

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

Vol. XIX, No. 6

©1997 Gary North

October/November 1997

RON SIDER HAS MOVED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

by Gary North

We are all familiar with the student who goes off to college and comes home after the first year spouting liberal nonsense that he learned in the classroom. This phenomenon has been around since the days of classical Greece. Aristophanes wrote a comedy about such a youth: *Clouds*. A young man goes off to Socrates' academy and comes home a know-it-all jerk. Students usually get over this phase by age 30 unless they go to graduate school. In grad school, the damage to both common sense and moral sense can become permanent.

The Christian version is the youth who comes home spouting nonsense and quoting the Bible out of context to defend his views. He does things like quote Israel's jubilee law (Lev. 25) as a model of State-directed wealth-redistribution. No one told him that the jubilee's legal basis was genocide: the destruction of an entire civilization by the Israelites, i.e., wealth-distribution by military conquest. No one told him that the same jubilee law authorized the permanent enslavement of foreigners and their children (Lev. 25:44-46).

He insists that he is still a Christian, but he declares that a Christian can be a liberal: an in-your-face, in-your-wallet, tax-collector's gun-in-your-belly kind of liberal. He announces, in so many words, "You'll have to pay; government gets to spend the money on the poor (after skimming off 50% for handling); and it's all in the name of Jesus."

With the publication of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study* in 1977, Ronald J. Sider became the Moses of the American Protestant evangelicals' version of this kind of liberal. (John R. Stott had already begun serving this role in England.) Sider led them in a unique kind of exodus: out of the fundamentalist prayer closets of their youth. "Free at last; free at last!" Dressed in tweed jackets with the obligatory leather patches on the elbows, an army of Christian college and seminary professors followed him into the wilderness of liberation theology.

They thought they were on the cutting edge of a new, caring kind of Christianity. They imagined that they were headed into the Promised Land of social relevance and political influence. They believed that their students would follow them. The students did, too, for about three years. Then they changed their minds, voted for Ronald Reagan, and went into real estate development or the brokerage business. (This, too, shall pass, but that is another story.)

Now, two decades later, their leader has announced it was all a big mistake. Ron Sider has become a card-carrying

capitalist.

In mid-1997, the 20th anniversary edition of Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* appeared. On the cover, it proclaims: "Over 350,000 copies in print." Most of these copies were the first edition. The second edition was forced on Sider in 1984 by David Chilton's book, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators* (1981), which I hired Chilton to write and which ICE published. Sider prudently refused to mention Chilton in that second edition . . . also in the third edition and the latest edition. The original publishers surrendered control over it in 1990, when Word Books picked it up. Publishers do not surrender books that are still selling well.

In a *Christianity Today* interview, published in the same issue as an obituary for David Chilton (April 28, 1997), Sider made it clear that he no longer is of the same opinion as he had been in 1977. "The times have changed, and so have I" (p. 68). Furthermore, "I admit, though, that I didn't know a great deal of economics when I wrote the first edition of *Rich Christians*" (pp. 68-69). Or, he could accurately have added, the second and third editions. It is clear who his nemesis has been since 1981, the unnamed David Chilton: "I had no interest in trying to psychologically manipulate people into some kind of false guilt" (p. 68). No, indeed; he wanted to manipulate them based on their true guilt. That is what his book was all about. But then came the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Times have changed, and so has he. Better put, the *New York Times* has changed, and so has he. He read the headlines in the *Times*, and he saw the light. He counted all those who are still officially in favor of socialism, and he saw the light. It was not David Chilton's arguments that persuaded him; it was a shift in liberalism's climate of opinion, and therefore academic neo-evangelicalism's opinions.

The original version of *Rich Christians* was a tract for the times. They were rotten times, ideologically speaking. The economic debate, as far as Christian intellectuals knew, was between Keynesians and Marxists. Not today. Everything has changed. Marxism is dead. Keynesianism is in its terminal stages, taking tiny, halting steps like an octogenarian with a walker. Sider has recognized this, and he has turned back toward what he used to call Egypt. "No, no: the Promised Land lies in **this** direction!" Most of this army turned back in the 1980's, and they have bought up all the choice real estate. Only Sider's officer corps, still dressed in the same tweed

jackets, remains with him. Will they keep following him, or will they continue to wander in circles? Were it not for the manna of academic tenure, they would have died of starvation two decades ago.

Revisions

Sider begins his revised edition with this admission: "My thinking has changed. I've learned more about economics" (p. xiii). So have his former readers. Socialist radicalism has fallen out of favor all over the world. The climate of opinion in the liberal media changed in 1991. Ron Sider has changed right along with it. I think of Joe Sobran's warning: he would rather be in a church that has not changed its beliefs in 5,000 years than in one that spends its days huffing and puffing to catch up with the latest shift in media opinion.

The 20th edition is barely recognizable. It even has a new subtitle: *Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. The earlier editions had been subtitled, *A Biblical Study*. The new subtitle is less pretentious. It also sounds more private than statist, which reflects the book's perspective. Here is an example of how much the book has changed. You may remember Sider's 1977 call to statist action on behalf of the poor. Back then, God was on the side of the poor: "... the God of the Bible is on the side of the poor just because he is *not* biased, for he is a God of impartial justice" (p. 84). What does he say now? "Is God biased in favor of the poor? Is he on their side in a way that he is not on the side of the rich? Some theologians say yes. But until we clarify the meaning of the question, we cannot answer it correctly" (p. 41). He has gone from confident rhetorical assertion to academic waffling.

Chilton summarized Sider's policy recommendations, and he offered footnotes from *Rich Christians* for every point: national (state) food policy, (state to state) foreign aid, a guaranteed national income, international taxation, land reform, bureaucratically determined "just prices," national health care, population control, and the right of developing nations to nationalize foreign holdings.^[1] In the 1997 edition, Sider mentions foreign aid briefly (pp. 31-33). But even here, Sider favorably cites reports on how recipient governments have misused this aid in the past. Sider uses the same kind of bureaucratic examples that Chilton used against his early editions (pp. 258-59). As for the recycled oil money loaned to the Third World in the 1970's, Sider writes: "Too much of what was loaned was spent on armaments, ill-planned projects, or wasted because of official corruption" (p. 154). Imagine that: wasteful government! He still mentions land reform, but only briefly (p. 260). He wants lower tariffs against foreign products. He is adamant about this (pp. 147-50, 244-45). This was Chilton's suggestion years ago (pp. 101-103).

As Sider has become more cautious - openly so - he has dropped almost all traces of his previous toying with socialism and statist coercion. The new edition is not the same book. It is not even a kissing cousin of the first three editions. His new edition is basically a retraction of the earlier editions - a kind of belated apology to the 350,000 buyers of his book who bought intellectually damaged goods.

Nevertheless, he still refuses to mention Chilton's book, even in the bibliography. He reminds me of Winston Smith in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who dutifully dropped inconvenient historical information into the "memory hole." Nevertheless, his new bibliography contains some very good books by such fine free market scholars as P. T. Bauer - to whom Chilton dedicated the third edition, since Bauer was a big fan of *Productive Christians* - George Gilder, Brian Griffiths, Julian Simon, and Cal Beisner. Unfortunately, he does not actually quote from any of these authors in 37 pages of endnotes, except to attack Bauer as an extremist (p. 307). He quotes mainly from UNICEF, other United Nations agencies, and the World Bank. He still avoids citing economists generally and free market economists

specifically. But at least his bibliography gives the illusion that he has thought through the reasons why his first three editions were wrong.

Harbinger and Fad

Sider's book was part harbinger, part fad. It was a harbinger of things to come because, in 1977, Protestant evangelicals were just barely coming back into American politics as an identifiable voting bloc. The Presidential candidacy of Southern Baptist and Trilateral Commission member Jimmy Carter in 1976 had made acceptable the label "evangelical" in the political arena. White Southern Protestants actually voted against Carter, but hardly anyone recognized this in 1977 or even today. The pundits incorrectly attributed his victory to the unpredicted appearance of the evangelicals.

From the era of the media-orchestrated humiliation of fundamentalist Christianity at the Scopes' "monkey" trial in 1925 until the election of 1976, American evangelicals had been conspicuous by their absence. They generally opposed politics, or at least identifiably Christian participation in partisan politics. Roman Catholics did that sort of thing, it was widely believed, "and you know what we think about Catholicism!" For decades, political liberals who controlled the theologically liberal National Council of Churches had chided fundamentalists, calling on them to get out of their prayer closets and get active in politics. They got their wish answered in 1980: the election of Ronald Reagan, whose personal commitment to salvation through faith in Christ was never proclaimed by him in public, and by his defeat of Carter, whose public commitment to Christ was considered media-worthy, but whose personal commitment was to theologians such as Paul Tillich. The National Council crowd never knew what hit them. Reagan stood firm, at least rhetorically, against the NCC's version of the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal, except by majority vote." He was re-elected in 1984. The NCC has never recovered. Like some emphysemic middle-aged athlete still dreaming of his glory days, the NCC continues to issue study guides and newsletters. No one pays any attention.

After my evening debate with Sider at the Gordon-Conwell Divinity School in 1981, a reporter asked me what I thought of Sider. I told him that I appreciated Sider for softening up the market for my work. I told him that Sider was preparing the way for evangelicals to get involved in social action and politics, but that my economic opinions, not Sider's, were representative of the broad mass of evangelical opinion. That statement had been verified the previous fall, with Reagan's defeat of Carter. Sider had been part of the minority of white evangelicals who were favorable to Carter's worldview and hostile to Reagan's. Sider's fame was fame based on the opinion of classroom professors and liberal arts editors, what I have referred to as the Wheaton College-*Christianity Today*-Calvin College axis. This cloistered non-profit community of liberal arts graduates is part of the modern chattering class, but it never has reflected the opinions of donors in the pews. The man in the pew always knew that socialism is simply Communism for people without the testosterone to man the barricades.

I have maintained for over two decades that neo-evangelicals pick up fads that have been discarded by secular liberals. Sider's book is proof. The tenured academic community of Christians was mildly socialistic when the American media were. Now they are mildly free market, just as the media are. What caused the change? The failure of the Soviet Union. Mr. Gorbachev admitted in the late 1980's that his nation was economically bankrupt. This stunned the West's academics. They had always insisted that the U.S.S.R. had a growing economy. Only a handful of free market economists had questioned this. By 1991, Gorbachev had been unceremoniously thrown out of power. So had the Communists. They had

neither money nor power by August 21, 1991, the day the Communist coup against Boris Yeltsin failed. With neither money nor power, Communism fell out of favor in the West overnight. The secular humanist West worships money and power.

Overnight, discount book bins filled up with Marxist books written by and for the college market. Marxists in the Western academic community found that their peers were laughing at them. Never before had this happened. They had always been taken seriously. Why? Because the Communists had the power to terrorize people without threat of retaliation, and Western liberals have great respect for this degree of power. They had raged for decades selectively only against military dictatorships in small nations that might be overthrown. Now the "impersonal forces of history" had turned against the Communists. This was bad news for tenured professors who had publicly worshipped the forces of history. They rushed in panic, huffing and puffing, to get on board the last train out of socialism's world of empty promises and emptier souls.

They have now become born-again democratic capitalists. What is a democratic capitalist? Someone who has modified the eight commandment as follows: "Thou shalt not steal quite as much as before, except by majority vote."

The Echo Effect: Neo-evangelicalism

Sider's book was partly a fad because it promoted a kind of warmed-over political liberalism that suited the times. Jimmy Carter had just been elected President of the United States. He was a political liberal, and he was a self-proclaimed evangelical, despite his commitment to neo-orthodox theologians. Two years later, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of Great Britain. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States. Those two politicians restructured political rhetoric in the West. They made political conservatism acceptable. More important, they made liberals look both weak and silly. They oversaw major shifts in public opinion, even among intellectuals. In the year after Reagan's retirement, the Berlin Wall was torn down, and the East German troops did nothing to stop it, as if in response to Reagan's words to Mikhail Gorbachev, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall." Gorbachev sat tight. Two years after that, he was thrown out of office, along with Communism.

Overnight, the liberation theology fad died. Marxism became passé – the ultimate humiliation in the modern intellectual world. This was the year after the third edition of Sider's book appeared, which sank without a trace. Ronald Reagan had destroyed the climate of opinion that had made Ronald Sider's book a best-seller among college-educated Christian evangelicals. Reagan had destroyed Sider's market as surely as David Chilton had destroyed Sider's arguments. Sider admits as much: "Communism has collapsed. Expanding market economies and new technologies have reduced poverty. 'Democratic capitalism' has won the major economic/political debate of the twentieth century. Communism's state ownership and central planning have proven not to work; they are inefficient and totalitarian" (p. xiii). This was what David Chilton had argued back in 1981. Sider writes: "One of the last things we needed was another ghastly Marxist-Leninist experiment in the world" (pp. 182–83). Yet in 1977, he offered this bold-faced, capitalized question: **IS GOD A MARXIST?** (p. 72). He never answered this question; instead, he wrote several pages on how God "wreaks horrendous havoc on the rich" (p. 77). Now, he has answered his own question. This is progress. It took him only twenty years.

The New, Improved, and Utterly Boring Version

Dr. Sider has admitted that he didn't understand much about economics in 1977. That was clear to Chilton and me when we finally got around to reading his book in 1980. Now he says he has changed. In his new book, for example, he continues to call

for a "graduated tithe." But he says this is strictly personal; he does not mention the State (pp. 193–96). He assures us: "Certainly it is not a biblical norm to be prescribed legalistically for others" (p. 193).

Throughout the book, he calls for private Christian charity – exactly what Chilton had called for. He makes a few gratuitous genuflections toward government intervention, but mainly in the most conventional areas, such as public health matters and education (p. 237) – activities that the typical Southern Baptist layman would agree with.

Most revealing, he has stripped his book of confrontational rhetoric against the free market or in favor of big government. His rare negative rhetorical flourishes are now directed against Marxism. This edition is marked by academic caution. It is an apology rather than an apologetic. And it is boring. He knows this, too. In his one chapter on economics, he begins: "However, the reader who has no interest in economics may want to skip to chapters 9 and 10, which deal with practical steps that individuals and churches can take to empower the people" (p. 138). After all, he finds economics boring and confusing, as the chapter reveals; why shouldn't his readers feel the same way? Skip the economics if you like! Who needs it?

Chilton's Bible-based economic arguments did not change Sider's mind. By the time Communism fell, making anti-capitalism passé, he had written two revisions without even mentioning Chilton or his other free market critics. Even now, in his third revised edition, he has provided not one reference to Chilton's book, and not one to me or this commentary. The climate of opinion has not changed **that** much! It was not logic or the Bible that changed Sider's mind. It was the change in the climate of secular academic opinion. He was not prepared to swim upstream. Neo-evangelicals always swim downstream with the liberal current, for liberals can impose academic sanctions.

Sider's earlier editions were subtitled, *A Biblical Study*. He has now moved away from that sort of unacceptable positioning. He now writes: "When the choice is communism or democratic capitalism, I support democratic government and market economics." Not quite. When the choice was between Communism and market economics, he was not ready to attack Marxism, and he attacked the free market with a vengeance. It was only after the academic world was laughing at Marxists that he made his choice.

He goes on to say, "That does not mean, however, that the Bible prescribes either democracy or markets" (p. xiii). To argue, as I have and Chilton did, that decentralized Constitutional democracy and the free market are exactly what the Bible prescribes, is just too theonomic for Dr. Sider.

Today, Ron Sider is closer to the biblical truth, but not on the basis of the Bible. He dismisses a brief 1984 essay of mine defending the free market as little more than an extension of Adam Smith, whom he correctly identifies as an Enlightenment thinker (p. 92, note 5). He refuses to tell his readers about my economic commentaries or my public attack on right-wing Enlightenment political theory in *Political Polytheism* (1989). He does not mention theonomy's commitment to searching for judicially binding social blueprints in the Bible. He does not inform his readers that free market economics as a discipline began, not with the Enlightenment, but with the late-medieval scholastic school of Salamanca, a fact that I have tried to get people to understand ever since I published Murray Rothbard's article on the topic in 1975 in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*. These scholastics used rationalism, not the Bible, to defend their case; so did the late-seventeenth-century mercantilists; so did Smith; so does the entire economics profession. So what? Does he think that his favorite economists in 1977 – there were not many cited in his footnotes – and non-economists were not also heirs of the Enlightenment? As with his academic peers, and virtually the entire Christian world, he

hates theonomy, yet he implies that the Enlightenment left an unreliable legacy. To which I ask, one more time: If not biblical law, then what?

Sider has affirmed what all of his academic peers affirm: the Bible offers no judicially binding economic, political, and social blueprints. But at least in this edition, we find no traces of his original inflammatory, anti-free market rhetoric – the outlook and rhetoric that made his book a best-seller. There is also no hint at the existence of some as yet-unpublished plan that might make statism work. He knows that statism will not work. He cannot tell us theoretically why this should be true. He shows no familiarity with Mises' 1920 article on the economic irrationality of socialist planning. This article was always the most important theoretical critique of socialism, which socialist economist Robert Heilbroner finally admitted in 1990 was correct.[2]

Anti-Communism is pragmatic if it is not based on economic theory, or biblical law, or some other moral grounds. Sider now rejects Communism as evil. Why did he wait so long? I contend that it was because the climate of secular liberal opinion had not shifted. Until secular pragmatists saw that the Communists could no longer maintain their terrorist apparatus, they rejected all economic criticisms of Communism that were based on its inherently irrationality and/or its moral evil. Until that historical turning point, the West's liberal media rejected all uncompromisingly anti-Communist authors and opinions as biased and unscholarly, a fact spelled out in graphic detail by Jean-Francois Revel in his book, *The Flight from Truth: The Reign of Deceit in the Age of Information* (1988).

How much civil government is appropriate? We just do not know, Sider says. "We need intensive study of how much and what kind of government activity promotes both political freedom and economic justice.. Through painstaking analysis and careful experimentation, we must discover how much government can work within a basic market framework to empower the poor and restrain those aspects of today's markets that are destructive" (p. 236). Notice what is the framework: markets, not government.

Guilt for poverty must now be shared internationally, perhaps like foreign aid. "As we saw in chapter 7, North Americans and Europeans are not to blame for all the poverty in the world today. Sin is not just a White European phenomenon" (p. 228).

What of the effects of multinational corporations? "For the purposes of this book, however, we do not have to know the answer to the question of their overall impact" (p. 176). Some of them do damage; others do not. (This is sociology's only known law: "some do; some don't.") What of colonialism? "It would be simplistic, of course, to suggest that the impact of colonialism and subsequent economic and political relations with industrialized nations was entirely negative. Among other things, literacy rates rose and health care improved" (p. 135). This, from the man who wrote in the second edition, "It is now generally recognized by historians that the civilizations Europe discovered were not less developed or underdeveloped in any sense" (pp. 124-25). He goes on: "It would be silly, of course, to depict colonialism as the sole cause of present poverty. Wrong personal choices, misguided cultural values, disasters and inadequate technology all play a part" (p. 136). They do, indeed – Chilton's point in 1981. Well, then, is there enough food being produced in the Third World today? Is the Third World facing famine? Here, too, we just do not know. The World Bank says there is no threat. Lester Brown – whose pessimistic assessment was prominent in the 1977 edition – says there is a threat. "The

final verdict? Non-specialists like you and me cannot be sure" (p. 165).

Here is what we **can** be sure of: this is not the *Rich Christians* that sold 350,000 copies.

Sider offers reworked versions of his old "institutionalized evil" and jubilee year chapters, but his heart just isn't in it. Reading the 1997 edition of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* is like going to your college class's 20th reunion and running into the campus radical, who is there mainly to sing the old songs. He cannot remember half of the words, but he can still hum most of the tunes. A good time will be had by all.

It is a shame that David Chilton died a few weeks before the new version of Sider's book appeared. Because of the effects of his first heart attack, he could no longer remember most of what he had read, even his own books. I can imagine what he would have said about the 1997 edition. "This is pretty sloppy theology, and its economics is really muddled, but it probably won't hurt anything. At least he calls for the tithe as morally binding. The good thing about the book is that people will not be able to remember anything unique about it. That will put them on my level. Still, I wonder who this guy Sider is."

Was.

Conclusion

I have been hard on Ron Sider for sixteen years. Had I read his book in 1977, I would have been hard on him for twenty. *Rich Christians* represented what I regard as the second-worst aspect of neo-evangelicalism: its middle-class sell-out to liberation theology. (The worst aspect is its sell-out to uniformitarian geology.) But Sider later went public with his opposition to abortion. He even called homosexuality immoral. Now he has begun to sound like a neo-conservative, except for his recitation of the standard myths of environmentalism and his preference for cooperative farming instead of New York City's cultural delights.

This book is not half-bad. It is also not very good. But at least it seems harmless. Compared to the 1977 edition, it is a decent effort by someone who does not understand either economic theory or economic history, and who does not believe that biblical law is binding. For a man who rejects economic reasoning and biblical blueprints, what he proposes is not all that bad – uninspiring, but not that bad. But if he had published this version of the book in 1977, nobody would remember him today.

If the book raises money for small business loans the poor, fine – except for the matching funds offered to such private lending agencies by governments. As an apology to 350,000 people who, if they actually read those earlier editions after they bought them, were misled from cover to cover, the book is a step in the right direction. A long journey begins with a single step.

1. David Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider* (3rd ed.; Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1985] 1996), p. 35.

2. Robert Heilbroner, "After Communism," *The New Yorker* (Sept. 10, 1990), p. 92.