

Worldview ~ Part 5

Economics

by Steve & Carol Ryerson

Mark 14:7 ~ For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always.

Proverbs 10:4 ~ He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.

Make 4:19 ~ And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

Matthew 19:21 ~ Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

So, in view of these Scriptures, if we work hard we'll get rich, but riches are bad, so we better not work too hard. Christians should be giving to the poor, and poor people will always be here. Thus if you want to be morally superior, have an easy life, and an assured source of income, just plan on being poor all your life.

Now, let's stop the illogic and bad Bible interpretation and ask some serious questions: Does making Bible truth the foundation for your life require the acceptance of a certain economic system? What about private property versus government ownership of property? Does God have requirements on these issues? Is it fair that some people should have a lot of money and others should have little?

Jesus Christ, our great God Who came to earth for us, is infinitely big. He reaches out to all of mankind. We see in His creation that He loves variety. He didn't create just a few dozen different kinds of insects, for example. He created thousands.

We see variety in mankind as well regarding the way we look, eat, worship, dress, and work. Regarding our lifestyles, there are so many factors that enter into man's cultures. As we study the Bible, we see many principles and commandments given to man. Bringing the two spheres together ~ man's ways and God's commands ~ it is necessary to understand which of the Lord's teachings are universal and which are flexible according to culture.

In this article we want to do some of this in a particular area: economics.

Through the years there has been a variety of views expressed among Christians on questions of economics. Most have believed that private property and individual responsibility are foundational concepts. To support this view, they cite passages such as Isaiah 65:21-22; Jeremiah 32:43-44; and Acts 5:1-4. Others say that compassion for the poor and general fairness demand that we control the right of individuals to amass wealth and power over others. They cite Acts 2:44-45 as support for this position.

Fundamentally there are only two choices ~ socialism or capitalism. In real life, these systems exist in many variations, and they are both affected by the sin nature of man. The Scripture is clear that anything man puts his hand upon will be polluted (Exodus 20:25).

In real life, capitalist systems contain elements of socialism and vice versa. In real life, man's sinful tendencies corrupt the high ideals of both systems.

But, it is still instructive to look at the essentials of the two systems so that we can compare them

with Scripture. Dr. David Noebel quotes Ronald Nash as follows: “One dominant feature of capitalism is economic freedom, the right of people to exchange things voluntarily, free from force, fraud, and theft. Capitalism is more than this, of course, but its concern with free [and peaceful] exchange [of goods and services] is obvious. Socialism, on the other hand, seeks to replace the freedom of the market with a group of central planners who exercise control over essential market functions.” (Thinking Like a Christian, pg. 136) The central planners in a socialistic system determine factors such as levels of production, profit margins, and the patterns of distribution. They might say, for example, that General Motors would be permitted to produce 15,000 Chevrolet Impalas in a given year, regardless of how many Impalas people wanted to buy. They would then choose the selling prices and dealerships who would sell them.

In Communist systems, socialism is taken to the next level of control. Not only would government planners make these decisions, but the government would also own all the major producers of goods and services.

Christians wonder about what is right. Those who support socialism point to Acts 2:44-45 where we are told that the early church shared their goods and distributed to those who had needs. Let’s carefully note a couple things. There is no command from the Apostles that the believers had to relinquish their possessions. This condition was completely voluntary. There is no statement that the apostles controlled who got what. These verses are speaking of sharing goods and services out of hearts of love. Secondly, there is no indication that the holding of goods in “common” was a permanent situation. In Acts 5 where the story of Ananias and Sapphira is found the statement is plainly made that this couple had full control of their property (v. 4).

What are some principles the Bible teaches that would have clear relevance to economic systems?

Let’s look first at private property. Exodus 20:15 says, “Thou shalt not steal.” This is the bedrock of many other references to this important concept. We have already mentioned the situation in Acts 5 where a couple lied about proceeds from the sale of their property. Peter affirmed their right to own and control that property. Much is made in the Torah of the inheritance that the Lord gave His people ~ the Promised Land. This was real property that the tribes were expected to possess and to keep in their families. You may recall the story of King Ahab of Israel who schemed to steal land that belonged to Naboth because he liked it better than his own (I Kings 21). That story makes no sense without the security of private property.

What about the work ethic? Remember how the concept of work began? After the fall of man into sin, God told man that he would face a life of toil (Genesis 3:17-19). He tells us through that if we are diligent, then we will accumulate wealth (Proverbs 10:4). When we mentioned that idea in a joking fashion at the beginning of this article, we left out the fact that we become responsible to God to use the wealth wisely. When Jesus saw a problem in that area of a young man’s life, He told the man what to do about it (Matthew 19:21). The requirement to sell all of his possessions was not something that was meant to be the norm for everyone. Jesus saw that the man’s property had become his god.

The whole earth belongs to God. Biblically we understand that our “ownership” is temporary. We understand that all of life is the province of God, and that He is watching to see how we respond to all the opportunities He has given us to choose the right paths. Thus personal responsibility (another key concept related to economics) becomes not only a material issue but also a spiritual one. We are accountable to God for using what we have responsibly (Genesis 1:26-30, 2:15). Further, Jesus taught that we should be maximizing the return on what we’ve been entrusted with (Matthew 25:14-20).

How could we use property to serve others if it didn’t belong to us? If the government owns the land and the factories, then we are ultimately all government workers. If so, then we are just

following orders. In a socialist system, we would just be obeying orders of the government planners rather than exercising personal responsibility. If personal initiative and Biblical character are not important, then we develop a society of dependents. Years ago when the McDonald's chain was in the process of opening their first fast food restaurant in Moscow, they clashed with this mentality head on. They hired people to work at the counters just as you and I are accustomed to seeing. They had to work very hard to get the workers to smile. We understand that being pleasant to customers brings more business. They did not. When a person was assigned to clean the dining area, the worker would move the mop back and forth in the middle of the floor a few times and sit down for a break. They had to be told again and again that the whole floor actually had to be clean or they would be fired. That was a foreign concept to people who had been used to going through the motions for a guaranteed paycheck.

If we are submitted to the Lord, then we are responsible to Him. In the Biblical context then, private property would actually discourage greed and oppression rather than encourage it.

Sometimes the critics of capitalism think of competition as an evil thing because they see business competitors as enemies. This aspect of the economics discussion is closely connected with law and politics that we discussed last time. If two people are in the same business, each will naturally seek to perform better than the other. They would do this by maximizing production, improving quality, and minimizing prices compared with the other one. If the government under which they function treats them equally, then their hard work will be rewarded with increased sales, and the consumer will benefit by the availability of an ample supply of reasonably priced goods. If however one of the businessmen is able to bribe a law enforcement officer to treat him less strictly, the advantages due to the product itself will be lost. The problem is not in the economic system, but in the immorality of man.

Think of the situation this way: If a businessman is not on his best behavior and really looking out for his customers' best interests when he works for them, he won't keep them. So, competition fosters Biblical principles.

A final area: what about treatment of the poor? Doesn't capitalism take things away from the poor? Wouldn't it be better to have a government agency make sure that everyone got his fair share of limited resources? Consider this example: Johnny is planning his birthday party. His Mom tells him that he can invite five friends over to his house for the party. Mom bakes chocolate chip cookies for the boys. She bakes a dozen and a half cookies which would be three for each boy. Johnny and his Mom don't realize it, but one of the boys is dishonest. At the party, Mom tells the boys that they can each have three cookies. The dishonest boy steals two cookies when no one is looking, and eats them. As the food is being served, one boy gets only one cookie. Mom sees the shortage, and must step into the situation as an authority to determine how the shortage developed. She discovers the problem, forces the thief to confess, and she redistributes the cookies fairly. In the confined situation of the party, the supply is limited because she can't bake more cookies on the spot. But in the long term, Mom can use her skill and resources to make more cookies. The immediate situation at the party is like socialism ~ "fair" distribution of scarce resources. In the socialist system, the government planners may or may not give Mom permission to bake more cookies.

Society's supply of most goods and services can increase when demand for them increases. It happens through hard work. That work results in the existence of more raw materials from which skilled workers can make and market more goods. Socialists, when they talk about fairness in distributing goods and services fairly, speak as though the resourcefulness of man were limited. It is not, unless the immorality of man interferes. This points out the need for responsibility to God as a check on the tendency of man to step in and interfere with the market's function to match the supply of goods with the demand.

Socialist systems that attempt to force equality are connected with the use of raw government power to take from one person in order to give to another instead of motivating everybody to work harder to produce more. In a socialist system, the wealthy person focuses on protecting what he has from government taxation. He may do this by investing in other countries rather than his own, or by keeping his money in secret foreign bank accounts. If there were equality before the law rather than a misguided attempt to force equality of possessions, he would invest that money in productive enterprises in his own country, thus providing jobs for his own countrymen.

The Bible does not teach that money is evil; it teaches that the love of money is evil (I Timothy 6:10). There is a huge difference that focuses on the heart of man.

Consider this concluding thought: The Communist philosopher Frederick Engels said this: “[I]f some few passages of the Bible may be favourable to Communism, the general spirit of its doctrines is, nevertheless, totally opposed to it.” (Thinking Like a Christian, page 143)