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WHY BIBLICAL ECONOMICS IS IGNORED TODAY

PART 2

by Gary North

In the previous issue of *Biblical Economics Today*, I discussed a remarkable opportunity that the collapsing economies of the Iron Curtain countries presented to evangelicals. Leaders in these nations approached Western Christians and asked for advice on how to reconstruct their countries' economies. They were greeted with either stony silence or a reading list of secular humanist economics books (hopefully, free market humanism rather than Keynesian humanism). Then, on August 19, the opportunity was removed in the Soviet Union by the removal of Gorbachev from power. On August 21, the *coup* failed. Opportunity restored!

For at least two centuries, and really for over three centuries, Christian theologians and intellectual leaders have self-consciously avoided discussing the details of economics and politics from the point of view of the Bible. They have adopted either right-wing Enlightenment thought or left-wing Enlightenment thought (usually the former until the rise of neo-evangelicalism after World War II) in the name of Christianity. They have not turned to the Bible as an authoritative source. They have steadfastly maintained two contradictory positions:

"The Bible has the answers to all of life's problems."

"The Bible is not a textbook on [fill in the blank]"

The scenario I outlined – the collapse of left-wing Enlightenment economics – is not hypothetical. It is a reality. This is why Christians have now been given such a tremendous opportunity to evangelize the Soviet world. The spiritual vacuum created by a collapsing Marxist faith is exactly what we had supposedly been praying for in the West. But Christians never really imagined that God would answer this prayer. When He did (perhaps only briefly), Christian leaders had nothing specific to suggest in the way of political reconstruction. They agree with the political worldview articulated in 1976 by Scientific Creationist Henry M. Morris:

Biblical Christianity is pan-political. It can and has existed and flourished under all types of political systems. In fact, church history witnesses to the phenomenon of a church that prospers more during persecution than under more favorable circumstances.

Ironically, this statement appears in his book, *The Bible Has the Answer* (1976 edition, p. 271). Some answer! What is the supposedly biblical answer to those Christians in Iron Curtain countries who may at last have escaped from the tyranny of the Soviets' Gulag Archipelago of the concentration camps? "Christianity is pan-political. In all honesty, you were much better off spiritually in the camps! Church history shows this." Here we have it in a nutshell:

the comprehensive intellectual bankruptcy of modern fundamentalism.

Morris argues brilliantly in his book, *The Long War Against God* (1989), that Darwinism captured both right-wing and left-wing social theory within a generation of Darwin's death. He shows how totally Darwinian ideas have permeated modern social theory. He shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Darwinian evolutionary ideas could not be contained within the narrow confines of historical geology, paleontology, and biology. But when he reaches the final chapter of his book, "The Everlasting Gospel," he offers a 67-page gospel tract. There is not a word on how six-day creationism has inescapable implications for economic and political theory and precisely what these implications are. Silence. Dead silence.

Should we wonder how the Darwinists so easily swept Christians from the corridors of influence? **Christians have had nothing uniquely biblical to say.** Christians cannot reasonably hope to transform the comprehensive worldview of Darwinian humanism with endless incantations of the words "water hydraulics" and "flood geology." But the dispensationalists and (to a lesser extent) the amillennialists who have dominated six-day creationism from the beginning have had as their operating presupposition the idea that God does not call Christians to challenge the comprehensive worldview of Darwinism, let alone transform a social world based on that worldview. They deny that this is possible on this side of the Rapture. They expect us to bear witness to the narrow truths of flood geology and the second law of thermodynamics, but nothing more. Anything else is "utopianism," i.e., theonomic postmillennialism. Their defeatist eschatologies and their implicit antinomianism have undermined their creationism. (I cover this in detail in my book, *Is the World Running Down?*)

Yet these people are the best of the bunch. Too many of the neo-evangelical leaders – theistic evolutionists all – think that the welfare State is in fact the Bible's required way.

Spiritual vacuums will be filled. Will we once again see the cults rush in where Christians fear to tread? Will we once again see revival come, but not Christian revival? Will we once again see God's Church caught flat-footed?

Caught Flat-footed

Nobody would have imagined as recently as 36 months ago that an opportunity like this would have been made available to the Church. Nobody in any position of leadership foresaw the collapse of the Berlin wall, nor did anybody suspect that Christians would be brought in specifically to give advice to the leaders of the Iron Curtain countries about what ought to be done. The Church was caught

flat-footed by the Soviet Union. Then came repression. Again. Now there is another opportunity.

But it is not just that the Church was caught flat-footed by the Soviet Union; **the Church was caught flat-footed by God.** It was not that the Church had spent decades and even centuries developing specific answers to real-world problems based on biblical revelation. The Church had no gigantic body of literature and materials available to it, to be able to take anywhere on the face of the earth and recommend the transformation of pagan social institutions. The Church was not caught flat-footed by its failure to come to the Soviet Union and provide solutions; **the Church was caught flat-footed because it had no biblical solutions to offer.**

Right-Wing Enlightenment Economics

Let me propose another scenario. What happens if the proposed New World Order of the right-wing Enlightenment should collapse in a mountain of debt? What happens if the West's vision of endless prosperity and constant economic growth is shattered by a major depression, or mass inflation, or some other economic crisis? What happens, in other words, if the international fractional reserve banking system finally breaks down?

We have needed to know the answer to this for almost 300 years. The privately owned Bank of England was founded in 1694, and it has remained the standard for all other central banks ever since. We are now being pressured to create a single, international, privately owned central bank comparable to the Bank of England. Our political representatives may be successful in creating such a bank. What happens if the manipulations by such a bank should produce an international economic disaster?

Can we envision a day when individuals in leadership positions in the West will come again to the Church and say, "Gentlemen, this system has failed. What should we do?" Can we imagine a time when those which rule over us today in the name of moral neutrality will come to us and say, "What in the name of God should we do?"

Most Christians today would say "No, such a scenario is impossible even to imagine." People who can easily imagine exactly how many tanks will be used during the battle of Armageddon, or how the corpses will be cleaned up afterwards, cannot imagine what it would be like if the secular humanist leaders of today's world were to come to the Christians and ask for specific guidance as to what they ought to do. The reason why they cannot imagine such a thing is that **they themselves cannot imagine what it is that Christians ought to recommend.** They simply do not care. To care is to accept responsibility, and they will do almost anything to avoid any added responsibility.

The standard tactic in avoiding such responsibility is the adoption of **antinomianism**: the denial that biblical law applies culturally in this dispensation. I am not speaking here only of dispensationalists; I am speaking of the whole Reformed tradition except for a small minority within the Scottish Covenanter tradition. Bible-affirming Protestant Christians have generally turned to Scottish right-wing Enlightenment thinkers and their Unitarian spiritual heirs whenever they have been asked to provide real-world political and economic solutions. There has been no attempt by Christians to go to the Bible in search of specific answers to such pressing institutional questions. Christians instead prefer to seek real-world wisdom from Unitarians, utilitarians, and atheists. So, what we find is that Christians have nothing specifically biblical to say in the name of Christ. All they can do is parrot a kind of baptized version of right-wing Scottish Enlightenment thought. They have no confidence whatsoever that the Bible really does speak to every area of life.

No Encouragement

When I first began to imagine the possibility of the development of a specifically Bible-based economics, I had no encouragement whatsoever from anyone I talked with. This was when I was 18 years old, in my second semester of college. I had been converted to Christ less than a year before, and I had also become interested in free market economics, specifically the economics associated with the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), located in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. FEE's writers and speakers were followers of Ludwig von Mises.

I became convinced that if the conclusions of Misesian economics are true, then at least some of the economic principles that Mises enunciated must in some way be related to the principles of the Bible. I was convinced that Mises was generally correct in his view of economics, so I began searching the Bible to see if there were principles in the Bible that Mises was appropriating through the principle of common reason (what I later learned is called **common grace**). It was not until I was a senior in college that I came across the works of Cornelius Van Til, and they persuaded me that I was on the right track. Mises established certain principles of economic reasoning, and I found that the Bible established very similar principles. That was when I began to consider seriously the possibility of becoming a systematically and self-consciously Christian economist.

When I began my research in Christian economics I was told repeatedly by Christians that there is no such thing as Christian economics. Now in one sense, that was an accurate statement. At the time that I began my work, there was indeed no such thing as Christian economics. But that was not what the critics were really saying. What the critics were saying was there **can** be no such thing as Christian economics. They were also saying implicitly that I was wasting my life in trying to develop Christian economics. And they would have said the same thing to Christian educators, Christian physicians, Christian lawyers, or Christian anything else. There had been a systematic attempt on the part of Protestant Christian leaders for over 200 years to persuade their followers that there is no such thing as explicitly biblical social answers.

When I attended Westminster Theological Seminary, I found that the idea of explicitly Bible-based academic disciplines (except for philosophy) was considered foreign by all of my peers on campus, and by all of the Westminster faculty. This attitude was not simply a problem that Westminster Seminary uniquely had; I would have found exactly the same response no matter what seminary I attended.

It was (and still is) universally believed that the Bible really does not speak in specific ways to the field of economics. Seminaries do not even teach courses on six-day creationism, let alone Christian economics. But Van Til had convinced me that secular humanism cannot possibly be neutral; therefore, if we dare not adopt secular humanism as the basis of our worldview and our academic disciplines, then we have to seek our answers in the Bible. I began this search in a systematic fashion at the age of 21. There was no previous model for such an effort, no tradition of Christian scholarship behind me. It would have to be a bootstrap operation. I would not have suspected how many Christian leaders would later stand behind me in this effort, each with a pair of scissors.

Today, almost three decades later, there is still no seminary that teaches Christian economics. There is only one seminary that has at least unofficially adopted Van Til's view of the absolute impossibility of neutrality in the world: what was once called Reformed Episcopal Seminary but is now called Philadelphia Theological Seminary. (The influence here was Dr. Robert Rudolph.) There is no semi-

nary or college that has systematically attempted to apply Van Til's principle in a negative sense to all of humanism's academic disciplines, and there is no seminary or college that has attempted systematically to rebuild even one academic discipline in terms of the presupposition that the Bible is authoritative in that discipline. Why not? **Because the Bible is not taken seriously as a guide to anything beyond the institutional Church, the family, and personal salvation.** It is not even taken seriously as a guide for seminaries; if it were, their faculties would not seek formal academic accreditation by humanists and liberals.

The Conservative-Subsidized Drift Into Liberalism

This attitude is the first step down the road to liberalism. It begins when Christians approach the study of Old Testament history. What we find again and again is that Christians use pagan chronologies to discover when biblical books were written and biblical events took place. They never seem to take place when the pagan records show any record of them. Thus, seminary historians begin to reshuffle the dates and events. This is the first stage of the blight known as **higher criticism**.

What we find is that in every area, Christian academic leaders are importing pagan principles into their classrooms, first in history and later in psychology. There is no attempt on their part to filter these principles and conclusions, line by line and case by case, in terms of the specific revelation of God in His Bible. There is no attempt to go to the Old Testament to find out whether these imported pagan principles are valid or not. They much prefer humanism to the Old Testament.

Therefore, year by year and decade by decade, **the supposedly conservative seminaries drift into liberalism and Barthianism.** We can spot this drift. The first break with the traditional curriculum is the adoption of pagan psychology textbooks for Christian counselling courses. The second step is the restructuring of the curriculum into separate "tracks" — tracks that are in no explicit way connected to the seminary's traditional theology courses. Finally, the faculty restructures the theology courses. But they never tell the naive alumni that this is the game they are playing. They need the donations. And the ever-faithful donors are either too blind or too polite to call attention to the game. The game is called "Take their money and steal the students." It works every time.

The problem that Bible-affirming churches face today is the steady capture by the liberals of future candidates to the ministry. To counter this traditional strategy of institutional conquest, the churches must appeal to the Old Testament as a valid source of all academic standards. This, of course, no denomination or association is willing to do. So the drift goes on. **The leaders would rather lose their churches to theological liberalism than appeal to the authority of the Old Testament.** They have demonstrated this preference, decade after decade.

Why Not the Best?

Let me offer you a challenge. Get a piece of paper and a pencil and sit down at your desk. Write out the names of those Christian organizations which you regard as pioneers in any field. In other words, name any Christian organization that has a reputation for doing, if not the best work in a particular field, then at least superior work which is worthy of consideration. You will not need a whole sheet of paper.

I have some recommended organizations. One is the **Salvation Army**. It is modeled after the Church, although it does not serve holy communion. It deals with poverty-stricken people in the cities. It attempts to transform the

lives of the down and outers of the world. It was a late nineteenth-century response to an urban society in which the Church no longer had much influence. It was an organization that moved into a social vacuum which the retreat of the Church had created. It deals with losers, and it does not have any pretensions about transforming the whole world for Christ.

There is another organization, the **Prison Fellowship** ministry, founded by Charles Colson. It is a relatively new organization. Like the Salvation Army, the Prison Fellowship deals with down and outers, the most down and out people in society. The Prison Fellowship is made up of mostly of inmates and former inmates. This is not an area in which the Church had specialized from the inside. The Church was supposed to keep its people out of jail, not get its people into jail in the name of evangelism. Colson was fortunate in that he was converted to Christ just as he was going into jail. As a result, he was able to deal with other prisoners on a face-to-face basis as an equal. This was a tremendous advantage for him, and an advantage which I hope none of the people reading this newsletter will take advantage of in the near future (except for Operation Rescue members).

In any case, the Prison Fellowship is a ministry to the lost, and it has no pretensions about reconstructing all of society in terms of biblical law. Mr. Colson has made it very clear repeatedly that he had no such intentions; he is quite hostile to the concept of theonomy or Christian Reconstruction. At the same time, he does say that the principles of restitution set forth in Exodus 21-22 are the proper basis of a much-needed reconstruction of the modern criminal justice system. For his intellectual schizophrenia, we should be grateful. It would have been nice, however, if this recommendation had come from the nation's Christian, academic, and spiritual leaders.

As I have said for over twenty years, I know of only one Christian organization that is widely respected as being the best in its field. That organization is the **Wycliffe Bible Translators**. They have done more to spread the gospel in backward tribes than any other organization that I am aware of. They have taken people, trained them in linguistic skills, shown them how to translate the Bible into foreign tongues, shown them how to create alphabets for these isolated tribes, sent them in, and showed these victims of years of demonism how to come out of demonism and how to enter the twentieth century. The Wycliffe Bible Translators are respected as some of the best practical linguists in the world. But twenty years after I first said this, I am hard-pressed to think of another organization that has the same kind of respect from the pagan world.

The Salvation Army, the Prison Fellowship, and the Wycliffe Bible Translators have this in common: they are explicitly evangelical organizations. They have come up with biblical solutions to real-world problems, but the specific problems they have chosen to deal with are limited to their particular ministries. None of these ministries has as a general operating principle the idea that the Bible is the source of principles of reconstruction and restoration of the whole society, rather than simply a handy book which you can go (occasionally) to solve a particular problem in your particular area of ministry.

General Booth, no doubt, turned to biblical principles when he attempted to get people out of London's gutters. There is no doubt that the Prison Fellowship ministry appeals to Exodus 21 and 22 in search of the principle of restitution as an alternative to today's prison organizations. There is no doubt that Wycliffe Bible Translators' scholars in some cases do go to the Bible in search of principles of communication. The problem is, none of these organizations operates on the basis of this presupposition: the

Bible speaks universally to society in the same way that the Bible speaks to certain particular problems that have been encountered as a result of these particular ministries objectives. Theirs is an **ad hoc** theonomy.

The ICE's Strategy

The Institute for Christian Economics does its best to present biblical economic principles. Unlike these other solutions-seeking organizations, the ICE is committed to the idea that what we do in the field of economics is a **representative case**, not a unique case. What we do is establish from the Bible that biblical principles can and must be applied to a specific academic field, and also to the real-world crises of any era. We do this in economics as an example of what the Bible can do in every other field.

The difficulty is, we do not find that the academic world responds favorably to the idea of Christian economics. By the academic world, I also mean the Christian academic world. There is enormous resistance to Christian economics, not because individuals and leaders believe that our conclusions are wrong, but because they are utterly hostile to the **method** that we use to come to these conclusions.

You will find few leaders in the fundamentalist world who attack me or ICE's authors because of our terrible economic conclusions. Most fundamentalists are conservative by instinct, and they have no affection for Communism and socialism. They like the conclusions of the ICE with respect to anti-Communism and anti-socialism. They may even like the ideas we have promoted with respect to the building of a free enterprise society. But over and over, we are attacked because we have gone to the Old Testament in search of the principles which we then apply to real-world circumstances, despite the fact that we have reached conclusions that these leaders basically favor.

The critics do not know what to do with Christian Reconstruction for this reason. They like the conclusions, but they do not like the way in which we reach those conclusions. They want Christians to appeal to Adam Smith, not to the book of Deuteronomy. And so there is great resistance to the idea of Christian economics, even though there is general acceptance to the conclusions of Christian economics. I have yet to receive a letter from any fundamentalist telling me that he likes my conclusions about the free market, and he especially appreciates how I derive these conclusions on the basis of the appeal to the Old Testament. There is a reason for this silence: **antinomianism**, the fear of biblical law.

Pagans Are Setting the Church's Agenda (As Usual)

Unless Christians as a community are intellectually and psychologically prepared to speak authoritatively in Christ's name to every area of life, they will not respond to the challenge when external crises hit. They will remain silent if humanistic political leaders ever turn to Christ out of desperation. What I have learned is that **the pagan world will not turn to Christ until there is no other solution**. I have also learned that **the Christian world will not turn to biblical law until the pagan world admits that there is no other solution**.

This means that things are going to be in a very sorry state before anyone is going to listen to biblical law and its conclusions and applications for society. In other words, **God is going to drag Christians through the mud and**

around many hard corners before He is done with us. We had a tremendous opportunity given to us after the fall of Communism in 1989, and the Church did not respond to it. This was not the way to please God.

The Task at Hand

We must work as hard as we can to develop explicitly biblical alternatives to a collapsing social order. First, we must work as hard as we can in our churches to begin to present these alternatives as clearly as we can and as forcefully as we can, yet without alienating the listeners. We must work on small projects in order to prove that the principles we espouse are workable at the local level. Second, we must persuade the churches of the West that the Bible does provide authoritative, real-world solutions to the problems of every generation. Yet we must face this possibility: **the pagan world may accept our solutions before the Church does.**

The failure of the Church in our day to respond to the tremendous opportunity which was dropped in the laps of churches all over the West by the Soviet Union is so embarrassing that **we should assume that God is going to bring negative sanctions against us.** We should assume that we are in the situation that Jonah was as he sailed out of port in the direction of Tarshish. We should assume that serious storms are coming, and we had better pray for whales. The Church of the late twentieth century has not responded to the call. When God issues a call, but the Church does not respond, members of the Church should expect trouble.

When the churches remain silent in the face of abortion, when the Church as a whole has continued to send its children into the public school system, when the Church has had nothing to say in response to a request by the ex-Communist nations for the Church to come and provide solutions to their problems, then **the Church has failed in its ministry**. There is no way that the stain of this failure can be wiped clean apart from a great deal of scrubbing and a great deal of pain. We should expect at least some external skin loss during this process.

This is why those who read this newsletter on a regular basis have enormous responsibility. It is not enough that we believe the truth. God calls us to **obey the truth** and to **spread the truth** with whatever resources we have.

Conclusion

I realize (and have realized for a long time) that the concept of Christian economics is alien to most people, but it is alien only because **the concept of a Christian social order is alien to most people, including most Christians.** Christian economics is simply a development of the general principle that there is such a thing as **Christendom**. There really is such a thing as an explicitly Christian social order. Though I realize that many of you have received hostile responses in your assertion that there is such a thing as Christian economics, I only want you to understand that this specifically negative reaction is an outworking of a **general** negative reaction against the idea of Christendom. It is Christendom that we must promote with all of our resources today, for it is only the ideal of Christendom which will suffice in a world that is in the midst of the collapsing faith in both right-wing and left-wing Enlightenment thought.

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