

One New Book for the Preacher

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Eric H. F. Law, *Holy Currencies: Six Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries* (St. Lewis, Missouri: Chalice Press), 2013.

Eric Law's *Holy Currencies* is an untapped resource for preachers seeking to move their congregations from survival mode to a renewed commitment to mission. Law's basic thesis is that human nature, in concert with the Holy Spirit, provides the church the means to be effective ministers of the Gospel. We are made for relationship, and we are essentially connected to one another. If we live into that reality and trust it, we will recover our voice, our witness, and our drive. Living into that reality involves recognizing and seizing on our connection to one another: for instance, offering to be in partnership with neighboring schools, police departments, and faith communities, and to make our buildings available for all kinds of neighborhood events. Furthermore, it requires a deeper engagement with one another. Truth is the product of our common struggle to speak out of our own experience and listen to the experience of others. This is the heart of Law's book. As followers of Jesus, when we actually listen to one another, it becomes possible to begin to work together, not so much despite our disagreements as in the power of our unity in Jesus Christ.

Law's insistence on listening and common ground arises from his early work in cross-cultural awareness. But this present book culminates a steady shift in his approach. Successful cross-cultural encounter means mutual understanding, respect, and a commitment to ongoing exploration and partnership. This requires listening and humility. But the practice of patient listening and the attitude of humble service arise out of an even deeper place. Law quotes Desmond Tutu's observation that we are different from one another in order that we may discover our dependence on one another. With regard to race, ethnicity, and culture, we might say that true engagement is driven by a hunger for relationship with human beings who are not like us. So the drive to engage is not only a moral obligation—although for religious faith it certainly is that. It is also a yielding to our overwhelming need to know and to be known.

This is the fundamental insight that is implied in all of Law's work, but which swings into full view in *Holy Currencies*. Since the establishment and constant renewal of friendship is the natural bent of human nature, our capacity to be present to one another may be compared to cash which can be converted into goods to be exchanged. In this case, the good to be exchanged is nothing other than the possibility of friendship and common cause. Because this is a precious good all too easily squandered, even when we are dealing with those most like ourselves, Law has shifted the focus of his work from cultural interchange to the dynamics of interpersonal relations within congregations and between congregations and the neighborhoods surrounding them. New life can be breathed into the church when we cash into what we can offer to one another and to our neighbors. Thus it is almost never about money primarily. I have already mentioned the currencies of relationship and truth. Law also discusses the currencies of wellness, time and place, and gracious leadership. For instance, a

congregation with ample physical space but an aging and exhausted membership might invite young adults from a thriving but cramped building to come and re-seed it with fresh energy and leadership.

Obviously, the notion of exchange is front and center here. This may be off-putting at first, as it seems to reduce relationship to a transaction. But Law's insistence on exchange as a spiritual dynamic points to something more essential. His point is that all of us, individually and collectively, possess relational gifts with which God our creator has gifted us. As in the parable of the talents, we are called to take the initiative to spend those gifts, expecting to receive gifts in return, not as payment, but as connection acknowledged, affirmed, and carried forward. Ultimately, Law is drawing us toward the classical Trinitarian doctrine of God, understood as an eternal exchange of love among the three persons. This is not about profit and loss, but about a constantly circulating give and take. The Gospel message here is that this give-and-take is not a zero-sum equation. God is infinitely self-replenishing, so the gifts God pumps into us are inexhaustible. We only need to trust that as we give them away, they will be returned in excess, if not by our neighbor, then by God. Whoever lets go of life will find it.

I hope I have already demonstrated the worth of *Holy Currencies* for preachers. In my view, the whole purpose of preaching is to hold the church together as it prepares to set out in witness to the justice and mercy of God. We are to embolden our congregations to engage in deep conversation about faith and the struggle for faith, and to imagine how to parlay that internal conversation into engagement with other faith communities, with all people of good will, and ultimately with those whose will may not be good. Eric Law provides both the inspiration and the tools to do this. To begin with, *Holy Currencies* is filled with concrete examples of congregations that have been transformed by discovering and exchanging the currencies they have already obtained. Secondly, he has included concrete lesson plans as follow-ups for every invitation into any deeper identification and exchange of gifts. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, he has identified the "margin of grace," the space between false comfort and paralyzing fear, where a congregation in fear of death can hear Jesus calling them to live in new ways.