

Marketplace Wisdom in the Book of Ecclesiastes

(An abstract)

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Working from the perspective of creation (rather than redemption), the Book of Ecclesiastes deals directly with the nature of the physical world, and it provides valuable insights for many issues in the marketplace. The creation theology of the book is best represented by one of its keywords: “give.” It brings out the two seemingly opposing themes of vanity and enjoyment. (The same paradox is found in the two creation accounts in Genesis 1–2, in which creation is depicted as order and gift respectively.) On the one hand, Ecclesiastes affirms that life, including our work, is the Creator’s gift for man to enjoy; on the other hand, the word “give” is also used to denote the setting of the creation orders. In particular, the “physical order” emphasizes the limitations of life and God’s sovereignty. According to the author of Ecclesiastes, all creation, work included, is by nature vanity as it fails to satisfy man’s inner desire for eternity.

From this perspective, the message of Ecclesiastes is then applied to the marketplace. Chapters 1–2 affirm the reality of vanity, rejecting creation as the source of ultimate satisfaction, thus warning against making work our idol.

Chapters 4–5 evaluate the various degrees of economic success, dispelling common myths regarding materialism, and promoting the right mindset characterized by gratitude and contentment. Chapters 6–8 emphasize man’s inability to define or determine his own fate and argue for moral behavior despite the apparent lack of retributive justice. Chapters 9–11 highlight the unpredictability of life and the vulnerability of wisdom, but they still teach us to make full use of our potentials and opportunities. In conclusion, creation theology as found in Ecclesiastes brings together the marketplace and our faith by taking work as a gift from the Creator. It teaches us to respect the creation orders as the way to fulfil the Creator’s plan for man.