



In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many discussions have arisen in the public forum. The first was the effectiveness of the government response and whether people depend too much on government to solve their problems (For a good article on this topic, read Joel Belz's article "Unquenchable" in *World Magazine* at www.worldmag.com). Now the leading topic is the rebuilding of New Orleans. Should government or private enterprise take on the job? This question is an on-going one in our country.

Capitalists argue that the government doesn't regulate itself as well as the free market system does. They point out that unless government limits the amount of money it prints, it will be able to operate outside of the limits that are imposed on the private sector. The lack of fiscal constraints leads to misallocation of limited resources, unrestrained growth in government programs and accumulation of unwieldy debt. As a result, capitalists seek to limit government's role in the economy.

In contrast, government leaders, while never openly condemning capitalism, are quick to point out its flaws. Capitalism places too much emphasis on making money and amassing possessions. Capitalism stresses private ownership of property and production. The economy is regulated through free markets in which the price mechanism determines the allocation of resources. Those who fear the dark side of capitalism believe government must play a significant restraining role in the economy to seek the good of all.

Even Christ's teachings may be held against the capitalist. The free-market is deified as the controlling arbiter of economic relationships. Emphasis on individualism is at odds with biblical teachings about community and caring for one another. Ownership of our property is relative and not absolute — we're stewards of what is rightfully God's. Helping the needy is a mandate and the poor have a claim on our possessions.

Who is right? Many Christians

assume capitalism is the form of economics that best represents biblical teaching. They contend it is the force that made America the great nation we are today. Is it? The following are some principles I believe we must apply to *any* economy to judge its ability to honor God.

1. Any endeavor of man, including those that are economic, must consider God's purposes in

Is it realistic to have Christ, as creator and redeemer, at the center of our economic thinking in this postmodern age?

creation and redemption. In James, chapter 3, verses 15 through 17, the Bible makes it clear there are only two ways to look at the world—only two sources of wisdom to understand how things ought to be. "Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy." Contrast that with worldly wisdom which is "...earthly, natural, demonic. Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing."

2. Economic policies based on God's moral and financial laws will eventually bear fruit in the marketplace. I believe it is because we have applied God's laws to govern our country that made America great. "Never forget that it is the Lord your God who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18).

3. Any national economic policy that violates God's moral or financial laws is inherently flawed. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). A flawed policy may be profitable in the short term, but will cause the economy to wither over time. Therefore, chronic

financial problems, from trade deficits to debt to high unemployment, should tell us that we may have violated one or more of God's moral or financial principles.

4. God's moral and financial laws must work together. Without economic knowledge, even the best moral intentions may prove financially destructive. And, without a sound moral base, we will not be able to deal with society's most vexing issues, no matter how much money we spend. America is the wealthiest nation on earth. Yet, despite spending trillions to help the poor, the poverty rate has not improved in 40 years! We imprison seven times more people than any other industrialized nation—nearly one-fourth of all prisoners in the world. Yet, the crime rate today is the same as during the Carter administration.

5. A basic rule of good financial decision-making is: the

Capitalism does not teach biblical values. It doesn't tell us that the way in which wealth is acquired and used matters more than the amount of one's net worth. It doesn't acknowledge the biblical model that the poor have a claim on the possessions of the wealthy. It doesn't appropriate passages like Proverbs 30:8-9 that suggest that the best in life is a modicum of the world's goods because both riches and poverty carry the danger of idolizing material possessions.

I can embrace capitalism in its purest meaning. I appreciate the opportunity, risks and rewards of free markets. Yet, it appears to me that capitalism, while embodying many scriptural principles, does not adequately consider our propensity for sin. Without godly motivation, the biblical mandate to "Seek first the kingdom of God" is readily replaced by "Seek first a comfortable life."

Does capitalism meet the test? I would suggest that George Washington's comment about government applies to the economy and capitalism as well. "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." When we have a worldly perspective about our economy and apply man's wisdom, no matter how brilliant, the best we can receive is the fruit of finite resources. When we have an eternal perspective and apply God's wisdom, we receive fruit out of His abundance.

You and I can illustrate to our clients that economic and moral issues are linked. We can make a difference in the lives of the people we serve—for their good, for the good of society and the glory of God. We have the opportunity to make many, many lives more profitable both now and forever. ✦

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