What Does it Mean to Flourish?

There are lots of possible responses to the question, and most, I suspect, typically revolve around some notion of material prosperity. But my point to you is that the answer to this question only makes the most sense when it’s positioned within the broader biblical notion of oikonomia. We get our English words economy and stewardship from oikonomia. “Economy,” after all, was originally oikonomia—a Greek word, often translated as “stewardship” in the New Testament. Later Christian writers used oikonomia to mean how God divinely orders the universe and how the church orders itself in response. In an everyday sense, then, economic means the norms or natural "rules" that every dimension of life operates by. God entrusts these realms to our care and he expects us to engage in active cultivation of their potential as an expression of his worth and their goodness. This could be called the original economic aspect of the cultural mandate in Genesis 1.

What most people miss entirely, however, is the corresponding oikonomic, or purpose, or telos-oriented dimension built into the very fabric of this economic aspect of the world. When we’re in tune with God’s oikonomic purpose, which requires living, breathing, walking, and working in the power of the Holy Spirit, we each come to a clearer sense of what God’s call means specifically in our own lives and what role we are to play in God’s economy of all things. We are to be attentive to God's present, dynamic presence like Samuel and not muffled in our ability to hear like Eli. God calls each of us to be wise, faithful, and effective stewards of all dimensions of life. The result of wise, faithful, and effective life stewardship is that each of us individually, as well as everyone around us, will flourish. You could call this the "economics of mutuality" and it is a central dimension of flourishing. The economic can’t be reduced to the oikonomic, and the oikonomic can’t be identified with purely “economic” measures. Most of human life is taken up by economic work. If we don’t integrate our faith what that part of our lives, we end up with what Mark Greene, a theologian of workplace ministry, calls “leisure time Christianity.” When dramatic changes in economic structures disrupt the moral signals we are used to from the “old order,” Christians need a fresh vision of how God’s providential care of the world takes place through our work, and how the Gospel can be manifested in our moral witness to the economy at large.

Today we’re living through an era of economic dislocation. We have to rediscover the perennial truth that the economy is a moral system, a web of human relationships in which each person’s work benefits others through a vast system of exchange.
Biblical View of Mission

Our activity as stewards is whole-life discipleship and embraces every legitimate vocation and calling to fulfill God’s mission in the world. But this isn't the idea that comes to mind when most people think of stewardship.

Why not? What set this inspiring vision back? It was set back for two primary reasons: First, because evangelicals siphoned stewardship off from a holistic understanding of God’s mission in order to raise funds for global missions and the local church, and second because evangelicals, at the same time, upheld the problematic distinction between clerical vocations and ordinary vocations, which only served to reinforce the age-old wall that had been erected between sacred and secular callings.

In the immediate aftermath of the First International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, John Stott, in his Oxford lectures entitled Christian Mission in the Modern World, pinpointed the theological root cause of the problem. He discerned that evangelicals seemed unable to integrate satisfactorily the Great Commandment (Lev 19:18), to “love your neighbor as yourself,” with the Great Commission (Matt 28:19), to “go and make disciples of all nations.” God’s mission, Stott urged in keeping with Matthew 5:13-16, “describes rather everything the church is sent into the world to do. [It] embraces the church’s double vocation of service to be ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world’” (pp. 30-31).

I think that a proper understanding of the scope of God’s mission places a stewardship responsibility on every Christian to join with the Son in the power of the Spirit to fulfill the Father’s purpose in creation and redemption. At its most basic level, Biblical stewardship is holistic and missional, touching every area of life and employing every legitimate vocation in service to Jesus Christ, who is “the firstborn of all creation” and “the head of . . . the church” (Col 1:15-20). Biblical stewardship in this broader theological sense, then, is a foundational design element in God’s purpose for creation and in his redemptive plan for the world. If evangelicals are serious about living into the full Trinitarian dimensions of biblical oikonomia, then we will need to learn from our Pentecostal brothers and sisters just what living in and relying on Holy Spirit power means. You have much to share and the broader church has much to learn.

Pentecostal “Value-Added” to the Faith, Work, and Economics Conversation

[This material is taken directly from Charlie Self’s Flourishing Churches and Communities, pp. 48-50]

Pentecostals will help evangelicals, broadly speaking, to better enjoy God and be empowered for mission. God’s creative and redemptive works encompass the whole person, the entire human race, and all of creation (Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:15-20). Our Lord Jesus Christ is the firstborn among many brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:29). Paraphrasing C. S. Lewis, Christians do not only believe in the immortality of the soul but in the resurrection of the body. The eternal union with the triune God, the forever life of the redeemed family of God (Rev. 4-5; 7; 20-22), is embodied existence and includes a meaningful activity of worship and work.

The Holy Spirit is the “earnest,” the “down payment,” or the “deposit” of the future. He
is the presence and power of God in Christ given to all Christians as a sign/seal of the fullness of salvation that will come with the day of the Lord (2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14). Jesus promised that his followers would continue his work through the presence of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39; 14-16). The reign of God inaugurated in the words and works of Jesus Christ (Matt. 5-9; Luke 4:16-21) continues through his followers. Works of charity, deliverance, healing, forgiveness, peace-making, reconciliation, and wealth creation are present signposts of the age to come. In other words, the Holy Spirit empowers the church to live the future now, demonstrating in proclamation and practice what the future looks like when Christ is fully present. This Spirit-empowered life does not result in perfection in this age, for we see and understand only in part (1 Cor. 13). At the same time, there is no biblical reason to impose artificial limits on the work of God in the world when the conditions of humility, love, unity, and holiness are present (John 17; Eph. 3:14-21).

**Life Stewardship**

God has made each of us stewards – a steward of ourselves, of our relationships with others, and of our citizenship in our community. This universal stewardship calling makes us responsible for cultivating our own life in cooperation with God, helping our neighbors to flourish as fellow stewards, and helping the community steward itself for coming generations. This integrated, whole-life approach to discipleship gives a central place to making the world a better place through your work (notice the inherent connection of work here to social life), and having the economic wisdom to understand how a community is sustained by people exchanging their work, because work takes up the majority of human life. Unfortunately, in this fallen world, people are tempted to let others be stewards of their lives and have others carry out their responsibilities to neighbors and community. Without an integral understanding of life stewardship, human existence becomes shallow and without dignity; people become selfish, passive, and dependent upon others both spiritually and economically. The goal of the primers is to lay out the vision of life stewardship in ways that are contextualized to readers in specific theological subtraditions. Work and economics not only helps individuals to flourish but they are the primary means by which God helps entire communities, cities, and nations to be blessed in material and nonmaterial ways (flourishing). This is the big point that we think is desperately lacking today. Of course, we also think that it is important to be people of character, and that character is individually acquired, but we don’t think the value of character stays with the individual. We think its value can also be seen on the social level through institutional channels of service to others.

**Enlightenment Discipleship Models Lead to Disintegration**

I have seen that evangelicals often succumb to a dangerous strain of separationist thinking that keeps faith and economics in tightly sealed containers out of a fear that economics will corrupt faith. Sometimes this mentality is driven by faulty theology, though it wouldn’t be accurate to say that it’s always a result of faulty theology. Separationism is mostly the result of a practical tendency to isolate faith from ordinary life — Sunday from Monday through Saturday. People don’t have to be sectarians or dualists in theory to fall into this trap; they just have to think and act in ways that isolate faith and ordinary life,
including politics, the workplace, and economics.

The Acton Institute is developing a church-based educational response to this problem, particularly because religious professionals tend to fall unwittingly into rigid dichotomies of sacred and secular, clergy and laity, ministry and everything else, success and significance. Acton’s focus is on training disciples to be faithfully present in all the venues to which God has called us, so, to counteract faith-life separationism, we’re attempting to unpack what it means to be disciples with callings to a variety of God-ordained vocations, including the ministry and business. And we’re acting on the challenge presented in the Cape Town Commitment for the church at large to “[intensify] efforts to train all God’s people in whole-life discipleship, which means to live, think, work, and speak from a biblical worldview and with missional effectiveness in every place or circumstance of daily life and work” (p. 36). What’s common to all forms of separationism is the root conviction that faith and parts of life should be compartmentalized, and that one area should have little or nothing to do with the others.