-limitation would be motivated by consistency to such paradigms, which again could be said to reflect the very nature of God himself.

What must however be emphasized in both these cases of creation and redemption is that the limitation involved was by choice, and was not an inherent restriction of God. A free choice to voluntarily self-limit is no diminution of essential ability. God could in theory reverse creation and redemption, although it would not be in his character to do so. This point may be clarified by noting that real freedom, which is what God has, includes not only the absence of anything able to restrict it, the negative aspect, but also, positively, the freedom to be able to choose to limit that freedom. Self-limitation is no reflection on the omnipotence of God, but quite the contrary. It may be commented here in relation to Jesus' ignorance of the time of the Parousia (Mk. 13:32), which is often cited as evidence for his limitation, that whereas people are not able not to know something, God, as omnipotent, is able so to do if he chooses.

5 J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: the doctrine of God* (London, 1981), 109.

6 D. T. Williams, 'A theology of the infinite', *Koers*, (1995), 114.

7 R. P. Martin, *The epistle of Paul to the Philippians: an introduction and commentary* (London, 1959), 100.

8 J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: the doctrine of God* (London, 1981), 132.

It must also be emphasized that the self-limitation of Christ does not mean in any way that his work is limited. There is no reason here for belief in a limited atonement. In fact, such a belief, far from being a result of the self-limitation of God, rather rests on quite the opposite; the belief is that God as fully sovereign predestines some to be saved, and therefore the effect of Christ's death was limited only to the elect. On the contrary, however, Christ's death may be seen as effective for all, but the limitation of the number of the saved which is so evident in the Bible (e.g. Mt. 7:14), may be seen as due to the fact that the relationship with Christ, which is the means of salvation, is dependent not only on the forgiveness of sins, the negative aspect, but also positively upon the union of the sinner with Christ. This is a matter of human freewill, made possible by the self-limitation of God.

It may be commented at this point that a common reason why people do not want to limit themselves in any way is not only the positive one of furthering themselves and their pleasure, but also the negative one of preventing the possibility of suffering; this is done by laying up surpluses in case of future accidents. Limitation opens up the possibility of suffering. Indeed this can be said to be true of God; Jesus wept but did not act, at the iniquities of Bethsaida and Chorazin (Mt. 11:21), and this must reflect the pathos of his Father also. Ultimately, his self-limitation also led to the ultimate suffering on the cross to deal with the results of that human freedom.

An affirmation of the self-limitation of God is not only necessary from the fact of creation and redemption, and follows from the expressed commands of God to his people, but is also supported by the fact that it enables possible solutions to some of the most perplexing theological conundrums, those of the problems of evil and of determinism.

In the first case, an affirmation of the total goodness of God in the face of human suffering is incomprehensible if God is unrestrictedly omnipotent. It is however understandable that people continue to suffer if God has chosen to restrict his ability. Of course it must quickly be added here that God's frequent refusal to act for immediate relief of suffering must be seen in the context of his ultimate purpose, which may be seen to outweigh present pain (cf. Jn. 16:21). Indeed not only does he ultimately deal with suffering, but the experience of many Christians is that he positively helps in the context of suffering, even if he does not actually take it away.

Paul would have been grateful if God had taken away his particular experience of suffering, the 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor. 12:7), but rather the reply of God to his prayer for this was rather that 'my grace is sufficient for you'. The point is that while God may well limit himself and not do what he could have done, yet his ability is never curtailed

to the point where it fails to be adequate for human needs. Indeed more often the problem lies not in the ability of God which is quite adequate for us, but rather in the fact that people do not allow God to work. Resting in their own ability, they do not limit themselves sufficiently to ask God to act for them (Jas. 4:2).

Secondly, despite theological contortions, it is really difficult to reconcile the idea of human freewill with an affirmation that God already knows the future. Even if the future is not positively caused by God but only known by him, it is really determined, in which case people are not free. It is not really satisfactory to suggest that God knows the future only insofar as he knows the results of every human choice; that is not really foreknowledge. If however God has chosen to limit his knowledge of the future, human freedom remains possible.⁹

Self-limitation for the sake of relationship

What must be a pressing question at this point is why God has in fact chosen to limit himself. After all, modern society, epitomized by America, sees personal freedom as the highest virtue; self-limitation is incomprehensible. At least, this must be qualified; for a greater benefit, anything may be done; it is just that modern people cannot conceive that there can be a greater benefit. What however may be suggested is that from God's perspective, there was, and is, a greater benefit, the relation with humanity.

Relationship is, after all, the fundamental attribute of God as understood in Christianity. God is Trinity, in which the three persons relate to each other in a perfect way. With relationship so fundamental, it is hardly surprising that God desired to relate even more widely, so created and redeemed. Particularly in the latter case, the relationship achieved was deep; Christians can be referred to as children of God.

Now this required God's self-limitation. For one thing, there is no real and meaningful relationship possible with a robot, so if the relationship is real, people have to be free, which means that God has to limit himself and not overwhelm them. Commentary on this point can be found in Ezekiel 3, where Ezekiel was overwhelmed by the vision of God, even though this was not complete; also in Revelation 1, John fell down at the feet of the risen Christ. In both cases, as is inevitable, God had to limit himself in order to relate. This is of course why the Son of God became incarnate as a man, for it was in that way that relationship with us was best achieved.

⁹ It should be added here that it is possible to see God's foreknowledge in the sense of the predictability of human action as a group, but not as individuals. As the insurance industry is well aware, while individual acts are totally unpredictable, it is possible to predict the incidence of accidents overall with a high degree of accuracy.

This highlights part of the problem with the modern world-view. The Enlightenment stressed the individual, and from an individual perspective there is no need for self-limitation. Relationships are only necessary insofar as they contribute to individual progress. Indeed problems such as resource depletion and population growth are not really relevant; they affect humanity as a whole and are serious for the future, but for the affluent Westerner they are irrelevant on a personal level. It is only when cognisance is taken of others that the problems emerge and self-limitation becomes an issue. Of course, awareness of, and care for, others should be an immediate result of Christian faith; selfishness and individualism are at least a root of sin.

Indeed, if people are free and God has limited himself, there immediately arises the possibility of the disruption of the relationship which we call 'sin'. However, God, because he desires relationship, also provided the means of the restoration of that relationship. Salvation was made possible by the forgiveness of sin and union with Christ. Such has to be without any compulsion, or again there is no real relationship with God in the full sense. This is the second self-limitation of God after the first in creation. It is no accident that Paul, referring to the act of redemption, can call it a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), as the relationship with God is created afresh through Christ.

It follows from this that if people are going to relate, they too have to limit themselves. Full relationship is otherwise just not possible. Firstly this is necessary in relation to God. The Genesis account tells that God imposed a limitation on the primal couple; they were not to eat of the tree of knowledge. This command was to be obeyed without compulsion, so that if the couple had limited themselves, relationship with God would not have been disrupted. The consequence of the self-elevation, or pride, was expulsion from Eden, and a continued separation from God. Secondly, self-limitation is necessary if people are to relate adequately to their fellow human beings. As with God, self-elevation naturally drives a wedge between people. It may be noted here that capitalism, the unrestrained search for personal increase, naturally leads to loss of relationship and social problems due to the greed and competition which must be associated with it. Western society seems to encourage the problems of loneliness, divorce, suicide and so on, all indicative of a loss of relationship.

Incidentally, it is no accident that observing the Sabbath was the distinctive mark for the people of God, for this was a voluntary self-limitation of activity to six out of seven days. It is also hardly surprising that the Exodus 20 account of the Ten Commandments relates the reason for the observation of the Sabbath to creation, while the Deuteronomy 5 account gives redemption, in this case from the bondage in Egypt, as the reason for the custom. Despite good psycho-

logical justification for the practice, it is basically irrational; by keeping Sabbath a person is in submission to the sovereignty of God, self-limiting to acknowledge his authority. What must however be noted, even emphasized, here, is that observation of the self-limitation of the Sabbath does not result in real loss. The work done on the other six days is adequate, as the story of the collection of the manna (Ex. 16) graphically indicates. Despite a constant temptation to ignore the Sabbath for the sake of extra work and so gain, it is not necessary.

The image of God

Here it may also be suggested that it is significant that the Genesis account declares that God created people in his image (Gn. 1:26). What this means has been subject to considerable debate. Perhaps the most likely is that, as bearing the image of God, humanity is endowed with the authority of God,¹⁰ but it is likely to mean more than that as well. It would seem that humanity reflects the very nature of God such as in rationality.¹¹ Most particularly, if the essential nature of God is in relationship, then it is in the idea of relationship that an aspect of the image of God is to be understood. After all, the text continues in reference to dominion over the earth, so of relating to it, and of filling the earth, which requires the deepest of all human relationships in the sexual act. It is in this that Barth¹² finds the meaning of the image. He notes that the first occurrence of the term in Genesis 1:26 is immediately followed by 'male and female'. He naturally does not want to see sexual relations in God, but does see that there must then be a plurality in him, a plurality that demands relationship in God.

It is also noteworthy here that the very idea of the image must mean a restriction, as an image must inevitably be less than the original; it is not simply a duplicate. Christ, as incarnate, was in the form, or image, of God, and as such emptied himself (Phil. 2:7). At the same time, the function of an image is to draw attention not to itself so much as to the original. Thus in Hebrews 1, Christ is the image of God revealing the nature of God of whom he is the image. This does not of course mean that Christ is essentially subordinate to the Father, but is the image as incarnate, and in that state must be less than God (Jn. 14:28). Indeed, the better that an image is, the more attention is given to the original, so it follows that an image must essentially have to be limited itself to glorify that of which it is an image.

It is this point which is so significant for the prevalent world-view of

10 D. J. Hall, *Imaging God: dominion as stewardship* (Grand Rapids, 1986). 71.

11 Hall, *op. cit.*, 92.

12 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol 3(1): The doctrine of creation* (Edinburgh, 1958), 181f.

today. Whereas the human possession of the image of God has been taken as dominion, the authority to use, and even to abuse and exploit, as in the classic expression of capitalism, Christ as in the image of God acts as a servant. It is this latter attitude which is essential to the harmony evident in the Genesis account of creation, and which is so antithetical to the competition and seeking for self which is at the heart of the capitalist spirit.

It is then insofar as we relate to, glorify and imitate Christ that we ourselves are also in the image of God. Moltmann¹³ asserts that it is the crucified Christ who is the image, so as suffering for others. Christ did not simply limit himself, but went further into positive action for the sake of others. Self-limitation is only ever half the story; the positive complement to this, as in early capitalism, is activity and industry, but whereas in capitalism it is for self, a Christian works for the good of others.

What Christ has done can be interpreted as identifying with us in our limitation, which we have due to our sin and estrangement from God. The final result of this is that we will transcend our limitation in our continued union with him, becoming co-inheritors of the benefits of his sonship. Naturally, for now, although human limitation is to some extent overcome in our salvation, we are still inherently limited, and will be until the consummation and re-creation of all things. Until then we continue, in our union with Christ, as servants of others limiting ourselves and positively acting on their behalf.

Some practicalities

The practice of Christian self-limitation will be in at least three crucial areas. The first has already been indicated in that the essence of sin is self-elevation or pride in relation to God. On the contrary, the worship of God involves a submission to his will. 'If it is your will' is not an indication of doubt as is sometimes suggested, but a self-limitation of desire so that God is glorified. The other two areas of self-limitation have also been hinted at, the areas of possessions and of population, in which self-limitation is increasingly seen to be necessary for the continued survival of humanity. What must however be stressed is that this self-limitation is not just for the sake of others, but so that a fuller relationship, both with the material creation, and with other people, becomes possible.

Basically, when people are concerned with their own benefit and profit, there is a natural neglect of others, and society as a whole suffers. Such modern phenomena as soaring crime and violence,

13 *op. cit.*, 159.

strikes and boycott actions have their roots in a desire for personal benefit, and are done with little awareness of the overall effect on society as a whole. On the contrary, where there is a desire for the benefit of society and for its upliftment, there will be generated a realization of the need for curtailment of personal ambition. Adam Smith, and his modern followers, may believe that society as a whole benefits from personal ambition, but such is more likely to damage society unless there is also a care for others. To give a trivial example, it is rarely in the interests of individuals to dispose of litter other than by simply dropping it, and hence the state of cities and towns steadily deteriorates. If however there is an appreciation of others and of society as a whole, some effort, even cost, is expended to deal with rubbish.

Not surprisingly, the major area where self-limitation is necessary is that of material possessions. It has become increasingly obvious over the last few years that people, particularly affluent Westerners, just have to limit themselves and moderate their consumption of the resources that are available to them. Firstly this is necessary due to the fact that the world itself is limited, and that there is simply not enough for everyone to live at the level enjoyed by the Western world and particularly by the United States. The progress made by technology is of course impressive, such as in the so-called 'green revolution', which has multiplied crop production and in the development of alternative technologies which have solved a number of problems; there is no longer concern about how to dispose of horse droppings in major cities! Nevertheless the extent of the modern dilemma is breath-taking, even in a very literal way when considering problems such as air pollution. This, and associated problems such as the 'hole' on the ozone layer and global warming are horrifying, and perhaps more so when it is appreciated that the major cause of these is the developed world, while the less developed 'two-thirds' world adds very little to the situation. If all polluted at Western rates, the world would rapidly become uninhabitable. The message is unmistakable; there has to be a curtailment on the part of the rich segment of the world for the sake of the rest and the environment.

Perhaps the other side of that coin is even clearer, because the Western world is consuming resources at a colossal rate, which just cannot continue. Now of course prophecies of the imminent exhaustion of key minerals, such as oil, have been frequent, and just as frequently the time said to be available before the total depletion of them seems to pass without serious catastrophe. However, it is obvious that sooner or later, again if there is no self-limitation on the part of the West, a crisis will develop. Humanity just has to note that God deliberately, in his self-limitation in the act of creation, made a world

which is fundamentally limited. He could have made a bigger one; although of course that would only have delayed the problem.

Nevertheless, it may well be argued that the world and its resources, although limited, are in fact adequate. It is only that a segment of the world is consuming excessively that is generating a problem. This highlights the second, closely related, reason why it is necessary for Western people in particular to limit their consumption. They are simply grabbing too high a proportion of the available resources of the world; a figure often quoted is that the United States, with 6% of the population of the world, is consuming 40% of its raw materials.¹⁴ This is particularly serious in the light of the limitation of the world, as it is just not possible for everyone in the world to live at American standards; the world cannot support them.

What is significant at this point is to observe the result of the current disparity in consumption. Visible inequality inevitably leads to envy and often to conflict, certainly to a loss of harmony. It is therefore necessary, if people are to relate to each other in a satisfactory way, for there to be less discrepancy in lifestyle. Self-limitation is again seen to be necessary for adequate relationship. It may also be suggested here that self-limitation on the side of the rich is necessary as a sign of repentance; much of modern affluence has been at the expense of the poor.¹⁵ Poverty, so often, is due to wealth.

It must be repeated here that the resources of the world are still adequate. The need is not for asceticism, which may be seen as self-limitation carried to such lengths as to be a perversion. In any case, asceticism is often practised due to a belief in the dualistic nature of the individual, so as to benefit the soul at the expense of the body. This in fact leads to a loss of relationship, not just with the material, but often also between the ascetic and other people. It is no accident that ascetics are often hermits. Nevertheless, of course, it is obvious that although the extreme suffering of asceticism is not called for, the self-limitation that is necessary must, as it always does, lead to a measure of suffering. However the benefits will again make that suffering worthwhile.

The consumerism and the related problems generated by capitalism quite naturally provoked the reaction of socialism. This has long appreciated the need for limitation, especially of the rich, but has been forced to compel people to be limited for the sake of others. Naturally this led to problems; the loss of freedom in totalitarianism and the inevitable corruption in any human system naturally again resulted in a reaction. The lesson is that self-limitation is very difficult to compel,

14 Hall, *op. cit.*, 13.

15 L. S. Stavrianos, *Global Rift: the third world comes of age* (New York, 1981), 31.

but here Christianity can provide a motive not only in its understanding of God but that the rights that people have over the material are not absolute but held in stewardship, for which account will have to be given to the divine owner. Such can motivate a more responsible lifestyle, particularly as Christianity also points out the fact that self-limitation is not permanent, but that there is a hope of blessing in the afterlife. Just as God's self-limitation is not permanent, but will end at the Parousia, so that of Christians will also end.

When it is affirmed that the resources of the world are still adequate, this highlights the other area in which self-limitation is particularly necessary. If human population continues to expand, the resources of the world will at some stage fail to be adequate to support even the barest level of human existence. Here self-limitation is necessary not so much in the rich areas of the world, in which population is basically stable, but in poor areas, which are where the greatest increase in population is being experienced.¹⁶ The question of population limitation is thus intimately linked to that of the limitation of resources, for it is because of a rapidly increasing population that the questions of resources and of pollution become more urgent. Thus if there was a greater degree of equality in the area of possessions, which would mean that the richer areas, more stable in population size, were limited in wealth, then it is likely that the dynamic growth in population would also abate. The question is a complex one, but one factor is that people in the third world seek to have many children as a measure of security for their old age. This means that if human relationships were better, so that all felt secure, there would in fact be less motive to procreate. Once again, there is a link between self-limitation and inter-human relationships.

Of course the need for security is only one factor in population increase, but it does mean that there is little desire for self-limitation in procreation. Even where contraceptives are available, they are often not used. Quite simply, unless there is a desire for self-limitation, then population will continue to soar. The same is true of another reason why population increases, teenage promiscuity.¹⁷ Again there is no desire for the restriction of relationship to just one partner; a lack of self-limitation leads to a population growth.

Despite the very obvious need for a curtailment of population growth, and indeed its reduction, this is another area where God has given humanity freedom. He does not restrict people at all, even if it has been suggested that he has used natural disaster and even disease,

16 K. Nürnberger, 'Cultural aspects of family planning: an ethical perspective', *Theologia Evangelica* 21 (1988), 57.

17 Nürnberger, *op. cit.*, 58.

notably AIDS, in this way. Actually, on the contrary, it has often been suggested that in keeping with the 'creation mandate' of Genesis 1:28, a religious duty is to procreate as much as possible.¹⁸ However, this must be taken in context; although a rapid multiplication in population was appropriate at the time of writing, this does not mean that it still is.¹⁹ On the contrary, it may well be argued that God's desire is not unlimited multiplication, but only to a limit. The population of the world should be adequate and no more. The world should be 'filled', but not to overflowing.²⁰

More fundamentally, the limitation of population is in imitation of the God who limited his own creativity. God could have created more but chose not to; likewise a Christian attitude should be that even where it is possible to procreate more, this should not be done. Obviously, once again, just as God's self-limitation involves a measure of suffering, so the restriction of what is a very powerful human desire for procreation also involves suffering, but nevertheless is necessary.

What would be hoped for in this regard is that the measure of suffering that widespread self-limitation entails would be accepted, whether motivated economically or religiously, as the alternatives involve even more suffering (but in the future, so irrelevant to a world-view that seeks only personal benefit). On a human level there is the possibility of the curtailment of individual freedom by a socialistic compulsion to restrict population, as is successful in China, but this does involve great suffering in an individual level. The only other possibility is the almost inevitable consequences of overpopulation in poverty and disease which will then reduce population in any case.

Conclusion

It has been observed that if relationships are to prosper, whether between human beings or between them and God, a measure of self-limitation is absolutely necessary. Personal consumption has to be curtailed, and procreation limited, in order to avoid a catastrophe which must occur sooner or later.²¹

In the world which God has made, limitation is a part of existence. It is inherent in God and in the things that he has made and done, so it is hardly surprising that humanity has to imitate God's self-limitation in a number of areas. God was satisfied with what he had done;

18 E.g. Davis, *op. cit.*, 120.

19 For a discussion of the meaning of Genesis 1:28 see D.T. Williams, ' "Fill the earth and subdue it" (Gn 1:28): dominion to exploit and pollute?', *Scriptura* (1993), 51-65.

20 R. Moss, *The earth in our hands* (Leicester, 1982), 38.

21 D. H. Meadows (et al.), *The limits to growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind* (London, 1972), 25f.

Genesis 1 repeatedly uses the phrase 'God saw that it was good'. There is no question that more could have been done, but in its very adequacy lay at least an aspect of its goodness. There must therefore be a rejection by Christians of the prevalent world-view that stands in total opposition to that, and demands the abolition of any form of limitation or restriction whatsoever. The Christian attitude is rather set down in the Philippian hymn:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests ... Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus who ... emptied himself... (Phil. 2:5-7).

If this is done, a temporary self-limitation in imitation of Christ will, in the final analysis, as it did with him, whom 'God has highly exalted' (Phil. 2:9), result in human blessing, both now and of course in the future, when all limitation will cease.

Abstract

The desire for continual growth and expansion is an almost unquestioned part of the modern Western world-view, expressed in technological progress and particularly in economic policy. Such an attitude must be questioned by Christianity in the light of God who limited himself in creation and of the limitation of Christ in incarnation and redemption. Such self-limitation was done from a desire for relationship with the world and in particular with the redeemed. In imitation of this, the Christian attitude should also be of self-limitation, both on a personal level and also on a social level, manifested in attitudes of restricted use of resources and of restriction in population growth.

I Must Speak to You Plainly

Essays In Honour of Dr Robert G. Bratcher

Editor: Roger L. Omanson

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