

# BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

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## COMPETENCE, COMMON GRACE, AND DOMINION

by Gary North

*And Solomon sent to Hiram, saying, . . . Now therefore command thou that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon; and my servants shall be with thy servants: and unto thee will I give hire for thy servants according to all that thou shall appoint: for thou knowest that there is not among us any that can skill to hew timber like unto the Sidonians (1 Ki. 5: 2, 6).*

Recently, I received a letter from a man who inquired about a speaker I had invited to a conference I plan to hold four months from now. His son has become interested in the work that the speaker has done in investigating anti-Soviet guerilla movements. The son recognized early that this man is a humanist and anti-Christian, and he conveyed this information to his father. The father, a Christian, wrote to me and almost begged me to tell him that the man is not a humanist. He wrote that he assumed that I would never hire someone to speak at one of my conferences who did not share my views, so would I please explain to his son that the speaker is a Christian?

I wrote back to him that it is my policy to hire competent people to speak on particular topics, and that for the most part, Christians are not competent.

The letter revealed to me once again the desperate situation Christians find themselves in today. Here is a father who is obviously concerned that his son is about to be led away in some fashion by someone who is not a Christian. The son recognizes a particular kind of competence in the man, and is interested in gaining similar competence for himself. The father wants to be assured that all is well, that his son is going to be following a Christian man, and that I will be able to give some sort of official Protestant imprimatur on the man's theology. His son recognizes exactly what the man's theology is, yet the father is grasping at the thin straw that his son is incorrect, because the man is going to speak at a conference I am putting on. He does not know that I did a taped interview with the man and specifically pointed out on the tape that my philosophy is completely at odds with the man's libertarian presuppositions.

### Higher Education

His son is attracted by competence. So are the sons of many Christians. Sons want to go to college, and there are no first-rate colleges or universities that are Christian. There is no college, even third-rate, that is staffed from top to bottom with scholars who are actively working to restructure the content of their academic disciplines in terms of the Bible. There is not even a single department on any campus in the English-speaking world whose members are even aware that such a reconstruction is necessary. Furthermore, there

never has been such a department in 800 years—none that has ever left a published legacy of its efforts and findings. Not one. In every case, Christian instructors have mixed in natural law categories or some other form of common-ground philosophy, and the biblical content of the course work has been submerged and then ignored. Nevertheless, Christian fathers continue to send their Christian sons to be instructed by atheists and Christian compromisers who teach anti-Christian courses. Competence counts.

Parents believe (correctly) that there is no institutional alternative to humanist colleges, at least none which is recognized by the world of employers. We even find that a conservative church such as the traditionally Calvinistic (and tiny) Orthodox Presbyterian Church requires candidates for the ministry to have graduated from an accredited college or university. Yet the church offers no formal training for its college students which would provide them with biblical presuppositions that reveal the bankruptcy of modern (and ancient) humanist education. Despite the fact that Bible presuppositionalist Cornelius Van Til is an ordained member of the denomination, they have officially adopted the compromised rationalism of Thomas Aquinas, Charles Hodge, and Gordon Clark as the approved academic methodology of the church, as reflected in church standards for "teaching" elders. The compromised intellectual legacy of nineteenth-century Presbyterian Calvinism—a legacy based on a rationalistic apologetic methodology—still binds this church in epistemological fetters.

The rise of the independent Christian school movement has, to some degree, at last offered a partial alternative to humanist education. Students are given some minimal training on the differences between a Christian world view and rival world views. But philosophy is not the specialty of the fundamentalists who write the curricula for the Christian schools. Most fundamentalists are proponents of some version of Roman Catholic medieval apologetics (the five proofs of God, the evidential defense of the resurrection, etc.), and they too adopt some sort of common-ground approach to science. This is true even of the six-day creationists, who explicitly try to build a model of the physical sciences without mentioning the Bible. They try to play the game by the humanists' rules—rules that even the more consistent humanists have at last abandoned, such as the doctrine of neutrality.

What we find, then, is that Christian students are placed as apprentices under God-hating instructors who use God-denying presuppositions to construct a world view at odds with the Bible. This goes on for years—anywhere from twelve to twenty years. Parents may worry a bit about this arrangement, but they shrug it off as inevitable, and hope for

the best. What they get, at best, is a compromise. It may take their sons a lifetime to rethink everything they have learned in college. I have seen some (including ordained pastors) who never have rethought what they learned. They are the curse of the church today.

### The Quest for Competence

Is it wrong to want the best? Is it wrong to want our children to be trained by the most competent craftsmen available? Not in itself. God demanded the best for His tabernacle. The construction of the tabernacle was guided by two men who had great skill, Bezaleel and Aholiab, "in whom the Lord put wisdom and understanding to know how to work all manner of work for the service of the sanctuary, according to all that the Lord had commanded. And Moses called Bezaleel and Aholiab, and every wise hearted man, in whose heart the Lord had put wisdom . . ." (Ex. 36:1-2a). In a wilderness environment God called formerly unskilled slaves to produce fine craftsmanship, and He gave them the skills.

This required a miracle, the direct intervention of God. Nevertheless, this miracle was also accompanied by good, old fashioned institutional tradition: He also gave them the spirit to teach. "And he hath put in his heart that he may teach, both he and Aholiab . . ." (Ex. 35:34). Both men were to pass on their skills to others, who had not been given these remarkable insights and skills by God. The students would have wisdom from God, but not the specific skills. Those had to be taught.

We see a different approach in the building of the temple. Solomon wanted the best that money and goods could buy. He recognized from the beginning that no one in Israel possessed the competence in woodworking that the Sidonians possessed. To save time, he hired the Sidonians to do this specialized work on the temple. It was God's house, yet pagans were assigned the task of constructing certain parts of it. Theology was not the issue; competence was.

Is this the same as sending one's child to be instructed by pagans? No. Solomon presented the design of the temple, not the Sidonians. Solomon had the upper hand, for he had the money to pay for the work. Solomon, because he had the money, could command the hired servants to produce a certain kind of work—not the specifics of production, which the specialists alone understood, but the overall results. He paid the pipers, so he called the tune.

The parent who sends his child to a humanist or compromised Christian college—the only kind of colleges there are—does not directly hire woodcarvers as Solomon did. The non-profit or tax-supported nature of all colleges, coupled with the perverse doctrine of academic freedom for professors, all made worse by the practice of granting tenure (lifetime guaranteed employment) to senior professors, inevitably produced a monstrosity. Colleges exist for the sake of professors first, administrators second, donors third, and students fourth. In the case of tax-financed schools, we would put legislators in third place. All of these institutions are financed by parents or taxpayers, yet those who pay are clearly at the bottom of the list of people to be satisfied. Because of the non-profit and tax supported status of these institutions, he who pays the piper listens to the piper's favorite tune. The tune he plays is the Pied Piper's tune: composed and played to capture and lead away the children.

This being the case, the parent who sends his child to college is paying the piper to steal his covenantal legacy. It is as if Solomon hired the Sidonians to serve as priests in the temple, and then granted these priests both theological autonomy and permanent tenure. They would henceforth choose their successors, and no mere worshipper could stay their hand. In other words, the self-proclaimed competence of Sidonian priests would have become the stand-

ard of ecclesiastical performance for all Israel. This situation, crazy as it seems, is very close to the one which all Christians have adopted today as the proper standard of higher education, and millions of Christians have accepted it for lower education, that is, the public school system.

### The Blueprints: Biblical or Sidonian?

In the case of the tabernacle and the temple, God provided the blueprint through revelation to His chosen instruments. The blueprints were very specific in both instances. The workers were provided with general guidelines of performance. They had authority to produce their work as competently as they could or would perform, but they were not autonomous. God's lawful subordinates who supervised the designs were to remain in charge of construction.

This is exactly how it is to be with respect to all construction projects. Those who are placed in positions of authority by God are to order the construction of those projects over which God has placed them. How they are placed in these positions of authority depends on the particular biblical rules governing the sphere of authority. Teachers are hired by parents and should be answerable to parents. They may be answerable also to professional guilds, but these guilds must not be granted exclusive monopoly powers to override the wishes of those who finance their performance. The blueprint must be the Bible, and all participants in education—parents, students, teachers, and guilds—are required to submit their minds to this blueprint.

In the case of the church, God has appointed rulers, and the tithe is the proper means of financing the institution. But the tithe must not be imposed on non-members, and the members are to be given some discretion in appointing the rulers. In any case, members are granted the right to "vote with their feet" and depart.

The same is true of civil government. The Bible is to rule, and all participants are responsible before God to adhere to biblical standards. Competent rulers are desirable, but the Bible establishes the first principles that are to be used to evaluate the performance of civil magistrates. They are to adopt uniform weights and measures. They are not to accept bribes. They are to declare the word of God. In short, they are to subordinate themselves to a blueprint which all members of the society have before them, and must use to evaluate the magistrates' performance. **No man is permitted by God to serve God or other men apart from a God-revealed blueprint.**

It is this truth which is rejected by Christians everywhere: in churches, in businesses, and above all, in Christian colleges. Mention the existence of blueprints that Christians are morally bound to honor in their particular callings before God, and you will be hooted down as a legalist. Everyone wants to conduct his work autonomously, or at least under human authorities who choose the blueprints autonomously. They will not accept the doctrine that there are Bible-revealed blueprints for every calling that are still morally binding on men, and many of which should be ecclesiastically and legally binding on them. They have adopted **Sidonian theology**. They want their pay, and they want high pay, but they do not wish to answer to Christians who demand that the Bible-revealed blueprints be honored. **This is the essence of humanism.** "Christians should submit, Christians should finance operations, and humanists should rule." For two thousand years, Christians have adopted one or another compromised variant of humanist theology, so they have been unable to challenge Sidonian theology effectively.

### Rival Ethics and Common Grace

How did Solomon know that the Sidonians were more skilled craftsmen than the Israelites? More to the point, how

could it have been that the Sidonians were more skilled craftsmen than the Israelites? After all, if God was with the Israelites, why wouldn't He have provided the necessary skills to be the most competent carpenters in the world? And not just carpenters. Why not the most competent everything in the world?

When God gave mankind the task of subduing the earth to His glory, and when Adam named the animals, mankind as a whole was the focus of God's concern. The very definition of man is tied to this requirement, the dominion covenant. A man who is not performing his tasks under God ethically is a rebel, but he must still work and perform in order to live in God's world. A man who is neither ethically nor metaphysically under this covenant is dead and in hell. This is the essence of hell: impotent existence. Yet the dominion covenant still judges him; his non-performance ethically in terms of this covenant eternally confronts him.

Performance implies a standard of performance. God implants in man basic standards of performance. Christ asked rhetorically, does a father whose child asks for bread give him a stone? But if such standards operate in the minds of men, isn't this the foundation of a common-ground philosophical system between the believer and the unbeliever? Aren't we all operating in terms of **generally received blueprints**? The answer is easy, but its implications are complex: covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers do **not** operate **ethically** under the same God, and therefore the respective **interpretations of the meaning and applications of God's blueprints** will be different. To the extent that covenant-breakers depart from God more consistently, to that extent will they also depart from God's required blueprints.

We can see this in the civil governments of the twentieth century. Communism is and Nazism was self-consciously anti-Christian, and their totalitarian legal orders almost entirely abandoned the Bible. Modern humanism in other societies has brought such horrors as concentration camps for civilians (an invention of the British at the turn of the century in the Boer War, for the suppression of Calvinist Christians in South Africa), legalized abortion on demand, the compulsory draft, taxes vastly above ten percent of income, military tactics that violate the Bible's standards (such as "mutually assured destruction" of civilian populations, or MAD), mass inflation as a means of financing civil government, and so forth. As men have grown more consistent with their own covenant-breaking presuppositions, meaning their **antinomian** presuppositions, they have more and more adopted satanic blueprints and satanic performance. They have become Sidonians. They have become Philistines. And they have shaved the heads of all Samsons. Worse; they have persuaded the Samsons to shave their own heads voluntarily in the name of democratic pluralism.

Common grace is just that, common and grace. The more that societies reject the grace of biblical law, the less they receive of common grace. As they progressively reject the **ethics** of the Bible, they thereby reject the **blueprints** of the Bible (biblical law). As they steadily and consistently abandon the blueprints of the Bible, they thereby forfeit the **external blessings** that the Bible promises. Thus, any appeal to common intellectual, political, or aesthetic blueprints falls on progressively rebellious ears. Any attempt to build a social philosophy or an apologetic methodology on common-ground principles of universal reasoning—the philosophy of natural law, or the principle of non-contradiction—will become less and less successful as a unifying force as covenant-breakers and covenant-keepers become more consistent with their respective rival presuppositions.

This is not to deny the existence of a single standard of performance in any given field of thought and practice. This is not to deny that all men, to one degree or another, must honor these universal standards. What I am arguing is the

**primacy of ethics**. I am arguing that **intellect is subordinate to ethics**, and therefore that all men tend to adopt intellectual first principles ultimately that are more in conformity to their ethical first principles. The more consistent men become in their faithfulness to God or their rebellion against God, the less we can safely rely on common grace to provide peace and prosperity in the world.

Thus, when covenant-breakers conform temporarily to the external laws of God, they become productive. The international division of labor can then function to raise everyone's standard of living. Covenant-keepers can hire covenant-breakers to perform specific tasks. But covenant-keepers assign the tasks in terms of God's standards, which covenant-keepers, to the degree that they are faithful to God's revealed ethical standards, will understand better than covenant-breakers, who are given competence in terms of common grace rather than redemptive grace.

### Competence and Common Grace

If my analysis is correct, then we should expect to find decreasing competence within non-Christian circles today compared with earlier periods, when the covenant-breakers were less consistent with their ethical first principles. We should also expect to find increasing competence within those Christian circles that are becoming more consistent with biblical ethics, meaning biblical law. This is exactly what we do observe.

Consider the performance of public education since, say, 1963. The performance of college-bound students on the SAT (Scholastic Achievement Tests) dropped steadily, year after year, from 1963 to 1983. As the New Left took over college classrooms, and college graduates streamed into high school and grade school classrooms, the decline of the public school system in the United States became visible to everyone. Only recently has there been a mild revival of interest in "traditional education," meaning the "three R's" and more strict discipline. There has been nothing like an institutional recovery of pre-1963 academic standards, and at best the SAT scores have stabilized since 1983.

We have seen "grade inflation" for a generation. We have seen publishing companies downgrading the language of high school textbooks until twelfth grade textbooks are being written with vocabularies that were eighth grade level in 1963. I spoke to a California junior college instructor in early 1985 who told me that students in his classes do not recognize the name Mark Twain. California, it should be understood, was one of the first states to adopt John Dewey's progressive education methodology.

What about socialist nations? Shouldn't they be suffering from reduced productivity, compared to capitalist nations, if socialism is a denial of biblical principles of ownership and personal responsibility? The answer is yes. Is that what we have observed? The answer is also yes, if by "we," we mean people who are still competent enough to make rational decisions. Almost all economists today, and most politicians, have at last admitted that socialist economies have failed to grow rapidly. What few admit, or even discuss, is that if Western governments had not encouraged (and insured) Western bank loans to socialist nations, what little growth that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have experienced in the last thirty years would probably have not taken place. What is not discussed by anyone is Antony Sutton's discovery that since 1917, something in the range of 95% of all Soviet technology was either imported from the West or stolen from the West. (*Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development*, 3 volumes, Hoover Institution Press, 1967-73.)

What we find, then, is that the competence of those who operate in terms of antinomian standards are rendered progressively less able to exercise dominion. They may use

force to achieve dominion, but the Bible informs us that all such experiments fail in the long run. In short, **dominion religion** eventually triumphs over **power religion**, and that societies that conform themselves to God and God's law outperform societies that do not. Backward nations are invariably pagan nations, and pagan nations only avoid backwardness by at least conforming to the external laws of the covenant. Japan is the obvious example: the Protestant ethic is dominant in Japan, even if Protestant theology is not.

As common grace is removed by God, common competence will also be removed. Christians who live in a society which has been dominated by anti-Christians then face a choice: either to replace the fading leadership of the enemies of God, in order to restore God's blessings to the society, or else to hide from the coming judgment of God—and dissipation is unquestionably a judgment. Either they adopt the dominion religion or the escapist religion. But if they adopt the escapist religion, they will not escape the decline which is all around them. This was the lesson of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. Will it also be the fate of the American Baptist Churches of all polities?

The rise of the Christian school movement, which includes the home school movement, offers Christians a unique opportunity to begin to replace the fading leadership of the humanists. Like the second generation in the wilderness, the next generation of Christians will have received fundamental training in the basics of government, especially the self-discipline of self-government. They will have basic computational and linguistic skills. They will have at least passing familiarity with the Bible. They will have a more consistent world and life outlook than their parents had when they graduated from public schools. They will be better potential employees at the lower levels, which means that they will have a greater opportunity to enter the production system early and exercise greater responsibility.

### "Holy Rollers"

It is significant that the Maranatha Campus Ministries organization, which is Pentecostal in origin, has concentrated on gaining converts at major American universities. They have challenged students with the gospel in the most prestigious halls of the enemy, the major recruiting and training ground for humanism's future leaders. If a program of constructing alternative Christian centers of higher education can be developed which uses the talents of some of these recruits, the shape of the future will be altered.

Previous campus ministries did not confront the converts with a comprehensive alternative to humanism. They were primarily interested in presenting a baptized version of the escapist religion. Presenting a comprehensive alternative is the first step of the dominion religion. If the mistake of previous campus ministries is avoided, and the "best and the brightest" recruits are not sent into the humanist pits to redeem a remnant out of the world, but instead are used to create alternative institutions to redeem the world out of the clutches of Satan, then we will see the present humanist order replaced by Christians who take seriously God's blueprints.

This possibility has not been taken seriously by Christians in over a hundred years. It is not random that the leadership of Maranatha is devotedly postmillennial. They see the possibility in our time to begin to reverse the slide into

judgment that humanists have created. They see the possibility of recapturing the seats of authority for Jesus Christ in the name of Jesus Christ by means of the law of Jesus Christ. They understand that without a **vision of victory**, there is little possibility of victory. Pentecostals across the nation are steadily adopting postmillennialism. They are adding this eschatological vision to their traditional presuppositionalist assumption that the Bible is the true and only standard of truth. (Pentecostals until very recently were not impressed with higher learning, and this has protected them from the humanistic methodology of common-ground reasoning.) They are also beginning to reconsider the traditional rejection of biblical law. Thus, they are fast becoming the front-line troops in the Christian reconstruction movement. All that remains for them to adopt is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as the guarantee of the eschatological vision of victory, and the guarantee of the efficacy of biblical law as a tool of dominion.

### The Failure of Recent Calvinism

It is interesting that the vast majority of traditional Calvinists are amillennial, and therefore categorically reject the possibility of the progressive external institutional influence, let alone victory, of Christians. This is a Dutch inheritance, and since the 1920's, it has replaced the older optimism of Princeton Seminary and American Presbyterianism in general, both northern and southern. Thus, those who forthrightly proclaim the unpopular doctrine of predestination have simultaneously proclaimed the predestined defeat of the institutional church. Their vision of cultural impotence has combined with their doctrine of predestination to remove them from influential positions anywhere in the American or European church. The doctrine of predestination has therefore tended to render Calvinists impotent in the twentieth century. The eschatology which Rushdoony has called the **permanent remnant psychology**, so common to Dutch Calvinists and immigrant Lutherans, has led to a kind of **enclave mentality**, the "defend the fort until we are at last overrun and Jesus returns in judgment" mentality. Calvinists who once expected great things because of their faithfulness to the doctrine of predestination now expect only external defeat because of their faithfulness to the doctrine of predestination. The doctrine of predestination has become a snare to them.

Traditional Calvinists have always emphasized higher education. They have always been hypnotized by higher academic degrees and natural law doctrines. They have seldom been presuppositionalists. Thus, they made an early intellectual alliance with the humanists, and have been contented to be part of the "loyal opposition" in humanism's proclamation of salvation by knowledge and the discipline of education. Thus, they have been sidetracked by the power religion in educational matters, and by the escapist religion in eschatological matters. They cannot seem to understand why God has passed them by in the twentieth century. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, they have seen God take the kingdom from them and give it to the gentiles—in this case, "holy rollers" who aren't rolling in the aisles as much as they are rolling politically. May God use the success of the Pentecostals to bring the Calvinists to jealousy and then to eschatological repentance, just as the success of Christians is supposed to bring the Jews to jealousy and repentance (Rom. 11:11-12).

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