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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 *Corinthians* 10:3-6)

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Essays from *Freedom and Capitalism*

By John W. Robbins

Editor's Note: The following two essays are taken from Freedom and Capitalism: Essays on Christian Politics and Economics by John W. Robbins published in 2006. The first essay, "The Founder of Western Civilization" was originally written in 1996 and first published in Freedom and Capitalism. The second essay, "Is Christianity Tied to Any Political or Economic System?" was originally written in 1980 and first published in Freedom and Capitalism.

The Founder of Western Civilization (1996)

Living in a post-Christian age, we have forgotten the heroic men who created the civilization to which we owe our lives, our freedoms, and our fortunes. One of these forgotten heroes of Western civilization is a German monk named Martin Luther. This year, 1996, marks the 450th anniversary of Luther's death.

Luther was a pivotal figure in world history. Not that he achieved anything by himself, as he was the first to admit, but in the providence and power of God, Luther's intelligence, knowledge, and courage changed the course of human history. Before Luther's time, the Middle Ages – a period of feudalism, ignorance, superstition, and church tyranny – stretched for a thousand years. After Luther's time, Western civilization and an age of religious, political, and economic freedom dawned.

Luther had no intention of starting either a new political order or a new church. On the evening of October 31, 1517, he nailed 95 topics for debate to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. The 95 *Theses* were written in Latin; Luther wanted to debate only other monks and priests about some of the ideas and practices of the Roman Catholic Church-State.

But his intentions and God's intentions were different. Someone translated Luther's *Theses* into German, and later into other languages, and they were the spark that set off a conflagration that razed the old world.

What were the principal political and economic effects of the Protestant Reformation?

Republican (representative) government.

Prior to Luther, authority in both church and state flowed downward, from either king or pope. Luther revived the Biblical idea of the priesthood of all believers, which gradually eliminated the hierarchies and aristocracies that existed in both church and state. The idea that all men are equal before God and the law was a revolutionary idea that created the representative governments of the West. The U. S. Constitution, influenced by the Reformation, prohibits monarchy and aristocracy in the United States.

Constitutional government.

The fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation was the idea that "The Bible alone is the Word of God." This means that the words of men,

whether they be church leaders claiming to speak on God's behalf, or ordinary churchgoers claiming to get new revelations directly from the Holy Spirit are of no authority. All such claims are false. The Bible alone is the constitution of the church and the rule of faith and life for the individual Christian. Nothing is to be added to or subtracted from it, as the Bible itself says. It is the written constitution for church government. Out of this Biblical idea of a written covenant developed the idea of constitutionalism: Civil rulers, as well as church officers, ought to be limited by written constitutions, and no ruler should be free to make up new rules as he pleases.

Religious liberty.

When ancient Greece and later both pagan and papal Rome ruled the world, there was no religious liberty. Church and state were combined, and the result was a form of totalitarian government that attempted to control both soul and body. In Athens, Socrates was condemned to death for his atheism: He did not believe in the gods of Athens. During the pagan Roman Empire Christians were tortured and killed for not worshipping the Emperor. During the reign of papal Rome, Christians were tortured and killed for holding views inconsistent with those of the Roman Catholic Church-State.

Luther opposed the use of force in religious matters. After the Reformation, Christians gradually freed themselves from pagan views of church and state, and state and church were gradually separated. Civil government was limited not only by being made representative and constitutional, but by removing the control of ideas entirely from its jurisdiction. To this development we owe the First Amendment of the Constitution, which first of all protects religious liberty, and consequently freedom of speech, press, and assembly.

Universal literacy.

Because Luther, following the Bible itself, taught that the highest (and only) authority is the Bible, and each person is responsible for his own beliefs and actions, the ability to read became of central importance to the Reformation. In the ancient world and Middle Ages, education had been restricted to the upper classes; the peasants, serfs, and plebeians

remained illiterate and unlearned. Luther and the Reformers taught the importance of education for all.

Capitalism.

After a thousand years of economic stagnation, the Reformation launched free enterprise capitalism. Harold Berman of Emory University has pointed out that "The Protestant concept of the individual became central to the development of the modern law of property and contract." Luther taught that all people, not just the "religious," have callings from God, and that all honest work, if done with the proper attitude, could be pleasing to God. To Luther we owe the articulation of the "Protestant work ethic," that is, the Biblical work ethic.

In these and many other ways, Martin Luther was the founder of civilization as we know it. Western civilization began 450 years ago this Thursday, October 31. The fact that we have forgotten Luther and the Reformers and instead celebrate a witches' holiday on that date is a graphic illustration on how far America has fallen.

Is Christianity Tied to Any Political or Economic System? (1980)

Some years ago, before it became fashionable for professed Christians openly to espouse socialist political and economic ideas, a cliché about the relationship between Christianity, politics, and economics became popular among those professed Christians who were reluctant to support limited government and private property: "Christianity isn't tied to any political or economic system." The cliché is ambiguous, but the intent of at least some of those who uttered it was not, and a study of the reasons for its popularity is worth a few minutes of our attention.

The people of the cliché meant their audience to understand, but did not dare to say it explicitly, that Christianity – that is, the propositions in the Bible – does not logically entail any propositions about

politics or economics. They dared not say this explicitly for at least three reasons: First, the people of the cliché had very definite beliefs about the proper political and economic system; second, they wanted to maintain that those beliefs came from the Bible; and third, they did not feel competent enough to defend their beliefs on exegetical grounds. Were they to state explicitly that the Bible does not give us any information about the proper political or economic order, they would be undermining their own position – later made quite explicit – that the Bible does in fact give us a great deal of information about proper political and economic arrangements. They used an ambiguous cliché in order to insinuate the idea into the minds of Christians that the Bible is silent on matters of politics and economics. The predominant idea among Christians when the cliché came into use was that the Bible supported capitalism, that is, private property, individual responsibility, and limited government; and it condemned all forms of socialism or Communism, that is, communal property, corporate rather than individual responsibility, and unlimited government. To launch a frontal attack on this prevailing view would be to risk offending and alienating those who might be persuaded by a more indirect approach, that of maintaining simply that Christianity is not tied to any political or economic system.

The subtlety of the attack, however, is seen in the fact that even this contention – namely the contention that the Bible is silent on matters of politics and economics – is not stated explicitly but arises in the minds of those who hear the cliché without their giving any thought to it. The ambiguity achieves its purpose: conveying an idea without explicitly and clearly stating it.

The second and third reasons that the ambiguous cliché was used have already been suggested: The people of the cliché wanted to destroy the historically dominant idea that Christianity, that is, the propositions in the Bible, supports private property, but they did not believe that their case could prevail on exegetical grounds. Therefore, they had to shift the argument to non-exegetical grounds by subtly suggesting that exegesis is beside the point, for the Bible is silent on these matters anyway. Once exegesis was eliminated, the liberal, professed Christians could rely on the “ideas in the air” to

persuade Christians that capitalism is morally reprehensible, while socialism or Communism is morally legitimate.

As an indirect and never explicitly stated argument, the cliché was an interim argument with very limited objectives. It was useful so long as and only so long as there were Christians who believed that the Bible does support capitalism. Once those reactionary Christians were eliminated or reduced to intellectual impotence, the use of the cliché ended, for it was time to proceed to the direct argument. That argument is quite simple, and it flows from the conclusion that the cliché evoked in everyone’s mind: Not only does the Bible not support capitalism, it actually supports a form of Communism and condemns capitalism. The whole process is as follows:

Phase 1: The ordinary Christian believes that the Bible supports private property, individual responsibility, and limited government;

Phase 2: This belief is undermined by the idea that the Bible is silent on these matters;

Phase 3: The logical conclusion is reached that the Bible cannot, therefore, since it is silent, support private property, individual responsibility, and limited government;

Phase 4: Secular and emotional arguments are used to deny the morality of private property, individual responsibility, and limited government, and to assert the moral legitimacy of communal property, communal responsibility, and unlimited government;

Phase 5: Biblical support is then sought for these conclusions, and they are announced as, in fact, supported by valid exegesis of Biblical texts.

This pattern – first an indirect and skeptical argument followed by a direct and dogmatic argument – is not rare in the history of philosophy. Scratch an agnostic, and you will find a dogmatic atheist. Scratch a skeptic, and you will find a dogmatist who neither intends nor is able to defend his dogmas. Skepticism is frequently used as an

intellectual corrosive to remove an offensive idea, but skepticism is not and cannot be a final philosophical position. Its value is merely instrumental.

The cliché, “Christianity is not tied to any political or economic system” is intentionally ambiguous. This is not to say that everyone who has used it has known explicitly and self-consciously what he was doing. The heart is deceitful above all things, who can know it? It is to say, however, that there is a “logic” in its use that some have understood thoroughly, a “logic” that works out its own consequences inexorably, despite the ignorance of some people who may have used the cliché. In the way it is meant to be understood, the cliché is false, for Christianity is most definitely “tied to” – logically tied to – a certain type of social order. The Bible may leave room for slightly different forms of government (I am not saying that it does; perhaps this impression is simply a result of my not being rigorous enough in deducing implications from the Bible), but it leaves no room for unlimited government, communal rather than private property, corporate rather than individual responsibility, or the view that the State is exempt from one or all of the Ten Commandments. On these matters the exegesis is overwhelming – and that is why the liberals used the cliché and the subtle attack they did.

The reasons that the cliché is accepted by many hearers are also important, for they constitute the persuasive power of the cliché. They stem from the ambiguity of the two key terms in the cliché, “Christianity” and “tied to.” It is the ambiguity of these two terms that lends the cliché whatever plausibility it has. If by “tied to” one understands “historically dependent upon” or “inextricably linked to” a particular political or economic order, then the cliché is obviously true. After all, has not Christianity survived the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages, the European kingdoms, and National Socialism? Is it not now present under Communist dictatorships, fascist dictatorships, and Western democracies? In the historical sense, Christianity is not tied to any particular political or economic order, for it has survived for twenty centuries while governments have come and gone.

This allusion to *Matthew* 16:18 points up the ambiguity in “Christianity.” Colloquially, it can

mean either the church, the visible ecclesiastical organizations, or the propositions in the Bible. The intended meaning of the cliché demands that Christianity means the propositions in the Bible, but the plausible and truthful meaning demands that it be read as the church, or at least as the visible ecclesiastical organizations.

What the liberals hoped for, and they were not disappointed, was that people would hear the cliché in its historical meaning but understand it in its logical meaning. They would hear: “The church has survived all types of political and economic systems,” but they would understand, “The Bible does not support any political or economic system.”

The fact that the church has survived and will survive all types of political and economic systems does not imply that Christianity, that is, the Bible, is indifferent to or silent about politics and economics. Some Christians have survived Communism, but the Bible unequivocally condemns Communism. The most reprehensible regimes may carry pockets of Christians within their borders, but that does not mean that Christianity is indifferent to totalitarianism. One might equally well argue that the coexistence of legalized abortion and Christianity in America implies that the Bible is silent about or indifferent to abortion. It is not the Bible that is silent; it is the inconsistent Christians.

The cliché, “Christianity is not tied to any political or economic system,” is ambiguous – deliberately so. By understanding the purposes and consequences of its ambiguity, we may better prepare ourselves to defend Christianity against all the rhetorical wiles of the devil. The First and Great Commandment is to love God with all our mind. Understanding the subtlety of those who attack the sufficiency of Scripture is not simply an academic exercise that can be performed or not depending upon one’s mood; it is an act of obedience and of duty. More emphatically, it is an act of love, the fulfillment of the command to love God with all our mind.