

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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## TAXES AND CITIZENSHIP

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by Gary North

One of the stock phrases Christians like to use is this one: "I'm in the world, not of it." It is a variation on Jesus' words at the last supper: "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil [one]. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:15-16). What Christians think they are saying is this: we are not able to escape the limits of the world, but we have our source of guidance and commitment from heaven. Like Paul, they are saying that "our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20).

The trouble is, the bulk of the Christians who glibly quote this old favorite, "I'm in the world, not of it," can usually be found to be immersed up to their ears in the world they claim they are not part of. Yet they really believe they are "spiritual." They think of themselves as being "otherworldly," yet they are only too worldly. Why is it that this inconsistency is so common? What is the logic used by Christians to lead themselves into such a seeming contradiction?

The heart of Christianity is the Bible. This is God's revelation of Himself to His creation, humanity. It is a comprehensive, all-inclusive revelation which embraces the whole of human existence. God is not a partial Creator, or a partial Saviour. When he created the universe, He did so in terms of a comprehensive plan, totalitarian standards, and faultless sovereignty. Then He pronounced the whole creation good (Gen. 1:31). We know that He has saved the whole creation in principle, and He intends to restore the whole creation to glory (Rom. 8:18-25; I Cor. 15:20-28). Since God intends to restore the whole creation, His revelation is intended to apply to the whole creation. Revelation, like restoration, is comprehensive.

This being the case, mankind is responsible before God to impose godly rule over the entire creation. We are not supposed to look at sections of the creation and conclude that they are in some way autonomous, or neutral — outside the comprehensive plan of God. The creation is to be subdued to the glory of God (Gen. 1:26-28; Gen. 9:1-7). Thus, we ought to conclude that in order to have our citizenship in heaven, we are to exercise dominion here on earth. The sign of full citizenship in heaven is our willingness to stick it out on earth, subduing our particular portions of responsibility in terms of God's law.

### The Impotence of Paganism

One of the great ironies of history is that those whose commitment is wholly to this world eventually find that they or their spiritual (anti-spiritual?) heirs begin to lose control over the world. Classical culture began to disintegrate intellectually, morally, and spiritually not long after Christ's advent. This disintegration has been chronicled forcefully by Charles Norris Cochrane's book, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1940). The Classical ideals, derived from Greek philosophy and Roman political life, could not keep that culture intact. The innate pessimism of these early pagan humanists did not offer men real hope in their ability to control the seeming chaos of life. Without a doctrine of creation, and without the doctrine of God's personal, sustaining providence, Classical thinkers gave up all hope. Christianity's optimism became the new cultural dynamism, especially after Augustine. It replaced the old, dead Classical culture.

We find much the same thing today. The optimism of the nineteenth century has steadily departed. A new existentialism has replaced the older confidence, even in the Iron Curtain countries. Marxist rhetoric is still officially optimistic, so Marxism is still a great threat to the more thoroughly existentialist West, but the handwriting is on the wall. Secularism has been weighed in the balance, by secularists themselves, and has been found wanting. The free market still provides the impetus to innovate, but the free market cannot be sustained by its own philosophical bootstraps. The religious roots of capitalism, namely, orthodox Christianity, are being eroded away in the general culture. The growth process is not autonomous, inevitable, or irreversible (Deut. 8).

In short, those who are of the world are finding it increasingly difficult to remain in control of their world, simply because it is not their world. Those who think there is nothing higher than this world, and nothing more authoritative than the word of self-proclaimed autonomous man, are despairing over their lack of power to control the multiple evils they find facing them. To be of the world means, increasingly, that one is incapable of having dominion over this world. The world is like quicksand; those standing in it, without a grasp of something above and outside it, are sinking into it.

## Christian Activism

John C. Raines, a radical humanist theologian, offers his fellow humanists what he hopes will be a return to the older optimism of Christian orthodoxy, but with Marxist foundations. He is impressed by John Calvin's vision. "Calvin understood the Christian life not as 'a vessel filled with God' but as an active 'tool and instrument' of the Divine initiative. But this is precisely our point. Active toward the world, the Christian knows himself as utterly passive and obedient toward God, whose Will it is his sole task to discover and obey." ("From Passive to Active Man," in John C. Raines and Thomas Dean, eds., *Marxism and Radical Religion* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1970], p. 114.) Why is it that modern Calvinists have failed to recognize this aspect of Calvin's thought? When redeemed man is passive before God — "meek" in the biblical sense — he is active in relation to the creation. Like Christ, who did His Father's will perfectly and humbly, we are to assert our lawful power over the world. The ultimate passivity of the cross enabled God to transfer all power to Christ after the resurrection (Matt. 28:18).

Those who are in active rebellion against God have the opposite tendency: passivity in the face of the creation. They become mystics, or ecology humanists seeking to "live in perfect harmony with nature," or cultural retreatists who simply hope to survive nuclear holocaust. The "passivism-activism" dualism is part of the basic structure of creation. Men cannot be neutral toward God. They are either in rebellion against or conformity to Him. They are either in the world as God-directed men or Mammon-directed. They are slaves to God or to sin. But they are always slaves to something. They are always in bondage. Christ's yoke is the lighter one (Matt. 11:29-30), but it is still a yoke. Man is not autonomous. He is always a slave. He is always passive toward some personal entity, God or Satan. Similarly, no man can be outside the world; it will either be an arena for long-term conquest, or an arena of long-term burial.

Christians who claim to be "in the world, not of it," and who still are in a position of cultural impotence and fear of the world, are clearly not wholly subdued by God. They have not offered all they have to God. They are "holding out" on God. To be subdued by God means to be actively seeking to subdue some portion of the creation to God's glory. If a man is basically passive toward the world, he must be in some sort of active rebellion against God.

## The Tithe

The prophet Malachi came before the people of Israel and announced that they were impotent, poor, and miserable because they had not abided by the requirement of the tithe. They were trying to "short-change" God. They were offering God the lastfruits, the leftovers. They were sealing their own doom by doing this. He said. They may have believed that

their poverty was a sign of their "deep spirituality." They may have tried to comfort themselves by pointing to their increasing impotence in the world by saying over and over to themselves, "We are not of this world, we are only in this world." They may have equated poverty with spirituality, but if they did, they were wrong. They were, in fact, so deeply mired in this world that they were unwilling to pay God the tithe. The tithe was their way of demonstrating where their citizenship really was: in heaven or on earth. Their citizenship was on earth, so they kept the tithe. The result was their impotence. They were actively rebelling against God, so God withheld the wealth that could have served them as a tool of dominion, not to mention their personal benefits. Why should God subsidize the enemy? Why should God allow His official people to subsidize the devil, by withholding the tithe?

The churches of the twentieth century have prided themselves — pride is the correct word — on their deep spirituality, their commitment to another citizenship, and their lack of concern for the things of this world. They have regarded wealth as a total curse, rather than as a tool. They sing, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold," and then conclude that they would rather have paper money than either. They hang onto their meager salaries, forgetting about the requirements of the tithe. Sure enough, they wind up devoid of silver and gold. They also wind up devoid of cultural and political influence.

The modern churches are filled with people who think that money — not the love of money, but money as such — is the root of all evil. They may or may not understand that the best way to get more money is to follow the law of the tithe. So in order to avoid contamination with money, lots of money, and the world (lots of personal responsibility), they refuse to pay the tithe.

Yet we inevitably pay the tithe. It's innate to human existence. The only question is our designated beneficiary of the tithe: God or Mammon. Whose kingdom will we subsidize? As a medieval sermon put it: "Our ancestors had more than they needed because they gave God tithes and paid their taxes to the Emperor. However, since we do not wish to share our tithes with God, everything will soon be taken away from us. The tax collector takes everything which Christ does not receive." (Quoted in Lukas Vischer, *Tithing in the Early Church* [1966], pp. 20-21.)

We must be in the world, not of it. That means we must be trying our best to overcome the world, subdue it, even as *Christ has overcome it. We delude ourselves if we say that*

*we have our citizenship in heaven but refuse to pay heaven's required tax. We delude ourselves if we think that spirituality is marked by our willingness to retreat from the world's affairs (or our simple impotence, whether our retreat is voluntary or not). If we are of the world, we will not overcome it; we will sink into its mire.*

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