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Christian Economics in One Lesson Part 2: Scarcity and Ownership

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And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Gen. 2:16-17).

God declared the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as forbidden to man, an area outside of man's lawful jurisdiction. This was a verbal "No Trespassing" sign. Man then violated this boundary.

This trespass can be interpreted several ways. Above all, it was man's attempt to substitute his sovereignty for God's. It was an attack on all three offices of God: prophet, priest, and king. It was a prophetic violation, a denial of the reliability of God's word: He would not bring the negative sanction He had promised, death. It was a priestly transgression, a violation of sacred space: sacrilege. It was a kingly violation, a challenge to the authority and ability of God to bring negative physical sanctions against man in history. It can also be understood as an attempt by the children to collect what they regarded as their inheritance before the father had transferred it. But for our purposes here, it should be understood as a property rights violation: the theft of God's property.

Sanctions Imposed

God had promised that on the day they ate of the fruit, they would surely die. On that very day, He imposed a death sentence. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19). Man died definitively, i.e., died **legally** that day. The curse of death was in him, and it would be transferred to his children. To dust all men will return.

But God did not execute this sentence immediately. That is, He did not declare man dead **finally**. In fact, He offered both time and hope to man: the possibility of deliverance. Both time and hope were explicit in His curse on the serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Both Satan and mankind would receive extra time before the final death sentence is imposed (Rev. 20:14-15). This was an act of grace on God's part: a gift unearned by either Satan or mankind. God promised that the seed of the woman would someday crush the head of the serpent. The final sanction of death for the serpent, and

therefore for the one whom the serpent represented judicially, would be imposed by man. This surely was grace to Adam: not merely a stay of execution but a guarantee of the reversal of at least some of his heirs' legal status as covenant-breakers.

Having been lured into sin and death by the serpent, Adam had subordinated himself and his posterity to Satan in what Satan intended as a new covenant. It was in fact the original covenant, but with the sanction of judicial death applied. The sentence of death against the serpent was a sentence of death against Satan and therefore all those in covenantal bondage to him. But Adam's heir, the promised seed, would turn the tables on the enemy and re-establish man's uncontested authority over nature under God. Covenant-breaking man's subordination to an evil master can be overcome in history through grace. A truly new covenant delivers those in bondage to Adam's old covenant.

Grace precedes law. Having revealed His grace, God then declared new laws for mankind. In the exercise of man's dominion, there will be appropriate negative sanctions. First, there will be pain in childbirth for women (Gen. 3:16). Second, the earth will not surrender its fruits willingly to men.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return (Gen. 3:17-19).

This negative sanction has a large element of grace in it. Man is bound by a covenant of death, and apart from grace, he seeks to imitate God by becoming a death-bringer, as Cain demonstrated. To restrain men in their rebellion, God has imposed economic limits on their actions. Cursed work has replaced murder in the lives of most men. The limits placed on nature's productivity bound most men to the soil in the Old Covenant era, and only in the twentieth century did this change in urban, industrialized societies. Yet for most of mankind, it is still true: rural dwellers in India, China, and the underdeveloped world. Men battle the soil for possession of its fruits rather than battle each other continually for supremacy. This was God's way of limiting the production of swords by

creating demand for plowshares.

Grace precedes law. Before casting them out of Eden, God provided animal skins to cover them (Gen. 3:21). This cost some animal its life. Its blood had to be shed for the sake of man. The negative sanction of death had to be imposed by God in order for God to show grace to man. This is the law of God's covenant of redemption.

God then separated man from the tree of life for as long as it remained in the garden. As in the case of every negative sanction in history, there was an element of grace in this expulsion. Man would not be able to gain access to the source of eternal temporal extension while he was under a covenant of death. He could not eat damnation to himself by feasting directly from the tree of life. Access to its fruit in history would henceforth be exclusively symbolic and representative: through ecclesiastical feasts of covenant-renewal. The boundary around the tree would not rely on man's good judgment to defend it. God placed a flaming sword to defend the tree (Gen. 3:24).

The Biblical Meaning of Scarcity

Modern economics defines scarcity in terms of price: "At zero price, there is greater demand for a scarce resource than there is supply." Technically, this is a useful definition. It has yielded enormous crops of valuable analytical fruit over the years. But it suffers from its surface appearance as ethically neutral. Scarcity is not discussed by economists in terms of the curse of God.

We know little about how scarcity affected the garden of Eden. We know that man was unable to do two things at once. He had to do things in a sequential order, even as God created the world in a sequential order. Man is not omniscient. So, a learning process is mandatory. This means that man has to make choices: study **this** rather than **that**; test **this** approach rather than **that** one. So, even in Eden, unfallen man had to allocate his time and effort. But he did not face losses; he faced varying rates of positive return.

There was one exception to this rule, of course: eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There, the potential for loss was total. There, also, the demand for the good exceeded its lawful market supply, which was zero. The price was very high, but this price seemed far lower to Adam and Eve than it was, since they did not believe God, who had declared the price in advance: death. They assumed terms of trade different from God's declared terms of trade. They acted as though the forbidden tree was under the same terms of trade that applied to everything else in the garden: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat" (Gen. 2:16).

In the 1950's and 1960's, there was a television game show in America called "The Price Is Right." The contestants had to guess the price of some item. The contestant who guessed closest to the right (correct) price won the item. Adam and Eve announced, "The price isn't right," meaning it was ethically wrong. "We are illegitimately being kept from enjoying the fruits of God's labor. We have a right to this fruit." This is what their actions declared. They imagined that they would not have to pay the announced price.

In response, God cast them out of the garden. He thereby placed new terms of trade on everything inside the garden: **Not for Sale at Any Price**. As the owner of the world, He placed a new price on the fruit of the earth: **The Sweat of Man's Brow**. He cursed man's labor, making it a burden for him, just as childbirth would be for the woman. Man's labor in the garden had been no more unpleasant than childbirth would have been for the woman. Now both activities are cursed.

Men's labor and their productivity have a covenantal aspect. Men seek to increase their wealth. They seek more efficient ways to produce whatever they desire. This means that they seek output of greater market value or personal use value from inputs of unchanging or reduced value. Men want more for less. But in never being satisfied with what they have - today's terms of trade - men are seeking a much more remarkable situation than "more for less." **They seek something for nothing**. They seek a world without prices: zero scarcity.

In seeking the goal of improved terms of trade - more for less - men implicitly are seeking to reduce the burden of God's curse. In seeking a world of reduced prices for ourselves as consumers, we are working toward a world of zero scarcity, meaning a world in which all demand can be met at zero price. The ideal of compound economic growth is necessarily the goal of returning to the economic conditions of the garden of Eden.

Is this goal legitimate?

Economic Growth as a Covenantal Witness

When Moses led the people through the wilderness, God gave them a taste of Eden. He gave them manna (Ex. 16:14-22) - as we say, manna from heaven. There were still terms of trade associated with manna. They could keep only one day's supply, except on the day preceding the sabbath, on which they could gather two days' supply. Anything extra left overnight in the pot would rot.

He gave them permanent clothing: wash-and-wear-indefinitely clothing. He gave them feet to match. "Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years" (Deut. 8:4).

Two days after they celebrated the Passover in the Promised Land, the manna ceased forever (Josh. 5:11-12). Presumably, their clothing started to wear out, and some people's feet started to swell. From that day on in Israel, there was greater demand than supply at zero price for food, clothing, and comfortable footwear. The Edenic terms of trade once again disappeared. A new era of economic law was about to begin for the generation of the conquest. But grace always precedes law.

For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass (Deut. 8:7-9).

Because of this, Israel owed God thanks: "When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee" (Deut. 8:10). I would call this extremely favorable pricing: enormous wealth from God at the expense of God's covenantal enemies, in exchange for public thanksgiving to God. But being sons of Adam, the Israelites repeatedly refused to pay. They covenanted with other gods who offered different terms of trade. They made new covenants of death. God had warned them about this temptation:

And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; Who led thee

through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint; Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end; And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day (Deut. 8:13-18).

God then added the threat of negative sanctions, just as He had with Adam in His original announcement regarding the terms of trade for the forbidden tree. "And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God" (Deut. 8:19-20).

Notice two things. First, the temptation is to substitute man's sovereignty for God's. "And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth." Second, the blessing of economic growth is intended by God to reinforce men's faith in God's covenant with them: "But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day."

This means that a positive sanction – economic growth – was present in God's national covenant with Israel. This visible sanction was to testify to the continuing reality of the covenant of an invisible God, just as the manna had, and just as their wear-free clothing had. But if this visible positive sanction did not persuade them of this covenantal reality, and of their covenantal duty to bless God, then a visible negative sanction would replace the visible positive sanction: the scattering of the nation.

Visible positive sanctions for covenant-keepers compound over time: blessings from God, followed by the public blessing of God by His people, followed by additional blessings from God. . . . In contrast, the visible negative sanction of scattering does not compound for covenant-keepers. It will eventually be reversed.

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath driven thee, And shalt return unto the LORD thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live (Deut 30:1-6).

This means that for covenant-keepers, something analogous to Eden operates. In Eden before the fall, Adam

could not incur losses if he avoided the forbidden tree. His array of possible decisions would produce varying rates of positive return, but not losses. Covenant-keepers today can sustain losses, but these losses are not permanent. There is a traditional slogan for market investors: "Cut your losses and let your profits run." This slogan reflects God's guarantee of His covenants, in Church, State, and family. He limits and then reverses our losses, and He lets our profits run for as long as we remain faithful.

In so doing, God extends His kingdom on earth in history. Point four of the biblical covenant model, **sanctions**, is unbreakably connected to point five, **inheritance**. Covenant-keepers receive the inheritance in history, while covenant-breakers are disinherited in history. As with the residents of Canaan in Joshua's day, the houses and vineyards of covenant-breakers are transferred to covenant-keepers. But this transfer is no longer made by military action, as it was in the conquest generation on a one-time basis. Rather, it takes place through productivity. Covenant-keepers buy the inheritances of covenant-breakers.

Property Rights as the Right to Exclude

What is a property right? The Bible provides the answer to this perpetual social question. We should begin our search theocentrically. We begin with God. Specifically, we begin with God in His office as Creator. He made the world out of nothing. He therefore owns it. Original ownership is established by original creation. All ownership other than that established by original creation is delegated ownership.

Delegated ownership is always governed by terms or stipulations: a lease agreement. The presence of these terms of ownership testify to the existence of original ownership and the original owner. God never passes original title to subordinates. He retains His right to exclude Satan from exercising control over any aspect of the creation. Satan must either ask permission (Job 2:1-6) or gain permission by default until God imposes sanctions to exclude him. Delegated ownership is always covenantal: under the sovereignty of God. Creatures are always subordinate to the Creator. Whatever they own, they hold in trust for God. Covenant-keepers are always tenants, never original owners. Covenant-breakers are always thieves, breakers of the original lease agreement in Adam.

In contrast to this covenantal view of ownership stand two rival theories: individualism and collectivism. Individualism begins with the presupposition that each man owns himself as a sovereign owner. The individual is autonomous. Collectivism begins with the presupposition that individuals are subordinate to the State. This is sometimes explained by a theory of a legendary ancient contractual transfer of final sovereignty from autonomous individuals to the State: the social contract. Or there may be no explanatory theory – just an assertion of State sovereignty. In each of these rival theories of ownership, man is both the initiating sovereign agent and the final sovereign agent, either individual man or collective man. God is not in the judicial picture. His stipulations are deemed irrelevant to ownership.

God established His property right to Adam's life when He announced Adam's comprehensive dominion assignment even before Adam was created (Gen. 1:26-28). That is, **God asserted an original ownership claim on Adam**. After He created Adam, He gave Adam a specific assignment: to keep (guard) and dress the garden. Adam named the animals of the garden as part of the dressing process.

God established His property right to the garden by declaring the terms of trade in the original lease. These terms were overwhelmingly positive and minimally negative: free access to every tree except one. God's property rights were

marked publicly by a boundary: a command not to eat from one tree. Adam was to guard the garden from any invader. He was to impose self-government on himself with respect to the tree. He was supposed to act on his wife's behalf and keep her from eating should she be so tempted. But the invader came into the garden and tempted Adam's wife; then she tempted him.

Adam was required by God to operate in terms of a theocentric hierarchy of authority: God > Adam > Eve > the serpent. This hierarchy, Adam's act implicitly announced, was to be replaced by a new hierarchy: the serpent > Eve > Adam > God. God did not allow this declaration to go unpunished. Had He implicitly consented to it by refusing to enforce the terms of the original lease with Adam, He would have transferred original title to Satan through the serpent.

Adam wanted to be on top. He wanted to be in charge of making the allocational decisions. But he could never be on top. The hierarchical structure of the rival covenants – God's real one and Satan's mythical one – prohibited this. He could be directly under God or he could be under his wife, who in turn was under the serpent, who was under Satan. Either God would be on top or Satan would. Adam could never become the original owner. The best he could hope for would be the office of second in command. He had that from the beginning, but he forfeited this legal claim in his rebellion.

God then restored to Adam the possibility of reclaiming his original position of authority through a new covenant. This was God's act of grace: a gift unmerited by anything Adam did or could ever do. If Adam and his heirs would ratify this new covenant with God, thereby repudiating their commitment to Satan, they could regain their forfeited authority. God would restore the original leasehold agreement. But this new lease would apply only outside the boundaries of Eden. Eden's boundaries would never again be profaned by an illicit trespasser.

A property owner has the delegated legal authority under God to exclude others from invading his property or using it in any way not approved by him. Because he is personally responsible before God for the administration of the property that he holds in trust for God, he has the authority to establish the terms of trade or exchange. He has the right to impose negative sanctions against invaders, either immediately or by calling upon the civil government to impose these sanctions in his name as the lawful owner.

Ownership: Individual and Representative

God delegates lawful control over the use of property to individuals. He holds individuals responsible for the proper administration of this property.

Does God delegate ownership to corporate entities? Yes. The institutional Church is the best example. The officers of a local church administer the church's assets as agents of God and as agents of the congregation. God holds congregations responsible for the actions of the officers. This is why, under the Mosaic covenant, the priest had to offer a sacrifice for his sins: the congregation was at risk if he refused. "If the priest that is anointed do sin according to the sin of the people; then let him bring for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock without blemish unto the LORD for a sin offering" (Lev. 4:3). At the same time, the priest was responsible for the people; he had to offer a sacrifice for their sins (vv. 14-21).

What about civil government? Again, the same principle

applies. The Mosaic civil ruler was responsible for his own sins, and if he failed to make a sacrifice, those under his authority were at risk (vv. 22-35).

Those who are incorporated covenantally under God are at risk as members of that covenantal institution: Church, State, or family. Their representative places them at risk. In the same sense that a military commander who wins or loses a war brings his nation under positive or negative sanctions, so is a covenantal ruler. His decisions represent others. In this sense, there are corporate laws, corporate sanctions, and inheritance or disinheritance over time. God deals judicially with collectives (Ex. 19).

The pure individualist who denies all traces of corporate responsibility is incorrect; the Bible affirms corporate responsibility. The pure collectivist who denies individual responsibility in the name of corporate responsibility or great impersonal social forces is equally incorrect; God brings individuals to justice in time and eternity.

The greatest degree of responsibility lies in the individual or the family. We know this because of the tithe. God requires covenant-keepers to pay ten percent of their economic increase to the local church (Num. 18:26). This is because of the church's function as guardian of the sacraments (18:4). He also announced through Samuel that a tyrannical king would collect ten percent of their increase (1 Sam. 8:15, 17). This indicates that the combined legal claim of Church and State must not exceed ~~ten~~ percent. In fact, it should be less; the State should receive less than the Church does. So, more than 80 percent of a society's wealth should be under the control of individuals, families, and voluntary associations formed by individuals or families.

Conclusion

A property right is a legal claim. God had a legal claim over the creation, which was established publicly by a series of boundaries, day by day. He verbally established His claim on Adam before He created Adam. He verbally declared to Adam a claim over the forbidden tree – another judicial boundary. He threatened negative sanctions against any trespasser.

Man and nature are under curses. The **benign scarcity** of Eden, in which work was not a negative factor and losses were not possible, has become a **cursed scarcity**, in which work has negative aspects and losses are possible.

The structure of ownership has not changed, however. God is still the original owner who delegates temporary control over scarce resources to individuals acting on their own behalf and to representative agents of corporate bodies. This delegation is always by contract: a lease agreement. This lease has terms. One requirement is tithing. It is enforced by God, not the State. Societies that fail to covenant with God, and covenanted societies whose members refuse to pay their tithes to God's institutional Church, place themselves at risk: God's negative sanctions. The refusal to tithe to God's local church is an assertion of man's autonomy.

Any attempt to achieve economic growth apart from covenantal faithfulness is an assertion of autonomy. It is an attempt to return to Eden's economy apart from God's new covenant. It is an attempt to re-establish Eden's terms of trade: no scarcity. Such attempts, God warned Israel through Moses, will result in corporate disinheritance, just as it did for the Canaanites.

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