Christianity and Capitalism after the Postliberals: Ecclesiological Lessons from Kathryn Tanner

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Since the emergence of the so-called "Yale school" in the 1980s, postliberal theologians have often critiqued capitalism by presenting it as a form of life fundamentally at odds with that of the church.[1] Such critiques rely on a strong sense of the church as set apart, constituted by radically different beliefs and practices, with the result that the church's resistance to capitalism is best manifested within the ecclesial community. Though taught by one of the fathers of postliberalism, Kathryn Tanner adopts a different angle. Emphasizing the ways theology serves as a kind of economic discourse structurally akin to capitalism, she engages capitalism on its own economic terms and encourages Christians to do likewise. With this shift come fundamentally different answers to questions of ecclesiology and eschatology: What is the relation between the church and capitalism? And how does the church embody God's coming kingdom in a capitalist world?

This paper analyzes Tanner's answers to such questions in order to consider what her work can teach us about the proper relationship between ecclesiology and eschatology. To do so, I briefly outline the ways in which Tanner attempts to correct some ecclesiological tendencies of postliberalism as she understands it. Then I evaluate the impact of these changes on her engagement with capitalism in order to judge her alterations by their fruit. Postliberalism is of course a diverse movement and a contested term; my point here is not to engage its specific

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[1] See, for instance, Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 20012); William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000).

representatives.[2] Rather, I'm interested in what ecclesiological lessons we might learn from the strengths and weaknesses of Tanner's treatment of capitalism, where her own ecclesiology plays out. Positively, Tanner shows the value of distinguishing the church's identity as an eschatological community from its sect-like characteristics. Ultimately, however, Tanner's proposals for confronting capitalism prove unsustainable without an account of the church as a distinct community of practice—such as one often finds in postliberalism. Thus, Tanner's treatment of capitalism also calls for a recovery of what she has lost: an account of the church as an eschatological community in which the truth of God's ways is made known at least in part because the church is set apart.

Let's begin with Tanner's ecclesiology, which I think is best explained by reference to her monograph *Theories of Culture*. Here, Tanner examines how one might approach theological tasks in light of postmodern anthropology's understanding of culture. Whereas anthropology in the early twentieth century thought of cultures as self-contained, internally consistent wholes with clear boundaries, later developments challenged such a framework. Namely, postmodern anthropology began to underscore that cultures overlap and develop, that they interact with and draw from the outside world, and that they even argue within themselves about the beliefs and practices that characterize their lives.[3]

Drawing from these ideas, Tanner challenges what she sees as a postliberal tendency to present Christian and non-Christian life as qualitatively discontinuous wholes, such that the

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[2] To gesture toward just one issue: George Hunsinger argues that the "Yale school" itself is mostly a fiction, representing at best a loose grouping of interests approached through a variety of theological programs, which Hunsinger demonstrates by way of contrasts between Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. See "Postliberal Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology,* ed. Kevin J. VanHoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42–57. For the purposes of this paper, a fairly loose sense of the term will nonetheless suffice.

[3] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), chs. 2–3.

church, like a culture in the earlier modern sense, has its own language and its own ways of doing, understanding, and feeling.[4] In this picture, the church's beliefs and practices produce a web of significance that can only truly be understood from inside. As a result of this supposed discontinuity, Christian identity seems best maintained by avoiding the influences that might result from intimate involvement with other ways of life.[5] Tanner acknowledges this is of course a caricature of postliberalism, and that postliberals will admit certain degrees of outside influence on the church. However, she believes a general tendency to think of the church as self-contained indeed remains in postliberalism, insofar as postliberals *do* think of whatever they consider *fundamental* to Christian identity as exempt from outside influence.[6]

Instead of a more or less self-contained community of distinct beliefs and practices, Tanner presents the church as an association that, like a culture in the *post*modern sense, has permeable boundaries. It necessarily borrows beliefs and practices from others. And once it does so, the church does not simply use those cultural materials to maintain its unified cultural form. Christians continue debating the proper understanding of their faith and life amongst themselves, and they continue interacting with other communities and with society at large.[7] The church's boundaries thus shift constantly as both church and world change, influencing and interacting with one another.

Unlike her postliberal foils (again, as she presents them) Tanner does not see such intimate interactions and their influence as a threat to the church's distinctive identity or its ability to engage society critically. This is in part because she works from a different account of the church's distinctiveness. As she points out, after all, the church does not just passively

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[4] Ibid., 104.
[5] Ibid., 104.
[6] Ibid., 105.
[7] Ibid., 108.

imbibe what others offer. Rather, it creatively *uses* what it borrows in new and distinctive ways. For instance, Paul in First Corinthians takes ideas from the honor-shame culture of the Greco-Roman world but turns them upside-down. The church may essentially endorse some cultural elements while heavily modifying others, but in any case, the church crafts its distinctiveness at its boundaries. The church critiques the cultures from which it borrows, judging the adequacy of their features piece by piece.[8] And the church in turn influences the rest of society as Christians bring their beliefs and practices out into social interactions with those beyond the church. In these ways, in Tanner's ecclesiology, the church's witness to God's kingdom is not dependent upon separation from society at large or upon maintaining the purity of distinct beliefs and practices.[9]

The payout of this ecclesiology is clear from the first pages of *Economy of Grace*, Tanner's first monograph dealing with capitalism. Here she adopts a method she calls "comparative economy:" insofar as both theology and capitalism participate in economic discourse, providing visions for the right production and circulation of goods, theology and capitalism can be compared, and Christianity's vision can be seen as an alternative both truly radical and truly *applicable* to capitalism.[10] Whereas capitalism's vision of economy says one must compete for scarce goods in a zero-sum game, in God's economy of grace, unconditional giving reigns, putting scarcity and competition to an end. In creation God gives the gift of

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[8] Ibid., 116–17.
[9] One might object at this point that I'm too generous with Tanner to say she has an ecclesiology. After all, she rarely speaks of "the church," instead speaking about "Christians," "Christianity," "communities," "voluntary association," etc. For this reason, Tanner's ecclesiology is admittedly a low one. But she retains a concept of the catholic body of Christ. She is simply reticent to speak of "the church" because it is so hard to pin down the features that unify it, because this global body—like all groups—changes with time, and because she wants to avoid the consequences that come from failure to acknowledge the diversity of voices within Christianity. Avoiding talk of "the church," in short, is simply one way Tanner embodies her commitment to a concept of Christianity as properly "a community of genuine argument" unified in commitment to and debate over what constitutes true discipleship.
[10] Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), x–xi.

existence, and God gives again and again without limit goods that all of creation can share. As Tanner emphasizes, this is what makes God's economy radical: it not only deals with different goods (for example, salvation instead of money); it understands the *nature* of those goods differently. One can observe a similar approach in Tanner's latest monograph, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, where she contests finance capitalism's subjectivity-forming influence point by point using a Christian theological understanding of persons and their relations to work, time, profit, and the like.[11] In any case, what's salient for my purposes is that these methods rely on Tanner's understanding of ecclesial distinctiveness. Critiquing capitalism theologically is not about refusing and retreating from its concepts, for example by denouncing capitalism as a false religion. Rather, for Tanner, theological critique is empowered by the distinctive ways one puts economic concepts *to use* according to God's economy of grace.

Following Tanner's theological vision of economy, one can confront capitalism head-on by applying the principles of the former in practice. Setting herself apart from certain strands of postliberalism once again, Tanner insists such application does not consist in "generat[ing], apart from the workings of the present system, a viable economic alternative…withdrawn from a world in which hope has been lost" in the form of a small-scale community focused on church practices.[12] Instead, a theological economy "works from within [capitalism,] to turn or convert it to different principles of operation…[The economy of grace] comes to life from within the belly of the beast…generating a radically new form of economy from capitalism's own blood and breath."[13] The dedication of God's economy to the well-being of all its members, for instance,

[11] Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 8–9.
[12] For Tanner, such a withdrawal is the "temptation" of Long's approach in *Divine Economy*. See Tanner, *Economy of Grace,* 88, 148n2.
[13] Ibid., 89.

calls for changes such as global environmental regulations, and the principle of unconditional giving requires that welfare not be conditioned upon work.[14] In all cases, Christian resistance to the injustices of capitalism should primarily take the form of economically advantaged Christians using their power to pressure wealthy governments for policy change.[15]

Tanner's project has much to be praised, and more in common with postliberal treatments of capitalism than she might admit. By rooting her theological critique of capitalism in a holistic view of God's relations to humankind, she maintains a postliberal sort of attention to a distinct theological grammar, though carefully avoiding a monolithic conception of Christian tradition. This attention to grammar makes possible her concept of the economy of grace, which the church is to imitate in human economic relations. And this concept is compelling. Narrating doctrines of creation, divine transcendence, the Trinity, and salvation in consistently economic terms such as "goods," "exchange," "gift," and "return," Tanner convincingly argues that Christian theology can be understood as an economic discourse of sorts. Yet at the same time she shows that by virtue of God's unconditional and noncompetitive giving, theology is an economic discourse like no other that calls Christians to participate in human economies in radically different ways. In all, this work shows that the church's eschatological character as witness to the coming kingdom does not require a sect-like refusal of the world's terms for conversation or withdrawal from society. The church can truly witness to God's radically different kingdom while using the terms of other disciplines that may at first appear antithetical to the task.

However, the church is called to witness not only in word, but also in *deed*, and at this point Tanner's project begins to falter. Her core proposal is that Christians should go beyond the

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[14] Importantly, Tanner acknowledges other economic changes must go with unconditional welfare for such a program to be successful. Ibid., 95, 101.
[15] Ibid., 142.

church's walls to participate politically in hopes of reshaping capitalism in the image of God's economy of grace. To be clear, I have no qualms about Christians supporting policies amenable to their own theological convictions. Moreover, I think Tanner's work issues an important charge for Christian ethics—namely, that what we believe about God's unconditional giving ought to prompt Christian action for the benefit of those outside the church. However, Tanner's hope for systemic reform based on theological principles seems to me misplaced. Even if God's economy is not limited by the ordinary constraints of economics, using theological concepts from God's economy to reshape capitalism in the ways Tanner envisions effectively requires that we jettison those concepts' theological grounding. However motivated by theological economy a Christian voter might be, after all, voters still vote for policies, or for politicians who vote for policies. Neither the theological convictions nor the community of practice behind Christian support for a policy go with that policy into law. At this point, there is little reason to believe those convictions can be sustained, lacking as they now do any connection to the ecclesial community that embodied them and gave them life. This sort of problem is apparent in the dissolution of social safety nets, for example, under neoliberal economic policies that chiefly value individual and corporate rights to wealth accumulation.

Tanner argues that the principles of a theological economy can work in a capitalist economy by serving capitalism's theoretical interest in creating cycles of mutual benefit.[16] This claim suggests, in a sense, that the market is the sort of community that can sustain the principles of her theological economy. But such an argument cannot sufficiently address the issues of character formation and imagination that impede economic policy geared toward mutual benefit. Even if the economic policies Tanner advocates can serve everyone's interest, they will not be

[16] Ibid., ch. 3.

passed unless people and politicians—particularly those who benefit most from the status quo—are well-formed enough to prioritize mutual benefit over maximum personal benefit. For this to happen, theoretical principles are not enough. Thus, understandable as Tanner's desire to avoid sectarianism is, the challenges her constructive proposal faces ultimately suggest an account is still needed of the kind of community that could embody a theologically-driven economy—even if merely, for Tanner's purposes, to demonstrate to the powers that be that such a radical economic alternative is viable.[17]

In this way, it seems Tanner has thrown the proverbial baby out with what she considers postliberal bathwater. The church may not need to divorce itself from the wider world in order to witness to God's kingdom—indeed, such total separation may not even be possible, given the observations of postmodern anthropology Tanner marshals. But this witness will be hollow without the eschatological embodiment of God's ways, the incomplete but real actualization of the economy of grace within a community that believes in it. Such embodiment would include, among other things, cultivating patterns of forgiveness, of sacrificing wealth and possessions for the good of others, and of trusting the body, rather than private wealth, to provide for one's needs. At least some of these practices might be called sectarian in a loose sense—that is, in the sense that the church forgoes participation in some of our larger society's economic practices and focuses its attention instead on embodying God's ways within particular church communities.

If Tanner is right—and I think she is—that Christians need not fear the outside world's influences because we use its cultural materials in distinctive ways directed by the Word of God,

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[17] Luke Bretherton makes a similar point about Christian political participation potentially more amenable to Tanner than the picture of radical orthodoxy against which she reacts: "Too often congregations pursue works of mercy divorced from any wider forms of political engagement. But corporeal works of mercy…are also part of how the church constitutes itself as a body politic characterized by *koinonia* and catholicity. And it is through the formation of healed and fruitful relations within and through congregations that the church in its catholicity contributes to the prevailing social and political order as an order not being wholly defined by an unjust status quo." *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 443.

then the church's goal certainly should not be actualizing God's economy *only* within its own walls, such that we withdraw from society at large. But God's economy has to be established first in communities that are set apart, communities committed to an economy of grace despite its apparent irrationality and costs, and empowered to do so by God, the source of this economy's very possibility. However fluid the church's boundaries may be, certain sorts of sectarian practices within those boundaries remain a necessary precondition for the church's transformative engagement with the world beyond it. Life set apart therefore remains a necessary feature for ecclesiology.

Before closing, I want to note that Tanner's account of the church in *Theories of Culture* has the resources to amend her ecclesiology. She does not deny that the church has a distinct form of life, after all, but merely defines distinction in an idiosyncratic way and refuses to draw clear, static boundaries around "the church" as if Christian communities did not change or disagree about their own identity. For Tanner, it is difficult to say what unifies the church, other than its commitment to the task of discipleship—to learning what discipleship properly entails and to living accordingly. But in this way the church is indeed unified, and it acts together, both in particular congregations and in the body of Christ as a whole. This sort of internal social life, I'm arguing, is part of the necessary grounds for the church's participation in God's transformation of the world, and thus a necessary ecclesiological feature for theological engagement with capitalism, or any other part of our world. In sum, the church is not an eschatological community *only* by virtue of being set apart, for it can make the coming kingdom known its distinctive uses of borrowed materials while it interacts with society at large. However, the church cannot use these borrowed resources to make the kingdom known beyond its walls without the practices of life as a community set apart.