

Politics According to the Bible

Economy

Acts 4:32-37

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August 19, 2012

Economy

Scripture

Years ago I came across the following somewhat humorous view of the economic policies of different political systems:

- In *Communism*, if you have two cows, the government takes both of them and gives you part of the milk.
- In *Socialism*, if you have two cows, the government takes one cow and gives it to your neighbor.
- In *Fascism*, if you have two cows, the government takes both cows and sells you the milk.
- In *Nazism*, if you have two cows, the government takes both cows, and then shoots you.
- In a *Bureaucracy*, if you have two cows, the government takes both cows, shoots one, milks the other, and then pours the milk down the drain.
- In *Capitalism*, if you have two cows, you sell one of them and buy a bull.
- In a *Democracy*, everyone has two cows, a vote is taken, and whatever the majority decides to do, you do, and that's no bull!¹

We are currently in a series titled, “Politics According to the Bible.” We are examining key political issues that confront us today and what the Bible says regarding each political issue.

Today, as we continue in our series on “Politics According to the Bible” I want to examine the “Economy.” What does the Bible have to say about the economy? How should we think regarding the economy?

I would like to draw your attention to Acts 4:32-37. This is an important text, though it is often misunderstood.

¹ Galaxie Software. (2002; 2002). *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. Biblical Studies Press.

² Report on August 11, 2012 at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2012/hot-campaign-issues>.

Let us read Acts 4:32-37:

³²Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32-37)

Introduction

Scanning the various polls on the Internet, it is clear that the most important issues in this election are federal spending and the economy. For example, Fox News has a poll that ranks the most important issues for 2012. Here is what they have in terms of votes:

- Federal Spending5.5k
- Jobs & Economy.....4.9k
- Government Regulation....3.8k
- National Security3.2k
- Illegal Immigration3.0k
- Health Care2.7k²

It is clear that the economy is, in the minds of the voters, a very important issue. Unemployment is still over 8%, and millions of people are struggling to make ends meet. In every area of the economy, people are finding it harder to make ends meet.

Some years ago, Henry Smith Leiper highlighted American

² Report on August 11, 2012 at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2012/hot-campaign-issues>.

affluence with some startling statistics. Even though these statistics are somewhat dated, I believe that they are still applicable.

Imagine that we could compress the world's population into one town of 1,000 people, keeping the proportions right.

In this town there would be only 60 Americans. These 60 Americans would receive half the income of the entire town. They would have an average life expectancy of 70 years; the other 940 persons would have less than 40 years. The 60 Americans would own 15 times as much per person as all of their neighbors. They would eat 72 percent more than the maximum food requirements; many of the 940 other people would go to bed hungry every night.

Of 53 telephones in the town, Americans would have 28. The lowest income group among the Americans would be better off by far than the average of the other people in town. The 60 Americans and about 200 others representing Western Europe and a few classes in South America, Australia, and Japan would be relatively well-off. The other 75% would be poor.³

Nevertheless, even though we are going through tough times now, America still has the greatest economy in the world.

Lesson

So, as we consider politics according to the Bible, let us examine what the Bible says about the economy.

Let me use the following outline to guide us:

1. What does the Bible teach about work?
2. What does the Bible teach about private property?
3. What does the Bible teach about the poor?

I. What Does the Bible Teach about Work?

First, then, what does the Bible teach about work?

³ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers, and Christian Workers* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, 1996, c1979), #6998.

It is important to note that the Bible is not a textbook on economics. Neither is it a textbook on politics. However, the Bible is truth, and it actually does have a lot to say about these subjects.

Some people believe that work is a curse to be avoided, an activity to be engaged in only when necessary. Some people have even said that work is the result of God's curse on Adam.

The fact is that God ordained work *prior* to the Fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. After God created the entire earth he created Adam. He placed him in the Garden of Eden, and commanded him to take care of it. Genesis 2:15 says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it."

Therefore, work is good and ordained by God. It was something that God commanded Adam to do prior to the Fall. Work is not a curse.

However, what is true is that after the Fall of Adam, work became a burden because God cursed the ground. This is what God said to Adam in Genesis 3:17-19, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

And so work is honorable, it is good, and it is right. However, after the Fall, work became aggravated, hard, difficult, and even painful.

Because sin is so pervasive, and because work is impacted by the affects of the Fall, some people find ways not to work. The apostle Paul makes it clear about what is to happen to those who will not work. He wrote to the Thessalonians, "For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). This does not refer to people who are *unable* to work. Clearly, there are people who are unable to work due to illness, infirmity, or some other

genuine inability. Paul's command, however, does refer to people who are *unwilling* to work. If a person is unwilling to work due to laziness, sloth, or sin, then he should not eat.

Many people don't like to hear these words. It seems so heartless, so uncompassionate. But, as Kennedy and Newcombe point out in their book titled *How Would Jesus Vote?*, "this is the most compassionate statement on the subject of economics that has ever been uttered."⁴ Why is that? Imagine if a growing number of people had the attitude that they no longer wanted to work. They noticed that one of their basic necessities—food—would be provided to them by others, and so they stopped working. If the non-worker population grew, eventually there would be a growing shortage of workers to provide food. That would lead to famine and starvation for all. And so the most compassionate statement is in fact, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."

Dr. Quentin Johnston shared with me that when he was an Associate Pastor at his previous church in Chicago, they often used to have people stop at the church asking for financial assistance. Because Dr. Johnston believed that work is honorable and that laziness is not, he determined a way to find out if the person was unable or unwilling to work. They had a number of different jobs available for people to do at the church and school. (The facility included a grade school with about 150 children.) These jobs, as I recall, included washing windows, vacuuming, weeding, shuffling papers, and so on. They offered to pay a person \$25 per hour, for a minimum of 2 hours of work. He said that it was rare that anyone accepted their offer. Most of the people wanted to eat, but they were unwilling to work for it.

II. What Does the Bible Teach about Private Property?

Second, what does the Bible teach about private property?

The first thing to note is that God owns everything. He creat-

⁴ D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?: a Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 103.

ed the universe and everything in it. He is the supreme owner of all things. And so the Psalmist says, “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1).

When God gave the Israelites the land of Canaan as an inheritance, he said, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine” (Leviticus 25:23). This made the Israelites *stewards* of God’s land, just as Adam was a *steward* in the Garden of Eden.

When the land was divided up, as we read in the Book of Joshua, every family received a tract of land as an inheritance. This land was a trust from the Lord. It enabled every family to produce enough for their own needs and share with their neighbors, especially the poor and strangers living among them. The land remained the Lord’s (Leviticus 25:23), although he gave each family the right to produce goods and services from it.

God wants us to understand that he owns everything. We are simply stewards of what rightly belongs to God. This applies not only to property, but also to time, talents, and treasure. Everything belongs to God, and we are simply *stewards* of what he has entrusted to us.

God knows that in order for us to live in this world, it will be necessary for us to produce goods and services. To that end, God has permitted us to exercise private ownership of property.

Now there are some who say that America needs to abandon its commitment to a free market system and move toward a more socialist system. Some of our politicians don’t say it quite so blatantly, but if you decode their terms, that is what they mean.

Some, who are more biblically knowledgeable, point to Acts 4:32-37 and argue that the Bible itself teaches a form of socialism. But, I want you to notice a number of points in Acts 4:32-37.

First, the right to private property is upheld. Barnabas, we are told in Acts 4:37a, “**sold a field that *belonged* to him.**” It is clear that Barnabas owned the field; it was his to sell. Even the statement earlier in the passage, “**and no one said that any of the things that *belonged* to him was his own**” (Acts 4:32), indicates

that the people owned their possessions.

Second, the action to sell was voluntary. There was no coercion. No one was forced or required to sell anything. God had moved upon the people's hearts in such a way that they recognized that everything they had belonged to God, that they were stewards, and that they were glad to use it in any way that would further the grace of God.

Third, the money was given to the church and not to the state. Barnabas **“brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet”** (Acts 4:37b). This is so clear that I don't understand why people think that this text supports modern state socialism. The church, and not the state, was the recipient of Barnabas' gifts.

And finally, this spontaneous giving was never repeated elsewhere. The apostle Paul constantly stirred up God's people in other places (such as those in Corinth) to give to the support of God's work. However, there was never anything that required God's people to give their possessions to the church (or to the state, for that matter). And God most certainly did not command it.

The Bible simply does not endorse a socialistic economy. It teaches that we are to work in order to produce goods and services that will benefit our families and others as well.

There are different ways for the government to support a biblical approach to the economy. That would include allowing people freedom to work, earn a living, and own their own property.

However, I am concerned about our sinful propensity to move away from work towards laziness. In the early 1800s, someone (we really don't know who) made the following prescient statement, “America will last until the populace discovers that it can vote for itself largesse [i.e., money] out of the public treasury.”⁵ Today, we have politicians who want to give us money out of the public treasury.

Politicians promise to do all kinds of things when they get into office. We have to realize that most the things that are offered

⁵ D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, 104.

cost money. And in order to get that money taxes will be raised.

In the summer of 1861, the U.S. Treasury had only \$2 million to fund the Union side of the Civil War. The North may have been rich in land and resources, but none of this could quickly be converted into cash to pay an army. And so on July 1, 1862, President Lincoln signed into law a federal income tax.

Prior to 1862, Americans funded a much smaller federal government, largely through tariffs on imported goods.

However, when the crisis of the Civil War ended, the income tax failed to win reauthorization—much to the disappointment of Senator Sherman of Ohio, who insisted, “the income tax is the only one that tends to equalize these burdens between the rich and the poor.”⁶

And so, personal income taxes were no longer paid after the Civil War ended in 1865.

Then, on October 3, 1913, President Woodrow Wilson signed a personal income tax into law. Citizens who earned less than \$3,000 were exempt and the highest tax rate was a level of 7% for Americans earning more than \$500,000.⁷

However, these rates did not last long. Soon, when America considered engagement in World War I, the government raised taxes. During the war, the tax rate for the wealthiest Americans soared to 77%.⁸

After World War I tax cuts quickly followed under the conservative fiscal stewardship of Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon; however, Pandora’s Box had been opened. Mellon said, “Once it was possible to see a great revenue engine financing a gigantic conflict, taxing the wealthiest Americans at high rates, it was more possible to contemplate such an engine supporting a welfare state.”⁹

Tax policies originally intended to fund a global conflict

⁶ Steven R. Weisman, *The Great Tax Wars* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 2002), 103-104.

⁷ Steven R. Weisman, 281.

⁸ Steven R. Weisman, 351.

⁹ Steven R. Weisman, 347.

wound up funding Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and, eventually, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

This goes a long way toward explaining the popular view of higher taxes as the answer to some of life's most difficult problems. Some say that if taxes can be raised for *some* expenditures, then they should be raised for *any* expenditures. A government *able* to collect income taxes *ought* to collect income taxes. In short, in its approximately 100 year history, the income tax has become an august and unquestioned institution, as American as apple pie. At present the lowest federal income tax bracket is 10% and the highest, 35%.¹⁰ (This, of course, does not include a variety of local, state, and other taxes.) But if the past is indicative of the future, these rates will likely rise.

Karl Marx once said, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."¹¹ By that he meant that those who had more, pay more to fund those who had less. Frankly, this is inherently wrong. The Bible teaches a flat tax system. All Israelites were required to tithe. Whether rich or poor, all were required to pay the same percentage on their wealth.

Interestingly, some former communist and socialist countries have moved to a flat tax, with remarkable results. After Russia did away with its communist economy, it was burdened with a tax structure that had 30 separate federal taxes and over 170 local and regional taxes. The people still found it oppressive, and 60% of taxes went uncollected. In 2001, Russia switched to a flat tax of 13% on personal income and a 37% corporate tax, and government revenues have gone up every year since 2001.

III. What Does the Bible Teach about the Poor?

And third, what does the Bible teach about the poor?

¹⁰ "Your Federal Income Tax," Internal Revenue Service, United States Department of Treasury Website, <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p17.pdf> (accessed August 11, 2012).

¹¹ Quoted in Kairos Journal at <http://www.kairosjournal.org/Document.aspx?QuadrantID=4&CategoryID=5&TopicID=16&DocumentID=5880&L=1>.

Jesus said, “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me” (Matthew 26:11).

There will always be poor people. And the Bible is clear that we are to help them. The passage we looked at in Acts 4 is a description of a poor church. They were being cut off from their Jewish family and friends, and the Roman government was not at all sympathetic to any religious problems. So, there was a great deal of poverty. The church is to help those in need.

The Church is the instrument by which God’s love is to be shared with those in need. Government welfare programs often help people who are unwilling to work to remain dependent upon it. The Church rather than the Government is in a better position to help those who are poor and genuinely needy.

Conclusion

So, what does the Bible teach regarding the economy? What should we think regarding economics?

I believe we should vote for a politician that promoted work, private property ownership, limited government, a low and flat tax, and church-sponsored programs to help the poor.

Come back next week as we learn how Jesus would vote on immigration. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

O God, thank you for your Word. Thank you for what we learn about politics according to the Bible.

As we think about the upcoming general election and our responsibility (and privilege) as citizens to vote, help us to understand politics according to the Bible.

O God, your Word teaches us about the economy. Your Word has much to say about that. Your Word teaches us that work is hard and difficult, but it is good. Your Word teaches us that you own everything, and that we are stewards of your creation. You want us to work in such a way that we can produce goods and services that help our families and others. Your Word teaches us a flat tax. And you want your Church to take care of the poor and genuinely needy among us.

Would you raise up political candidates who understand how you intend for the economy to work?

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.