

Faith Pulpit

Economic Wisdom as an Analogy to Prudence of Separation, Part 2

We have previously demonstrated that economic prudence involves the judicious allocation of limited resources. Economic wisdom also reminds us that personal freedoms must be balanced by public necessities and a shared communal well-being. Samuel Gregg argues that “it is irresponsible for people studying public policy from a Christian perspective to ignore not only the self-evident fact of scarcity but also the likely economic consequences of different choices.”¹ Therefore, economic ethics “involves discerning the object of an act and the intention underlying the act, as well as considering the side effects of the act and the circumstances surrounding it.”²

In a free market economy, individuals must be free to start a new business and to run an established business. Workers must be free to seek and change employment. Employers must be free to make corporate decisions concerning production, distribution, and sales. There must be true freedom in a free market economy. On the other hand, even a laissez faire government must intervene in certain instances. The rule of law insures that economic contracts are legally and appropriately binding, and a system of justice must prohibit and penalize fraudulent business practices.

Furthermore, a responsible freedom must prudently consider social structures and cultural advancement. One may legally profit from selling anti-parental entertainment to minors, or building casinos in disadvantaged neighborhoods, or exploiting natural resources without due regard for the future environment bequeathed to others, but should one do so? Moreover, within a specifically Christian ethic, the goal of “profit” must be directed toward virtuous objects of spending. We do not simply amass wealth to consume it upon ourselves. We seek to provide for our families and to give benevolently and charitably to our local churches and other worthy causes. In any possible relocation or change of employment, we must consider the effects upon our spouses and children. Any scheme to “get rich quick” must be limited by the long-term effects on families, society, and culture. Economic

freedom must be balanced by the need for the continuity of order and structure. And economic interest in personal wealth must be balanced by a judicious concern for the “commonwealth.” In turn, this shared health of society will insure that future individuals have the needed freedoms to practice sound economics. Personal freedoms in the present must be limited by communitarian concerns for the future.

As in the case of limited resources, these principles of economic wisdom may also serve as analogies to the logic of separation. In the case of “personal separation,” Evangelicals often pluck the single note of “Christian liberty” without the accompanying chord of “Christian responsibility.” It seems to be lost on many individualistic libertarians that New Testament ethics, and Pauline ethics in particular, are decidedly communitarian. Believers are not to make ethical decisions in isolation. The Spirit grants us true personal freedom (2 Cor. 3:17), and this same Spirit motivates us to serve one another unselfishly in love (Gal. 5:13–15).

The modern Evangelical tends to stress the individual aspects of Christian living to the detriment of the network of social relationships in which we biblically live and thrive. This individualistic perspective is clearly seen in the downplaying of the local church and its concomitant plagues of church-shopping and church-hopping, a lack of historical awareness, and the refusal to practice personal accountability. We may also observe this lack of communal sensitivity in certain philosophies of church growth that choose to disengage entire segments of faithful church members in order to reach the anonymous “unchurched.”

Furthermore, this perspective of “personal Christian freedom” tends to argue about ethical matters on a purely “proof-text” basis. “If I can’t find the matter at hand in my Bible concordance, then I must be scripturally free to engage in this activity.” The wise application of biblical principles and the possible consequences upon others become irrelevant. But Paul’s discussion of adiaphora in 1 Corinthians 8–10 stresses an ethical discernment that prudently considers contexts and consequences. Just as any language is a complex network of meaning between various signs and things signified, our personal actions communicate within a web of cultural and contextual understanding. Moral decision-making, especially in matters of “personal separation,” requires spiritual maturity as we apply scriptural principles within the social networks in which we exist (Heb. 5:14; 1 Cor. 2:15).

In addition, we are to be concerned about the long-term effects of our decisions. Even beyond the biblical warrant, the validity of Fundamentalist concerns has been proven through sociological and historical experience. In the passage of time with its accompanying pressures, institutions, churches, and fellowships find it difficult to retain their boundaries, and therefore their present identities. Church history is strewn with the carcasses of churches, institutions, and denominations that were once vibrant with spiritual life.

The Fundamentalist stress upon purity, because of its implied conservative nature, may seem to be grounded in the past alone. But this “preservationist” emphasis is also decidedly oriented toward the future. We desire to pass on a healthy, biblical Christianity to our spiritual descendants (2 Tim. 2:1–2). Of course, there is always the danger of “repetition without ownership.” That is, future generations may mouth the same teachings without personally embracing them in any thoughtful or meaningful fashion. However, the solution is not wholesale abandonment of the doctrines but a patient and deliberate instruction that produces a true understanding and earnest appreciation.

Because such a Fundamentalist program involves the continuity of community life, there is an in-built respect for tradition. Traditions insure that cultures, nations, communities, and other social groups do not have to create themselves *de novo* or “reinvent” themselves with every new generation. Many Christians reflexively disparage the role and importance of tradition, perhaps because they equate the concept with the perceived Roman Catholic doctrine of a source placed beside Scripture as an alternative authority. But there is a difference between tradition and traditionalism; traditions are not inherently antithetical to Scripture (cf. Col. 2:8 and 2 Thess. 2:15).

The Bible itself reveals the possibility and importance of proper “tradition,” or *paradosis* (“what is handed down or delivered”) (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3). Tradition rightfully understood is the collective wisdom of the past, and Scripture is the ultimate source of true wisdom. Without any foundation in historical awareness, churches will view everything through a contemporary lens alone in a never-ending search for the ephemeral goal of “relevance.” We must heed the truism that “he who is married to the most recent trend is sure to become a widower.”

Sound economic theory reminds us of the undeniable nature of limited resources and of the importance of responsible freedom within the context of a structured continuity. These same principles hold true in the biblical doctrine of separation. As one might expect, a demonstrable wisdom pervades this scriptural mandate, and thus the virtue of prudence is required of all its practitioners. As God wills, discernment, holiness, and prudence will preserve a biblical Christianity for generations of faithful believers yet to come.

Works Cited

1. Samuel Gregg, *Economic Thinking for the Theologically Minded* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 23.
2. *Ibid.*, 20.

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