

## **Thoughts on a biblical economic worldview or Godonomics**

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In the eighth extract we continue the exploration of the question of how our fallen nature comes to idolise the state.

### **Fallen minds and the spiritual dimension**

#### **Passing-by on the other side**

Ending responsibility has another dimension when it means avoiding feeling responsible and not wanting to be. All too often people feel that it is easier for someone else to take on the responsibility. Am I my brother's keeper? People want to say no, but God's answer is yes, because we are to love our neighbour as ourselves.

We need to ask the question of whether the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century growth in the welfare state has crowded out the opportunity to witness Jesus' resurrection and show God's love for the poor? Are Edmund Burke's 'little platoons' suppressed and the opportunity for 'a million points of light' snuffed out? Does the devil smile at the growth of the welfare state because it reduces the opportunity for Christian witness and evangelism?

The early church was commended for the way in which believers loved each other. A voluntary system of welfare would provide a huge incentive for the church to reach out and love thy neighbour in a truly meaningful way mobilising armies of compassion and generating social entrepreneurship on a vast scale. It could be a far more compassionate system. It could also be far more efficient, getting much closer to the individual and thereby being able to discern between what used to be termed the 'deserving and undeserving poor'.

#### **Guilt**

Guilt is a powerful force, and the liberal humanist who espouses a non-Christian worldview remains hopeless in his or her own sinful guilt. The natural consequence is for fallen man to project that guilt onto others, filling the void with a cause.

Nowhere is this possibly more apparent than in the climate change debate. The answers are assumed to be state driven. Since our fallen minds are corrupted, we are susceptible to the claim that the free-market is all about greed and selfishness, because we know deep down that those same darker motivations are part of who we are. But state intervention also gives fallen people the opportunity to pass-by on the other side. The market may provide much more optimal solutions to complex matters such as climate.

People without faith will still seek to fill the God shaped hole in their lives (hence the opening for parental socialism). The risk along this path is perhaps best captured by GK Chesterton's admonition that, 'if people don't believe in God, they won't believe in nothing, they'll believe in anything'. Politics and statism is often the answer.

## **Pride**

C. S. Lewis stated that: 'The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea-bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.'

It is the contention of this paper that a completely anti-God state of mind has resulted in the statist worldview so prevalent today. Unfortunately, many Christians have been deceived by this worldview as well, not because they have an anti-God state of mind, but because they have a very sincere belief that bigger government helps deliver more compassion.

However, fallen human beings will never be able to build a New Jerusalem on earth but pride keeps them trying. Indeed, attempts to do so, and undermine the free-market always end in failure due to: (1) contradicting God's prescribed economic system. (2) ignoring the fact that the heart of man is desperately wicked above all things, and so without limits being placed on it, the size and power of government will grow.

If the free-market is God's market, then it is the height of arrogance for fallen human minds to question it and elevate their economic thoughts above those of their Creator. This is yet another manifestation of the original sin of pride in the Garden of Eden. And the prouder we become the deeper the economic problem becomes, and all the more difficult to reverse because of the power of vested interests. We pay a high price.

C.S. Lewis, writing in an article for the Observer in the 1950s, *Is progress possible? Willing slaves of the welfare state*, warns that once government encroaches on our freedom, every concession makes it more and more difficult to 'retrace our steps'. Lewis argues that the development of a worldwide welfare state, entailing the giving up of freedom for security, is a 'terrible bargain'.

### **Every generation**

The consequence of fallen minds is that the battle for the free-market has had to be fought throughout history, and since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, by every generation it seems. There is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

Fallen people seem to want to create a whole new set of economic rules. The battle appears almost spiritual as man searches for some form of secular providence. Every generation would appear to have to fight this battle against the encroachment of a larger state. Plato's *Republic* saw the ideal economic system as one where private property was abolished. Thomas Moore's *Utopia* also saw such a society as one in which private property was abolished. Engels stated that 'just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history.' According to Marx, the law of evolution in human history was the end of private property. The contrast between the Bible's position on property rights and statist utopianism, could not be more telling.

If the free-market is God's market then it makes sense that in a fallen world His model will be rejected by men, because of this spiritual dimension. Simply stated, if the free market is God's market that's why people won't like it.

As is all too clear, the world remains uncomfortable or profoundly mistrusting of capitalism. The world has embraced scientific Darwinism, but it rejects free-market economics as a social Darwinian survival of the fittest. This is probably because an unbelieving world refuses to recognise that ultimately the free-market is God's market, and therefore wishes to reject it without acknowledging Him.

In his book, *Socialism: The Failed Idea that Never Dies*, Kristian Niemietz argues that over the past 100 years there have been more than two dozen attempts to build a socialist utopia, from the Soviet Union to Maoist China to Venezuela. Niemietz points out that all of them have ended in failure.

Niemietz was making an economic and political point, but a theological inference can be drawn from his conclusion. It is surely true that the free market is constantly under attack in every generation, and that might suggest there is a spiritual aspect to it. The spiritual aspect is the false idol of statism.

The collapse of communism did not lead to the end of history, but the search for new forms of economic interventionism instead.

This author once chaired a high-level debate on climate change involving politicians and scientists from the UK and the USA. The first speaker was one of the UK's leading climate change academics, who staggered the audience when he said he wasn't going to debate the science because people formed their views on it on the basis of whether or not they wanted more state intervention in the economy. I had to admire his honesty. What a shame for any genuine environmental concern.

More recently the potential future economic transformation to a world of automated robotics has brought with it calls for the state to provide a universal basic income when the robots come for our jobs. More and more government is seen as the solution, whatever the problem.

Of course, in a fallen world, the economic case for Christian capitalism or capitalism full-stop, will not be portrayed accurately or truthfully. Capitalism will be blamed for economic problems which at root are the consequences of interventionism. A classic example<sup>1</sup> of this can be seen in the UK, when commentators argue that the lack of affordability in the housing market is due to income inequality, whereas the overwhelmingly obvious and true explanation is the degree of distortion of house prices imposed by an interventionist planning system<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *How good can we be? Ending the mercenary society and building a good country*, Will Hutton, Little Brown, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> A simple example illustrates the point. The land price share is around 40 per cent of the total price of a new house, and as we have seen the distortion of the price of land, with/without planning permission can be 100 to 150 times or more. Land release would substantially lower land prices with planning permission and therefore cut the cost of new housing, with a knock-on price effect to existing properties as well. The problem here is of course both political and economic. A substantial increase in land supply would be helpful for my children when they start work and want to buy a property, but it would be

God's economic message to every generation hasn't changed either. Gruden (1989)<sup>3</sup> argues that biblical teachings related to economics always include attitudes of mind and motivation that have a heavenly or spiritual perspective, and in that sense are timeless. God is consistent in His dealings with man. The Ten Commandments have not been revised since they were given, and neither has God's model for the economy. This means that claims that the Bible is silent in modern times, because its economic messages refer to an ancient, agricultural, theocratic state, carry much less force.

### **The spiritual dimension**

The battle for a free-market displays some very obvious signs that it is as much spiritual as material. The free-market is one of those touch button issues which inflames secular passions (and more Christian heat than light also).

What follows is an imaginary description of how this battle might have played out in the spiritual realm, given that Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians: 11-14). With this in mind, imagine that C.S. Lewis was transported back in time to the year 1800 in order to write a special economics edition of *The Screwtape Letters* from a senior (Screwtape) to a junior (Wormwood) demon. The opening text from the special economics edition might have read as follows:

‘Screwtape has promoted Wormwood and put him in charge of the economics brief. Wormwood is keen to impress his mentor and presents him a chart showing that in the previous 1800 years or so from the birth of Christ, there was virtually no growth whatsoever in per capita GDP and the overwhelming majority of mankind lived in wretched poverty, bereft of all hope except for their trust in God. Screwtape looks irritated at the mere mention of people trusting God and so Wormwood quickly shows him a second chart, this time looking forwards not backwards. The chart shows

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damaging to existing property owners who would see the value of their properties fall. This could potentially trigger negative wealth effects on consumption spending as well, although the increase in new build would probably outweigh this effect. Moving from a planned economy to a market almost inevitably entails some pain before the benefits can be realised.

<sup>3</sup> *How can an economic system be compatible with scripture?* Wayne Gruden in *Biblical Principles and Economics: The Foundations*, R. C. Chewning (ed), Navpress, 1989.

that over the next 200 years, in the wake of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Industrial Revolutions, there will be an exponential increase in economic growth. Wormwood puffs out his chest and announces that this will mean that people will become materialist, haughty and proud, and atheism will explode. Screwtape now looks less irritated but has another concern. If they're to take this plan to Lucifer they will have to raise their game. Lucifer will love the explosion in atheism, but he hates God so much he'll want to make sure that no credit whatsoever for the surge in economic growth will go to Him. The idea that Christians might want to give the credit to God will be repulsive to Lucifer. Lucifer doesn't want anybody to make the connection between the Bible and a free-market. It's at this point that a crooked smile comes across Screwtape's face. He has an idea that is so evil, cunning and devious, even Lucifer will be impressed. Screwtape looks at Wormwood: "This is what we're going to do. Firstly, we're going to invert the truth and say that capitalism is all about greed. We're going to say it so often and in so many different ways, nobody will want to defend free-market capitalism. Secondly, just in case there are still people making the case for capitalism on biblical grounds, we're going to sow confusion everywhere and hammer home the message that the Bible doesn't prescribe any particular economic model". Wormwood looked as though he didn't fully understand, so Screwtape summarised the message very simply: "Capitalism is bad, and the Bible doesn't tell you anything about what is good economically". Wormwood finally got it, the Father of Lies signed off on the plan, and the rest is economic history'.

Obviously, this conversation is pure figment, but it does capture some sense of reality. Screwtape and Wormwood have done a good job. Over the past century decline in belief in God has been mirrored by an increase in belief in Government - although as we have seen, the command and control version has been rejected. The removal of God from the public square has made it possible for Screwtape and Wormwood to argue that left to itself, the free-market economic system will create outcomes that are unacceptable (hence paternalistic and distributive socialism).