

# BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

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## CONFISCATION IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE

by Gary North

*Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him (Matt. 21:33-39).*

The theocentric principle here is the sovereignty of God over inheritance. God is the creator. He sets the terms of the leasehold. His Son, Jesus Christ, is the true heir in history and eternity.

### The Davidic Inheritance

Jesus gave this parable to the religious leaders in the week preceding Passover. The people had strewn palm branches before Him as He entered Jerusalem. They had acclaimed Him as the heir of David. "And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest" (Matt. 21:9). This was a messianic declaration. Jacob had prophesied: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Gen. 49:10). No Jewish king had reigned in Israel since the Assyrian captivity. No Jewish king had reigned in Judah since the Babylonian captivity. Yet the crowds were proclaiming Jesus the son of David. He was Shiloh, "and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." Jesus had the right to "wear the sword of Judah."

This declaration offended the Jewish rulers. "And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased" (Matt. 21:15). They sought to entrap Him by forcing Him to declare this authority, and then place Him under sanctions for blasphemy, as they did a week later. "And when he was come into

the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?" (Matt. 21:23).

As He did so often, and with such devastating effect, He answered their question with a question: "I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things" (Matt. 21:24b-27). They feared being placed under the public's sanctions. So, they could not pursue Him by means of this strategy. He escaped from their trap once again.

The people had declared Him the heir of David's office. This threatened the Jewish establishment, which had a working alliance with Rome. David was the great warrior king of Israel. If the multitude ordained Jesus as king, this could undermine the establishment's arrangement. It was clear to Pilate a week later that this was what bothered them. He understood that it was not religion that had motivated them, but politics. He also understood that Jesus was uninterested in politics, for He was self-consciously unbending to power. He was not afraid of Pilate or his sanctions. Jesus stood His ground with Pilate, and Pilate respected Him for this.

Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin. And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto

them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar (John 19:10-15)

The rulers crawled before Rome's power at the expense of their theology. Jesus had challenged Pilate in terms of His theology. "Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." Jesus told him that God was over him, and therefore the man who had delivered Him to Pilate – presumably, the chief priest – had the greater sin. Why? Because the chief priest's theology declared that God is in control, yet he had brought Pilate into this religious dispute because Pilate possessed the civil power of execution.

Pilate recognized the nature of the game that the Jewish rulers were playing, with him as the pawn. They were placing him between the rock and the hard place: either do their bidding or face public disorder which would undermine his reputation in Rome. As a politician, he recognized the political nature of what the priests were doing at his expense. They were painting him into a corner. Jesus had verbally put him in his place in terms of biblical authority, which Pilate did not respect, but Jesus was not trying to use him for His purposes. The priests were, and they invoked Roman politics in their manipulation: "We have no king but Caesar." Politicians do not like to be manipulated by other politicians. Pilate therefore preferred to let Jesus go. So, when he finally capitulated to the rulers for the sake of Roman politics, he gained symbolic revenge. "And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin. Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written" (John 19:19-22). He thereby publicly announced that Jesus was the heir to David's throne, and he, Pilate, had smashed it. Rome got the credit, not the Jewish politicians. This annoyed the Jewish politicians, which was Pilate's goal.

### Stealing the Inheritance

Jesus' parable of the owner of the vineyard rested on the Bible's theology of inheritance. An only son would inherit all of his father's property. This was not simply a matter of preserving a family's wealth. Far more important, it was a matter of preserving a man's name in Israel. What we call the levirate marriage law reveals the importance of a firstborn son's preservation of a man's name. "If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel" (Deut. 25:5-6). Brothers who shared the same landed inheritance shared more than land. They shared mutual responsibility to preserve each other's name through procreation. The land that was part of the deceased brother's inheritance would go to the firstborn son who was fathered by the surviving brother. This biological son would carry the dead brother's name. None of the land inherited by this son from the deceased brother would be shared, at his death, with the heirs of the biological half-brothers born to his biological father. Family name was more important than bloodline inheritance in Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The owner in the parable had funded the planting of the vineyard. He then leased it out to people whose task was to care for it. He then went on a far journey. The imagery here is

obvious: it is a recapitulation of Eden. The main difference is, the owner went on a far journey, not a morning excursion, as God did in the garden. The husbandmen could expect payment for their services, but only when the crop came in.

They cared for the vineyard. The issue was not the quality of their labor. It was the quality of their morals. They were thieves and murderers. They were intent on building up an inheritance of their own. But they had none. They had not funded the planting of the vineyard. It was not their land. They were hired hands. This inheritance belonged to the owner's son.

This legal arrangement offended the hired hands. After all, had they not remained in the field, in good weather and bad? Had not they remained on duty, defending the vineyard from predators, whether human or otherwise? Had they not invested years in the building up of the property? Did they not have an independent legal claim to part of the crop? To a large part of the crop? To all of the crop? To all future crops? Of course they did. And there was no one to tell them differently.

Then the harvest season approached, and the owner sent his servants home to administer the harvest and the distribution of the crop. The hired hands beat them and stoned them. He sent more servants. The same thing happened. Then he sent his son. This time, the hired hands saw a great opportunity: to collect not just the crop but the entire inheritance. "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him."

Jesus then asked the rulers of Israel to render public judgment on the literary hired hands. "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons" (Matt. 21:40-41). What Jesus did here was what Nathan had done to David. He told a story and asked those in authority to render judgment. As in the case of Nathan's judicial challenge, the targets condemned themselves. And, like Nathan, Jesus wasted no time in declaring the judicial equivalent of "thou art the man." "Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder" (Matt. 21:42-44).

With these words, the lawful heir of David's throne surrendered His claims to that throne and all of the associated inheritance. He transferred the kingdom to another nation, the church. Shiloh had come, and with His advent, as Jacob had prophesied, the sword was removed forever from Judah. That was because it was removed forever from Israel.

The parable was about a forced disinheritance: **disinheritance by illegal execution**. The judicial solution, said the Jewish rulers, was the execution of the hired hands and the transfer of administrative responsibilities to new employees. But there was a crucial problem with this solution: the absence of heirs. The solution might solve the management problem; it could not solve the inheritance problem. The priests assumed that the father was still alive, as the parable indicated. But where would the owner get another son? The answer should have been obvious: by adoption.

The new heirs would care for the vineyard. They would not be hired hands. As adopted sons, they would have a stake in the inheritance. They would share the harvest. The gentiles would inherit.

But was not Israel the true son? Jesus had already lured

them into publicly forfeiting any legal claim to that office. "But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him" (Matt. 21:28-32). The gentiles had long refused to go into the vineyard, but they were now going. The Jews had said they would go, but now they refused. The true son does the will of his father. "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (John 15:10).

### His or Ours?

The hired hands asserted a claim of ownership. Standing between them and this claim was the owner, who was far away, and his servants, who were no match for the hired hands, and the son. The son was the least of their problems, as long as the owner stayed away. But, of course, he would not stay away once word of his son's murder came to him. The rulers had understood this: "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons." In the matter of power, the hired hands were superior to the servants and the son, but the owner was armed and dangerous.

The hired hands decided to confiscate the inheritance by killing the heir. In the name of the people – the workers of the world – they united to kill the son. When they did this, they secured their own judgment. They would not retain their stolen goods indefinitely. The owner would come and destroy them. But they did not foresee this. They did not believe that he would return from the far country. They were fools.

The twentieth century, more than any in history, is the century of the hired hands. Because they have adopted the Darwinian view of God, they have become convinced that the cosmic owner of the vineyard is not even in a far country; He is a figment of superstitious men's imaginations. Within a quarter century of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), Lester Frank Ward wrote *Dynamic Sociology* (1883), which asserted the right and obligation of the State's scientific planners to direct society, including the economy, into evolutionary progress. By 1900, this view of central planning had captured the minds of the leading intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> The Progressive movement in the United States and the social democracy movement in Europe invoked Darwinism as the model for, and justification of, social planning.

Social planning requires power. It also requires funds. Through State power, social planners have laid their hands on other people's money. They have transferred the inheritance of families into the coffers of the State. Taxation has grown tenfold or more in this century. The Bible-based observation that God has placed restrictions on lawful taxation – less than ten percent of one's income (I Sam. 8:15, 17) – is greeted with hoots of derision, not only from social Darwinists but from Christian professors of social science, who have publicly baptized the recommendations of social Darwinism. "Don't give us that Old Testament stuff!" the Christian professors insist. What they really mean is, "Give us a State that taxes us at 40 percent of our income, twice the rate that Pharaoh extracted from the

Egyptians." They call this "economic democracy." It is based on a revision of the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal, except by majority vote."

The suggestion that the Bible sets forth as binding a private property social order is rejected without detailed consideration of what the Bible teaches.

### Wiser Than God<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of Christians have always believed that they can improve on the Mosaic law. On their own authority, they revise God's law by coming to conclusions in the name of God that deny the specific teachings of God's revealed law. Then they proclaim their annulment-through-interpretation as being in conformity with "the true spirit of God's law" or "the underlying principles of God's law." As part of this improvement, they reject the binding authority of God's law. In doing so, they necessarily become advocates of some system of law proposed by one or another group of covenant-breakers. They refuse to ask themselves the obvious question: "If not God's law, then what?" They refuse to deal with the ethical question: "By what other standard?"<sup>4</sup>

As an example, consider the assertion of John Gladwin, a defender of central planning, who later became a bishop in the Anglican Church. In a chapter in a book devoted to Christian economics, he rejects the concept of the Bible as a source of authoritative economic guidelines or blueprints. In fact, he assures us, it is unbiblical to search for biblical guidelines for economics. "It is unhelpful as well as unbiblical to look to the Bible to give us a blueprint of economic theory or structure which we then apply to our contemporary life. We must rather work in a theological way, looking to the Bible to give us experience and insight into the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. This then helps us discover values and methods of interpretation which we can use in understanding our present social experience."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, "There is in Scripture no blueprint of the ideal state or the ideal economy. We cannot turn to chapters of the Bible and find in them a model to copy or a plan for building the ideal biblical state and national economy."<sup>6</sup> He contrasts biblical law unfavorably with theology. He then goes on to praise the welfare State as an application of theological, rather than legal, insights.<sup>7</sup> Theology informs us that "there is no escape from the need for large-scale state activity if our society is to move into a more equitable future at social and economic levels."<sup>8</sup> Clearly, neither the Mosaic law nor the New Testament teaches this, but theology supposedly does. Whose theology? Reinhold Niebuhr's.<sup>9</sup>

So, we are assured, there are no authoritative economic guidelines or economic blueprints in the Bible. On the other hand, there are numerous vague and non-specific ethical principles which just about any Christian social theorist can invoke when promoting his recommended reconstruction of society. All it requires to baptize socialism is a series of nice-sounding pat phrases taken from the book of theological liberalism, which Gladwin offers in profusion: "the bounds of Christian principles of human concern," "the righteousness revealed to us in God himself," "the good," "structural framework of law and social values," "gross and deepening disparities in social experience," "spontaneity of love," "the light of the gospel," and "the most humane principles of social order."<sup>10</sup>

Lest you imagine that Gladwin is an aberration, consider the fact that the two other anti-free market essayists in the book adopted the same anti-blueprint hermeneutics. William Diehl, a defender of Keynesianism's State-guided economy, confidently affirms: "The fact that our Scriptures can be used to support or condemn any economic philosophy suggests that the Bible is not intended to lay out an economic plan which will apply for all times and places. If we are to examine

economic structures in the light of Christian teachings, we will have to do it in another way."<sup>11</sup> Art Gish, a defender of small communities of Christians who hold property in common, informs us that "Since koinonia includes the participation of everyone involved, there is no blueprint for what this would look like on a global scale. . . . We are talking about a process, not final answers."<sup>12</sup>

The fact that these statements appear in a book on Christian economics should come as no surprise. These comments are typical of the opinions of humanist-educated Christian intellectuals. Christians who have spent their lives in humanist educational institutions, and who then have fed their minds on a high-fat diet of humanist publications, in most cases have adopted the worldview of one or another variety of humanism. They have felt emotionally compelled to baptize their adopted worldview with a few religious-sounding phrases. But just because someone keeps repeating "koinonia, koinonia" as a Christian mantra does not prove that his recommended policies of common ownership will actually produce koinonia.<sup>13</sup> What produces peace, harmony, and increasing per capita output is widespread faithfulness to God's law.

It is unwise to attempt to become wiser than God. "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Cor. 1:25). This is why it is our job to become familiar with God's Bible-revealed law. Biblical law, not the latest academic fad, is to be our guide, generation after generation.

### Conclusion

A private property social order is mandated by biblical law. Where biblical law is enforced, free market capitalism has to develop. Modern fundamentalists in the pews generally believe in capitalism, but they do not believe that biblical civil law is still valid. So their defense of capitalism implicitly rests on some baptized version of secular epistemology, whether natural law (Adam Smith), natural rights (Murray Rothbard), Kantianism (Ludwig von Mises), or empiricism (Milton Friedman). Meanwhile, the neo-evangelicals go off to college and come back mostly confused.<sup>14</sup>

The top priority in this parable is honoring the rights of ownership. As surely as men should honor the God of creation and His Son, so should they honor God's ownership of this world and his delegation of stewardship to his servants. Delegated ownership is the basis of maintaining the kingdom grant. The State has no legitimate claim on anyone's income that matches the church's: the tithe.<sup>15</sup> But modern Christians, wiser than God, have dismissed the tithe as "Old Testament stuff," and have wound up paying less than a tithe to the church and four times a tithe to the civil government. God is not mocked.

God's judgment will surely come on this society of murderous, thieving hired hands. "And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of

it" (Matt. 7:26-27). When this happens, Christians had better be well prepared in advance for the collapse of the hired hands' Darwinian order. They had better not be dependent on it. But most of them will be. They live under a regime that rests on taxation twice as confiscatory as Pharaoh's, and their academic spokesmen call it democratic capitalism.

1. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1999), ch. 62.

2. Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis* (2nd ed.; Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), Appendix A.

3. The following passage is taken from Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1999), ch. 61, section on "Wiser Than God."

4. Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991).

5. John Gladwin, "A Centralist Response," in Robert G. Clouse (ed.), *Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 124.

6. Gladwin, "Centralist Economics," *ibid.*, p. 183.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26

8. Gladwin, "Centralist Economics," *ibid.*, p. 193.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 197. He cites *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). It is an odd book to cite. It was written by the author in reaction against his youthful fling with Marxism, a book in which he proclaimed that Jesus "did not dwell upon the social consequences of these moral actions, because he viewed them from an inner and a transcendent perspective." Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner's, [1932] 1960), p. 264.

10. See my critique in *Wealth and Poverty*, p. 200.

11. William Diehl, "The Guided-Market System," *ibid.*, p. 87.

12. Art Gish, "Decentralist Economics," *ibid.*, p. 154.

13. If you wonder what "koinonia" means, you are probably not a left-wing advocate of common ownership. Understand, I am not suggesting that voluntary common ownership is anti-Christian, any more than I am saying that voluntary celibacy is anti-Christian. Paul recommended celibacy (I Cor. 7:32-33). He did so, he said, because of "the present distress" (v. 26). Similarly, the Jerusalem church held property in common (Acts 2:44; 4:32). Shortly thereafter, a great persecution of the church began. The entire church fled the city, except for the apostles (Acts 8:1). This exodus created the first foreign missions program in church history: "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). The fact that they had sold their property enabled them to leave the city without looking back, as Lot's wife had looked back. So, for temporary purposes in times of great trial, voluntary celibacy and voluntary common ownership are legitimate, even wise. But to make either practice a recommended institutional model for all times and places is a misuse of historical events. The one institution where common ownership has been productive for longer than one generation is the monastery. However, it takes celibacy to make this system work for longer than a few years. As soon as there is a wife saying, "He's earning as much as you are, but you're far more productive," koinonia ends. In the modern State of Israel, the kibbutz collective farms faded rapidly as important sources of national production.

14. Ronald J. Sider is probably the best example. Compare the first edition of his book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1977), with the 1997 edition. For my comparison, see *Inheritance and Dominion*, Appendix F.

15. Gary North, *Tithing and the Church* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1994).

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