

Christians & Politics: Big Government & Small God

Discerning what is at stake in trying economic times

By Jesse Phillips

If I had to summarize the current debate in America regarding our economic struggles, I could do it with one word: *complicated*. Everybody has a different opinion of what went wrong and how to fix it. Pundits on the radio, television and Internet expound a spectrum of opinions as vast as America's fruited plain. Sorting through the analysis and ramifications is like solving a Rubik's cube. Blindfolded. And upside down. At Mach 3.

I believe, however, amidst all of the confusing analysis, this present situation is not very complicated at all. I actually think it can be summarized in one sentence. *What we are seeing in our economy is what happens when statism meets materialism*. We are witnessing the perfect storm that occurs when man's insatiable demand for more stuff meets a government willing to make sufficient accommodations for such living irrespective of means.

As we discussed in the first article of this series, statism is the belief that the state is the ultimate autonomous entity, the Great Benefactor. Materialism is the belief that happiness can be found in earthly possessions. The illegitimate marriage of these two ideas occurs when people begin to look to government to meet desires to have more than God has otherwise provided.

Materialism: The American Dream becomes the American Right

These days, nothing is more American than prosperity. Of course, it is a great principal of our nation that all men are created equal and blessed by God with rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For many, however, happiness means making enough money to achieve fulfillment of dreams of a life of peace, comfort and material prosperity.

The gospels warn us against this selfish ambition. *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"* (Matthew 6:24). Not surprisingly, when we subscribe to this version of the American dream, money becomes bigger and God becomes smaller. Add to that mix a sense of personal entitlement and the American dream quickly becomes an American right. Rather than being a dream that can be obtained by hard work, prosperity becomes an American right that doesn't include work, sweat, suffering or poverty.

Make no mistake; there are many aspects of the American dream that are good. We should defend life and fight for freedom. There is however, a danger of which we must also be aware, and to which many Americans are unfortunately blind. As prosperity comes raining down, or the winds of adversity blow, this American ideal can become a slippery slope on which we descend into materialism.

According to Dave Harvey materialism was one of the greatest challenges to the church and a contributor to her general state of powerlessness and apathy in the 20th century. *"Consumerism was the triumphant winner of the ideological wars of the 20th century, beating out both religion and politics as the path millions of Americans follow to find purpose, meaning, order and transcendent exaltation in their lives. Liberty in this democracy has, for many, come to mean freedom*

*to buy as much as you can of whatever you wish, endlessly reinventing and telegraphing your sense of self with each new purchase."*¹

The harsh reality is that funding the American dream is expensive. Cars cost lots of money. Televisions, boats, clothes, additions to the house, renovations, lawn service, cosmetic surgery, jewelry, vacations and eating out cost lots of money. In our culture, we rarely have enough money to pay for what we *want* to do, and very often do not even have the money to pay for what we *actually do*. Yet the limits of God's provision has never stopped a sufficient malcontent whose defiance against God's boundary lines leads to inevitable bondage. The American dream of prosperity often becomes the American nightmare of debt.

Dave Ramsey explains the widespread nature of this sad epidemic: *"Just as slaves born into slavery can't visualize freedom, we American's don't know what it would be like to wake up with no debt. Last year 6 billion credit card offers were put into our mailboxes, and we are taking advantage of those offers. According to CardTrak, Americans currently have \$807 billion in credit-card debt."* Numbers that large are too big to process. Let me make it relatable: this averages to more than \$4,000 of consumer debt *for every working adult*. The church is not exempt. We have chased the American dream, demanded the American right, and are now living in the bondage of our own idolatry.

Government: "Come, all ye who are discontent, and I will give ye more."

Eventually, something has to give. Illusionary living of this variety cannot be sustained forever. Reality always sends our dream world into a tailspin when we live as though we are richer than we are. We are experiencing the wake-up call necessary to lead to change. Unfortunately, with the blessing of a wake-up call also comes the opportunity for a seductive and far more dangerous offer. *What if it were possible for some generous benefactor to bless me, allowing me to continue living beyond my means without consequence?* Like smoke that causes a person to sleep while the house burns around him, we are being tempted by certain ideas and ideology to return to our former apathy, to ignore the God-given, life-saving alarms of conscience, and to sleep ourselves to death under the supervision of an entitlement government.

Long before the recent downturn of the economy, the groundwork was slowly and meticulously laid as godless ideas replaced biblical principals, beginning with God's ideas of equality. In God's economy, being equal before God means being judged impartially based on what we do. For God "will render to each one according to his works" (Rom. 2:6, 11). Today, being equal means being rewarded *totally irrespective of works*. We can't give trophies only to the kids who won just because they won. That might hurt the feelings of the kids who lost. Everybody gets a trophy. In God's economy, being fair means there is a proportional reward based on the quality

¹ April Witt, "Acquiring Minds: Inside America's All-consuming Passion," *The Washington Post Magazine* (December 14, 2003), 16. Quoted in *Worldliness: Resisting Seduction in a Fallen World*, CJ Mahaney ed., p. 96.

of your labor (Luke 10:7). In today's thinking, however, being fair means there is a *flat* reward regardless of the quality of labor. In God's economy, mature competition is a virtue because it's the vehicle through which God-honoring industriousness is blessed, while sustenance and productivity are motivated. In today's mindset, competition is evil because it only promotes God's ideas of fairness and quality, which have been deemed untenable by the foolishness of man.

The negative result is the same as with our previous discussion of life and marriage: God's image is erased from the earth. Man is God's image bearer. What man was created to do uniquely reflects God's glory. The first thing man was commanded to do after creation in Eden was "to work it and keep it" (Gen. 2:18). To remove man's incentive to work—eliminating the relationship between work and reward—is to discourage participation in one of mankind's chief God-glorifying activities.

This is exactly what seems to have happened in the housing markets. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were commissioned to guarantee houses to people who had previously been deemed unable to afford them.² The political pressure to relax lending standards³ led to the "rapid expansion of mortgage debt over the last decade and attendant excessive price appreciation and risk taking"⁴ which this current downturn is attempting to correct.

In former days if you could not afford a house, you could not live in it and had to accept God's restriction on your life as it pertained to your housing. The Great Benefactor, however, disagreed with this Sovereign arrangement. *People living under the limits of their own means? People being forced to live with what God provided them with through their work? How absurd and unfair!* Do you feel poor because you don't have the house you want? Are you discontent renting with the current lot handed down to you by God and you want to own something for yourself? Come to government and you can have more. The only conditions are idolatry, enslavement and destructive spiritual apathy.

History is replete of examples demonstrating the fallibility of this ideology. Plymouth colony, one of the first experiments of American government, is a perfect case study of these two contrasting view points: benevolent government versus God-honoring industry. Governor William Bradford first established a system in which everybody was given the same plot of land and the entire harvest was put in a common storehouse. The result? No one worked hard, people did not take responsibility and the harvest was scarce. Why work hard? There's going to be this great storehouse that gets you through the winter, regardless of how hard you work on your little piece of land. Everybody was hungry because no one owned anything or had any responsibility before God. The first winters of Plymouth were nearly fatal to the life of the colony.

² Fannie Mae was a New Deal organization established by FDR in 1938, privatized in 1968. In 1970, Freddie Mac was established for competition. In the late 1990's—see overview online at {http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Mae}. Fannie Mae came under legal pressure from the Clinton Administration to underwrite loans for people previously unqualified to borrow, particularly minorities.

³ Holmes, Steven A. (September 30, 1999). "Fannie Mae Eases Credit To Aid Mortgage Lending", New York Times.

⁴ "Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac" (July 12, 2008), Econbrowser, http://www.econbrowser.com/archives/2008/07/fannie_mae_and.html

Then Bradford had a new idea. Why not give everyone their own land and let them keep everything they grow? How well did this work? Much better, according to Bradford.

*"This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content."*⁵

Why did this work so much better? People were motivated because they had responsibility. They knew the day was coming when the work of their hands during summer would be tested by the winter. Not only were they able to sustain themselves, but also gave to those who were in need. Of course, they acknowledge God as the true source of their blessing through the great Thanksgiving feasts.

It's very telling to read why Bradford thought the previous communal storehouse strategy didn't work.

*"The experience [proves] the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God (emphasis mine). For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort."*⁶

Bradford laments his own failed attempts, essentially saying (paraphrase), "Folks the reason Plymouth languished so much was because we thought we 'were wiser than God.'" Ultimately, they figured out God was pretty wise to create man with instinctive industry, motivated by the future reward for present work. When the men of Plymouth were suppressed under unbiblical restraints and robbed of biblical motivation, there was "confusion and discontent" and the 'retard' of employment and entrepreneurialism.

In God's economy, the promises of a government, no matter how well intended can never replace God's provision. It always kills God's provision. This is why a benevolent government is actually not benevolent at all. It's a dangerous trap.

The lessons of Plymouth were not lost on the other founders. Consider the thoughts of James Madison: "Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government."⁷ Madison also said, "I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article of the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents."⁸

Thomas Jefferson also chimes in, saying this form of 'fair' government is fundamentally flawed and unfair: "To take from one, because it is thought his own industry and that of his fathers has acquired too much, in order to spare to others, who, or whose fathers, have not exercised equal industry and skill, is to violate arbitrarily the first principle of association, the guarantee to everyone the free exercise of his industry and the fruits acquired by it."⁹

⁵ Of Plymouth Plantation, Book I, Chapter VI, and Book II, Chapter XIV

⁶ Ibid

⁷ James Madison, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Presidential File [LC-USZC4-4097]

⁸ James Madison, 4 Annals of Congress 179, 1794

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Joseph Milligan, April 6, 1816

When Government Is Big and God is Small

As the quote from Dave Harvey says, materialism (or consumerism) was the predominant ideological and spiritual challenge for the church in the twentieth century. Now that the bubble seems to be bursting and American Christians and non-Christians are recognizing it as untenable, we are faced with a further challenge. I wonder if the most significant ideological battle for today's young Christians in the twenty-first century will be statism.

Will we turn to God and repent of our discontentment and selfishness? Or will we turn to the promises of government for more? Will we expect government to meet our felt needs for circumstantial improvement? Or will we work as we were created to do, and receive the blessing of God's provision?

If God doesn't give us the house, car or iPhone we want, will we complain to government for one? Or will we be grateful for what God has blessed us with and work even harder so we can be generous to others?

There are many young folks, even Christians, who hear the warnings about statism and socialism and wonder, "What's the big deal?" It is portrayed as an "antiquated" idea meant to incite false alarm.¹⁰ Ignorance of the painful lessons of history and blindness to the spiritual enslavement that comes from pagan ideologies will lead to the inevitable repeated experience of past misery and decadence. To answer the question, the "big deal" with socialism and statism is that they make government big and God small.

Whenever God becomes small we place our trust in what is big. When the church puts its trust in something perceived to be bigger than God, the gospel is forgotten, the testimony is lost and the church becomes dead and irrelevant. These are the stakes.

The stakes of this pivotal juncture for the next generation of the church could not be higher. God is getting our attention and awakening us from our sleep to revive us. There is an awakening beginning in the hearts of young men and women who are seeing through the lies that happiness is found in anything other than knowing and serving Christ. We are realizing that true happiness comes as we lay down our lives for others in need, not as we serve ourselves. Happiness is found as we live the gospel, not the American dream. Joy comes as we share the gospel, not hoard our cash. Fulfillment comes as we stand up for others and defend the innocent, rather than protecting our portfolios.

The downturn of this economy is God's invitation to freedom from the stranglehold and idolatry of materialism. As the gospel meets man's greatest and freshly realized need, it could produce the widespread move of the Holy Spirit we all long to see in our land. We will either turn to God or to government. If we turn to government, our hearts will enter a much steeper recession than the economy is currently experiencing. But if we will turn to God this recession could birth revival.

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articles, please email JessePhillips@MetroLife.org*

¹⁰ <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/tim-graham/2008/11/01/nprs-linguist-socialism-antiquated-word-isnt-scary>