

Viewpoint

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Remembrances of the Association of Christian Economists

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John Mason, Gordon College

ACE Secretary/Treasurer, 1983–2004

At the Atlanta ASSA meetings in December of 1979, lobby and dinner conversations prompted a spontaneous gathering in the hotel room of Marvin Kosters attended by perhaps a dozen economists with varied affiliations (research universities, policy-oriented think tanks, government agencies, Christian liberal arts colleges). In the summer of 1980 Brian Griffiths presented a series of lectures on economics and Christianity at the Brookings Institution (which Marvin Kosters and Robert Hamrin, two early members of the Association, helped arrange). Using the occasion of the lectures someone—precisely whom, we cannot recall—organized meetings at the Fellowship House in Washington to interact with the content of the lectures.

Six months later, during the ASSA meetings in Washington in December of 1981, a small band of economists (primarily from Calvin College, Gordon College, and Wheaton College) met at the offices of the Christian College Coalition, asking ourselves why some formative initiative had not been forthcoming. Bruce and I agreed in that meeting to bring to the next ASSA meetings a proposal for a formal association.

Editor's Note: *The Association of Christian Economists is marking its twenty-fifth birthday in several ways—most importantly, through the upcoming conference at Baylor University, “Three Perspectives on Economics and Faith,” April 16–18, 2009. In addition to the conference, we have solicited from past Presidents (and others who have played important roles in the Association) a set of brief written reflections on the history of the Association, and its future. Presented in this issue is a selection of excerpts from those reflections. The unabridged reflections are available from the Association's website, <http://www.gordon.edu/accel>.*

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I solicited names of potential members, arranged for a meeting room with the Secretary of the American Economic Association, and assembled an organizing committee from those present at the previous gatherings to extend a general invitation at the New York ASSA meetings in December of 1982 to form an Association of Christian Economists. A modest-sized conference room was almost filled.... The San Francisco ASSA meetings the following year found us listed in the Program for one professional session, a fellowship breakfast (a portion of which served as an annual business meeting), and as one of the Allied Social Sciences represented at the meetings.... When I requested rooms to host our professional sessions and fellowship breakfast, and to have these locations listed in the ASSA Program, no resistance was encountered whatsoever.

We began and remain an association of “Christian economists,” and both personal attributes call for definition. The bylaws presented to the organizational meeting in 1982 stated that “the Association shall be open to all interested economists who are in agreement that 1) Jesus Christ is the Son of God and through his atonement is the mediator between God and man and 2) the Holy Scriptures, as the Word of God, are authoritative in matters of faith and practice”.... Our intention was to situate the Association to be open to all orthodox Christian believers from any Christian tradition.... Bruce and I, along with other founding members, were anxious especially in the early years that the Association not be perceived practically as a gathering primarily of Christian college economists, and to this end we encouraged the nominating committees in their bi-annual work to put forward a president associated with a research university or similar status in the non-academic world.

A. M. C. Waterman, St. John's College, Winnipeg

I attended the inaugural meeting of ACE, and was one of those who preferred to avoid, so far as possible, any attempt to spell out just what might count as “Christian” in our title. My dear friend, the late Paul Heyne, was so disaffected even by the minimalist definition eventually adopted that he declined full membership and preferred an Associate status, at least at first. It pleases me that the Association now includes such a wide variety of Christians that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for all of us to reach agreement on almost any article of the faith. Why am I pleased? Because an Association such as ours, like the Church itself, can and ought to be a society in which we continually learn from one another. And as the great Paul Samuelson said to me a few years ago, “I never bother to talk to anyone who agrees with me. I learn nothing from them.”

What then have we of the ACE disagreed about during the past two-and-half decades? Most importantly, I think, about whether there is, or could be, any such thing as a “Christian economics” that might be different, both in its method and findings, from ordinary “economics”.... Have we come any nearer to agreement in the past twenty-five years? No. Are we ever like to come to agreement? No. Does this matter? No.

All economists disagree with one another to some extent—whether profitably or otherwise—and so do all Christians. Because each of us is unique we see the world from our own, private angle of vision. But we escape solipsism by the practice of humility and charity. We can then learn from each other not why one is right and the other wrong but something much more important: the indefinite variety of defensible opinions which may validly be held by persons of good faith, and which can divide them on important matters from some of their colleagues (and friends) who share both their scientific training and their religious convictions

Gerald Brock, George Washington University

ACE President, 1983–1985

The initial membership was composed of faculty from secular universities and from Christian colleges along with economists working for the government and other organizations. The Christian college members generally saw the association as a way to facilitate their focus on integrating faith and learning. Several people attempted to provide an alternative to standard models.... The secular university members tended to be skeptical of the alternative modeling exercise, to be heavily involved in research efforts utilizing the standard economic approaches, and to see the meaning of “Christian economist” in terms of personal ethics and selfless care for students rather than in the content of the economic analysis. The organizing committee and the ACE bylaws recognized that difference by including two purposes for the new organization (which have remained unchanged): (1) to encourage Christian scholars to explore and communicate the relationship between their faith and the discipline of economics; (2) to promote interaction and communication among Christian economists.

My first goal was to establish the organization in a meaningful form.... My second goal was for ACE to develop an intellectual framework for what it means to be a “Christian economist.” I was hopeful that ACE could facilitate progress by improving communication and interaction, leading to a cumulative process.... In order to aid research, we established a paper series, a section for notes on current research in the *Bulletin*, and a

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series of book reviews in the *Bulletin*. We decided to establish the *Bulletin* as a communications device rather than an outlet for publishing completed research papers because we believed that it would be difficult to set up a research journal while the organization was new and we believed that it would be better to encourage people to publish in the more established journals in order to obtain a wider readership.

J. David Richardson, Syracuse University

ACE President, 1987–1990

I have been intimate with ACE from our charter trust. Our intimacy has been...well...prickly. I was prickly-President from 1987 to 1990.

Why prickly intimacy? The intimacy is easy—I remain deeply committed to Christian discipleship of our minds, and to those fellow pilgrims who find economics to be a God-given logic and method for helping do His ministry.

The prickly part is harder. One piece is a kind of raw envy of comparable groups such as the philosophers and the natural scientists who seem to “do it” with more energy and maybe more integrity. Do what? Do the purposes for which ACE itself was created—to advance the discipline in faith and in community. I’ve never been persuaded that we’ve had as much impact on economics as leading Christian philosophers and natural scientists have had on their disciplines. And I’ve only rarely felt that we were enjoying each other’s company in loving and practicing economics—using as a baseline the annual Christian philosophers’ conferences and meetings of the American Scientific Affiliation.

In retrospect I think we also missed some great opportunities: to better engage Jews and Muslims, especially, in serious faith-based economics; to partner with theologians and social ethicists in a sensible-centrist approach to markets and global market integration; and to think out the microeconomics and evaluation methods for faith-based social work, ranging from charter and private schools to government contracts for welfare services, to “business-as-mission.”

In the last decade I think we have made significant progress on some of these fronts—e.g., our twentieth anniversary conference for development scholars and practitioners. But I also think we have a long way to go.

William F. Campbell, Louisiana State University

ACE President, 1991–1994

The President of ACE needs to be someone who can live within the ambiguities of a balancing act. Balance, however, carried several types of connotations. On the one hand, we should balance left and right amongst our members. Different interpretations of the role of government reflect both disagreements about positive economics and normative foundations.

Another balancing act was between research economists at large research institutions and teaching economists at small, liberal arts oriented colleges.... Sometimes there were difficulties forming panels from the colleges because their faculty simply did not have the time or the inclination to research and break new ground. Larger teaching loads, community involvement, and committee meetings absorb the energy and time of the faculty.

This tension also is reflected in the kinds of research that are done by our members. Increasingly, empirical approaches suitable to the refereed journals and tenure promotion at the large state universities are making headway in our organization. This is not bad in and of itself as long as we continue to raise the kinds of moral and spiritual questions prohibited by the still-reigning positivism of the academy.

John Anderson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

ACE President, 1995–1997

In looking back at my 1995-97 term, the context of the time was significantly influenced by the 1994 ACE-Gordon College workshop before the ASSA Boston meetings, on the question, “What Should Christian Economists Do?” Papers presented at that conference provided a range of answers to that question and stimulated a good deal of reflection and debate. The debate was essentially between those who claimed Christian economists were obliged to do economics in fundamentally different ways (focusing on methodology) and those who argued that Christian economists should do economics well to the glory of God (focusing on mainstream and leading-edge economics). John Tiemstra of Calvin College answered the question, saying that Christian economists should do economics, but differently — stressing alternative methodologies. Dave Richardson of Syracuse University said that *mere* professional economics is worth doing for Christ’s sake. While this characterization oversimplifies, it provides context for viewing the activities of ACE and the next two sets of meetings.

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In a modest effort to raise the profile of ACE at the 1997 New Orleans meetings and broaden the appeal of our activities, I invited Glenn Loury of Boston University to be our luncheon speaker. We had not previously used a luncheon speaker, but had typically used the luncheon time for fellowship followed by a business meeting. Glenn graciously accepted my invitation to come and provide personal reflections on being a Christian economist. The Durham Room at the Riverside Hilton was packed to overflowing, well beyond the 40 persons for whom we had prepared as we placed our food order in advance. Despite the discomfort of a packed and stifling hot room, Glenn provided a very challenging and personal set of insights on his Christian faith and its influence on his work as an economist.

Judith M. Dean, United States International Trade Commission

ACE President, 1997–1999

It was the January 1994 ACE conference on Christianity and Economics that caused me to ask questions, and ultimately shaped my term as President. This conference was a first for me. I learned a tremendous amount from ACE members who had thought long and hard about their faith and their field. Some members saw the Christian economist as one who evaluates the underlying principles of mainstream economics, sees where they may conflict with Christian thought, and proposes alternatives based on Christian principles. Other members saw the Christian economist as one who uses mainstream economics, despite its shortcomings, to better understand economic issues, and thereby shape better economic policy. I couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be an unwritten divide between these two views--as if they were competing, mutually exclusive approaches to Christianity and economics. I was surprised by this. While the first approach appealed to me greatly (especially as the daughter of a philosopher), my own passion was to pursue the second. Weren't both of these valid options?

During 1997–99, we refocused our planning so that one of our annual sessions would emphasize the application of mainstream economic analysis to policy issues of interest to Christians.... These presentations have indeed attracted many economists who normally would have avoided something sponsored by Christians. It is exciting to see that today, ACE excels in presentations reflecting multiple approaches to thinking Christianly about economics.

P. J. Hill, Wheaton College

ACE President, 1999–2001

Two items did occur during my term of office that shaped the future of ACE. The first was the conversion of the *Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists* to *Faith & Economics*. Stephen Smith and Bruce Webb, the two long-term editors of the *Bulletin*, took the leadership in the conversion, which seemed appropriate given the fact that the *Bulletin* was accepting and publishing more articles and was not just a place for book reviews and communication about ongoing work among members.

I thought the change in the Association's journal was an excellent move because we had matured as an organization and knew more about who we were. Part of that knowledge was an acceptance of the fact that there is no single definition of what it means to be a Christian Economist. Part of the resolution of that issue occurred at a conference that the Wheaton College Department of Business and Economics sponsored in Chicago, January 5 and 6, 1998, immediately following ASSA. The conference was entitled "Christian Economists Doing Economics: A View from the Trenches." My memory of the conference is that there was not a consensus about what defined us as Christian economists. Several perspectives were present in the papers and in the ensuing discussion, ranging from doing good research that would be respected by other economists to using a completely different paradigm than the standard one of neoclassical economics. Thus when I entered my term as president it was clear to me that the Association needed to be an umbrella organization that allowed room for these differing viewpoints.

The one area the board took up, under my urging, was the statement of faith that we published as defining regular membership. It states:

Regular membership is open to all interested economists who are in agreement that: Jesus Christ is the Son of God and, through his atonement, is the mediator between God and man; and that the Holy Scriptures, as the Word of God, are authoritative in matters of faith and practice.

My understanding was that the statement had not changed from the time it was written for the organizational meeting, almost twenty years prior.... The board agreed that we wanted to have a creedal statement and I attempted to write an alternative version. In the end, however, each attempt failed to be satisfactory in one way or another, and we ended up not changing the statement.

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Chris Barrett, Cornell University

ACE President, 2001–2003

By the time I was elected President of the Association of Christian Economists (ACE), ACE was a mature organization with a significant and growing membership of more than three hundred brothers and sisters in Christ. While there continued to be regular disagreements within the membership over what it meant to be a “Christian economist,” the overwhelming majority of the ACE membership had accepted that it was infeasible—even, arguably, undesirable—to establish a shared intellectual paradigm that could characterize Christian economists. The prevailing view, which I supported then and continue to espouse, was that a fruitful tension emerges through respectful disagreement on this deeply personal point.

Two significant advances took place during my time as President. First, the Association’s *Bulletin*, which had served the membership well during its first decade-plus, had recently changed titles, to *Faith & Economics*, and was increasingly positioning itself as more than just an organ for communication among the membership. Under the dedicated and skilled editorship of Stephen Smith and Bruce Webb, *Faith & Economics* made significant strides, maturing into a true journal, an outlet for serious reflection on a variety of topics of broad interest to Christian economists and a publication that non-members respect and consult.... Finally, my term as President encompassed ACE’s twentieth anniversary.... I advocated for an event that would bring Christian practitioners in development organizations together with Christian academic economists in a forum for mutual learning.... Judy Dean and Julie Schaffner selflessly offered to organize a post-conference following the 2003 ASSA meetings in Washington. [They] organized a brilliant program that coupled insightful papers with a broad and engaged group of participants.... Stephen Smith joined Judy and Julie in editing the set of papers into an outstanding volume, *Attacking Poverty in the Developing World: Christian Practitioners and Academics in Collaboration*, published in partnership with World Vision in 2005.... it is a wonderful example of the sort of rigorous, thoughtful, and diverse Christian economics that this Association alone can foster.

Andrew Yuengert, Pepperdine University*ACE President, 2003–2005*

I was hopeful that more could be done to reach out to economists in the field who were Christian, but who were uninvolved in ACE.... Similarly, I was hopeful that more might be done to encourage young economists-in-training to consider ACE. Again, the challenge of getting the attention of graduate students, who are simultaneously trying to master the discipline and find a place in it, are great.

I have come to believe that our goal of promoting Christian scholarship is key to promoting a wider fellowship among Christians in the discipline. Christian graduate students, and Christian economists in general, need Christian mentors and fellowship, and this is available in ACE. Most are unlikely to be attracted by fellowship alone, however. We come to the annual meeting not just for fellowship, but for professional development and connections. If the opportunity cost of coming to an ACE session or luncheon is the opportunity to stay abreast of your subdiscipline, or to meet with scholars in it, we should not be surprised that the quantity of fellowship demanded is lower than we would like. If Christian fellowship is a joint product with stimulating scholarship, insight into the discipline, and opportunities for new research, more Christian economists will come to ACE. ACE's mission to encourage and publish new scholarship is therefore an important part of its fellowship mission.

During my time as President I became fully aware of the great sacrifice of time and effort the Gordon economics faculty had made to the Association. John Mason, as Treasurer/Secretary since the founding, and Stephen Smith and Bruce Webb, as editors of the journal, were the human foundation on which ACE functioned. It is hard to imagine that ACE could have functioned as well as it has for the first 20–25 years without them.

Earl Grinols, Baylor University*ACE President, 2005–2009*

In their professional capacity, Christian economists may be asked if they are Christians first or economists first. Assuming such a distinction imposes the conclusion that there is a conflict, subtly suggesting the slander that there are times where one's Christianity causes one to act inappropriately as an economist—the exact opposite of Christian doctrine. In fact, no person of integrity abandons his faith for his profession, and

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there is no contradiction between being an economist and a Christian. The relevant issue...is how our Christianity enhances our service to others (Golden Rule) in the economics profession.

In 2005 the board met to discuss adopting objectives for the coming years that, if accomplished, would most help the organization and its members. The following focuses/accomplishments were the results:

1. During these years the Association established an editorial board for its journal, *Faith & Economics*, changing the Association's bylaws to reflect this change. Board member terms were staggered to provide ongoing transitional institutional memory. The positive results of these changes are, we hope, and will be, reflected in the journal.
2. We sought to continuously raise quality of Allied Social Science Association meeting sessions. During these years attendance was excellent, generally well over 30 per session. Although it was unsuccessful, a request was made to the Allied Social Science Association to expand the number of ACE sponsored sessions from two to three. Perhaps such a change can succeed in the future.
3. At a member's suggestion, a voluntary fund to be used to support membership dues of those who claimed need was established and was funded.
4. The Association noted the passage of its twenty-fifth year. In addition to recognition in *Faith & Economics*, an Association-sponsored conference under the leadership of ACE member John Pisciotta was planned. The Association conference will be held in April 2009 at Baylor University. ■