

## **Empty Churches, the Loss of Liberty, and Societal Decline**

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Few people today would deny that Christianity's influence on American society is declining. Signs of this decline are all around us.

The most obvious manifestation of this trend is the progressive shrinkage of attendance at Christian churches. The oft-cited Gallup polls that show church attendance to have been holding steady at approximately 40% of Americans for the past seven decades has been debunked by more thorough research, some of it painstakingly gathered over a period of several decades. David T. Olson, the director of the American Church Research Project, which has tracked attendance at more than 200,000 of the USA's approximately 330,000 churches, and sociologists Kirk Hardaway and Penny Long Marler, known for their scholarly longitudinal research on churches, concur that church attendance has fallen to less than 18% of Americans on any given Sunday. Olson notes that this percentage has been trending downward for decades and will, if not reversed, fall below 12% by 2050. Church researcher and author Thom Rainer, whose team surveyed 1,159 U.S. churches in 2002, found that "94% of our churches are losing ground in the communities they serve."<sup>1</sup>

Another sign of Christianity's diminishing presence in our society has been obvious to anyone of my vintage—namely, the government-enforced exclusion of activities with Christian content from our public schools. I had the good fortune to attend a public elementary school when it was still permissible for the glee club to sing Christmas carols.

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America," Church Leaders Web site, [www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html](http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html) (accessed 21 November, 2013).

In the early 1960s, the situation changed dramatically. On July 25, 1962, the Supreme Court banished collective prayers from public schools (*Engel v. Vitale*). The following year, the Court disallowed Bible readings in *Abington School District v. Schempp*. With these two decisions, the Court repudiated more than a century-and-a-half of established American practices and traditions. Ever since then, secular philosophies and practices have been in the ascendancy while the cultural impact of Christianity has been eroding. (This isn't to suggest that the Supreme Court is the primary agent of Christianity's decline. The justices rarely lead the way into new philosophical realms, but reflect the evolving beliefs that percolate through books, periodicals, schools, and, yes, churches.)

Since those watershed years of the 1960s, our society and culture have changed for the worse in significant ways. Language has become more crude and coarse. Attire has become, not simply less formal, but often slovenly. Before the 1960s, a higher percentage of marriages remained intact, and in many neighborhoods houses and cars did not need to be locked. It seemed like almost everybody went to church or synagogue on weekends, even though the actual attendance might have been below 50%, and there was an unmistakable sense that even many of those citizens who chose not to attend church respected religion enough to accept the moral authority of Christian churches in setting the appropriate ethical standards for society.

Given the fallout from the eclipse of Christianity's influence on our society, the continuing trend toward shrinking congregations should be of great concern, not just to Christians, but to all Americans. It is an historical fact that Christian values, beliefs, and ethics have informed the founding of the American republic, and subsequently undergirded our liberty, inspired our progress, and impelled our prosperity. There is great irony here, and I'll return to this point later, namely, that secularism's triumphs are pyrrhic victories: The more such ideas

advance, the more the fabric of society frays, and the more precarious and problematical our economic and political situation becomes.

A key question we need to explore is: Why? Why is Christianity in retreat on so many fronts? I think a valid explanation may be found in the Lord's parable of the sower and the seed.<sup>2</sup> In that story Jesus tells us that the Word of God doesn't register at all with some people; for others, the gospel is interesting at first, but when persecution or tribulation arises, they fall away; a third category consists of those who at first embrace the message, but eventually are drawn away by worldly concerns; the fourth are those true-blue believers who really "get it" and adhere to the message, giving and receiving abundant blessings.

Most of the other papers in this compendium have focused on the second category in Jesus' parable by examining various forms of contemporary persecution that have contributed to Christianity's retreat. This paper focuses on the third category in the parable—the diminution of Christianity, not as a result of persecution, but seduction.

The primary force warring against spirituality is, as it always has been, materialism in its various forms and guises. In just the last two centuries, a new form of materialism has posed a challenge that in earlier epochs would have been unimaginable—what I call "the challenge of affluence."<sup>3</sup>

One would say that a country with an average life expectancy of 47 years, where only 14% of homes have an indoor bathtub and only 8% of people have telephones, and where the average wage is 22 cents per hour is a poor country indeed; yet those statistics describe the United States in 1907.<sup>4</sup> Today's widespread affluence (and even statistically "poor" Americans

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Matthew 13: 1-23; Mark 4: 1-20; Luke 8: 1-15.

<sup>3</sup> Mark W. Hendrickson, "Thanksgiving Thoughts 2008: The Challenge of Affluence," Vision & Values Web site, [www.visionandvalues.org/2008/11/thanksgiving-thoughts-2008-the-challenge-of-affluence/](http://www.visionandvalues.org/2008/11/thanksgiving-thoughts-2008-the-challenge-of-affluence/).

<sup>4</sup> Free Republic Web site, [www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-chat/1832977/posts](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-chat/1832977/posts).

have more living space than the average Japanese, French, or British citizen<sup>5</sup>) is a marvel, providing unprecedented longevity, comfort, and choices to Americans, but it does have a negative side. Affluence has lulled many Americans into a spiritual dullness. Many are so busy enjoying all the good things available to us that we don't seem to have time for church or to acknowledge "Him from whom all blessings flow."

The danger here is that we, as a people, may be forgetting what made our affluence possible. Why did the United States prosper to a greater degree (until the last twenty years or so) than all other countries? While one may quibble about the details of his thesis, the German sociologist/economist Max Weber (1864-1920) explained the key to American prosperity in his 1905 classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

The essence of Weber's thesis is that the superior prosperity of the U.S. and Protestant European nations was the natural outcome of the values and attitudes inculcated by Protestant doctrines—specifically, the virtue of hard work, the wisdom of frugality and thrift (giving rise to what economists call "capital formation") and a willingness to defer present gratification so as to reap a greater reward later, in both this life and the next.

Today, older Americans have noticed that many younger Americans entering the workforce have a strong sense of entitlement and a correspondingly weak work ethic. As a society, the thriftiness of earlier generations has given way to an orgy of debt-financed consumption. Instead of the earlier Protestant-induced self-restraint and willingness to defer present gratification, many contemporary Americans live according to the precept, "Consume and enjoy now, and pay for it later" and have placed their present desires above their concerns for the future. The result is a debt-saturated economy at great risk of a devastating financial day

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Whaples, "Lecture 19: Poverty and Families," *Modern Economic Issues*, DVD (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2007).

of reckoning—mass bankruptcies, lost jobs, possible severe disruptions in the delivery of vital goods in the marketplace, and perhaps the hyperinflationary destruction of our inherently brittle and vulnerable fiat currency. Thus, we see that the abandonment of certain Protestant-informed core values represents not just a loss of religious influence in the U.S., but also portends an economic cataclysm that will affect Christian and non-Christian Americans alike.

Indeed, the very affluence that we crave may portend and precipitate civilizational decline. In the well-known “cycle of civilization” attributed to Alexander Tytler (1748-1813), affluence has a corrupting effect, breeding selfishness, complacency, and apathy, leading to dependence and ultimately bondage.

In his classic study *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) similarly warned of affluence’s potential to breed a love of ease that induces people to disregard creeping tyranny—what he termed “soft despotism.”<sup>6</sup> As the astute Frenchman observed, “...The increasing love of well-being...cause[s] democratic nations to dread all violent disturbances. The love of public tranquility is frequently the only passion which these nations retain....This naturally disposes the members of the community constantly to give or to surrender additional rights to the central power....”<sup>7</sup>

America’s challenges today go beyond merely the seductive allurements of material wealth. As a Christian worldview and value system lose influence, they inevitably are replaced by secular versions. People fall under the sway of worldly philosophies, intellectual trends, and political agendas, for people must entertain some sense of how the world is supposed to work and what constitutes right and wrong.

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<sup>6</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chapter VI, Virginia Education database, [xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/ch4\\_06.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/ch4_06.htm) (accessed December 6, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, Chapter III.

One of the most influential strains of materialistic philosophy has been that of Karl Marx (1818-1883). In “The Communist Manifesto,” Marx explicitly sought to annihilate three venerable and age-old institutions, the main pillars of western civilization: religion, the family, and private property, as a means of abolishing individuality and freedom and establishing an omnipotent state.<sup>8</sup> As we examine the current state of religion, family, and private property in the U.S., we see them evolving in a direction more consistent with Marxian ideology than biblical principles.

### **Religion.**

Undoubtedly, one factor contributing to the weakening of Christian churches in America is that many Christian clergy do not themselves believe in fundamental Christian doctrines. Perhaps the most vivid proof of this assertion occurs every Easter season; various media outlets publish articles by ordained ministers asserting that the resurrection of Jesus Christ wasn’t an actual historical event, but some sort of figurative or metaphorical story.<sup>9</sup> As St. Paul made clear to professed Christians, “...If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith also is vain.”<sup>10</sup> If even the pastors of the Christian flock lack conviction about the main reason for Christian faith, then indeed their preaching is vain, and consequently laypersons will fall away from the church.

Besides accepting the materialistic view that Jesus’ resurrection after the crucifixion couldn’t have happened, Christian clergy make many other accommodations to humanistic theories. Herbert Schlossberg analyzed this all-too-common phenomenon in his thought-

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<sup>8</sup> cf. [www.learn-usa.com/transformation\\_process/hdn003.htm](http://www.learn-usa.com/transformation_process/hdn003.htm); Mark W. Hendrickson, *America’s March Toward Communism* (Spring Mills, PA: Libertarian, 1987), 3, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Mark W. Hendrickson, “Atheism Versus the Resurrection,” March 25, 2008, Vision & Value Web site, [www.visionandvalues.org/2008/03/atheism-versus-the-resurrection/](http://www.visionandvalues.org/2008/03/atheism-versus-the-resurrection/).

<sup>10</sup> I Corinthians 15:14.

provoking 1990 book *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture*: “...Ecclesiastical structures that depart from the faith do so by...the gradual conformation of their thought and life to that of the larger community. Sociological observations confirm that, by and large, the religious institutions of United States...use religious terminology that ratifies the values of the broader society.”<sup>11</sup>

Further, “some of the most influential theological works of the 20th century exhibit the domination of these outside norms. Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann hoped to make theology conform to the requirements of philosophical truth which, for them, was the existentialism of Martin Heidegger.... Others have chosen different systems, such as Jungian psychology, linguistic philosophy, popular sociology, and Marxist economics as models to which theology must conform.... Mortimer Adler puzzled over why Protestant theologians should have come to the position of atheism and decided that it was because they had committed themselves to the reigning views of naturalism and materialism.”<sup>12</sup>

Plainly, many Christian clergy have failed to heed the counsel of St. John, “Beloved, do not believe all spirits, but be distinguishing between the spirits whether they are from God, because many false Prophets have gone out into the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Schlossberg cites studies indicating that “the clergy who are least comfortable with the traditional understanding of their roles tend to leave the parish ministry—to enter the ecclesiastical bureaucracies and influence them in “progressive” ways.... This element of the clergy may be most usefully regarded, therefore, as another manifestation of the new class of white-collar communications professionals influencing the masses toward adopting the humanist vision of reality.”<sup>14</sup>

The “progressive” ideology of many contemporary clergy leads them to embrace Marx himself—rather astounding, considering that Marx explicitly condemned and sought to abolish all religious faiths and observances. One example of this is José Míguez Bonino, a vice president

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<sup>11</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 1990), 235.

<sup>12</sup> Schlossberg, *Idols*, 235-6.

<sup>13</sup> I John 4:1, Aramaic Bible in Plain English.

<sup>14</sup> Schlossberg, *Idols*, 257, citing Jacques Ellul, *False Pretense of the Kingdom*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (NY: Seabury, 1972), 39.

of the World Council of Churches (a body that endorses terrorism as a means of Christian witness”<sup>15</sup>). According to one of Míguez Bonino’s supporters, “Jesus is Lord—in the church; Marx is Lord in history.”<sup>16</sup>

The adoration and exaltation of Marx is but one example of the idolatry that has supplanted reverence for the Savior, Christ Jesus. There have been worrisome signs of cult-like worship of secular politicians. Periodically, someone attending an Obama rally has swooned in rapturous ecstasy, acting as if they had seen Jesus,<sup>17</sup> a reaction that one might expect in a state with a personality cult, like North Korea.

Perhaps most dangerous and deadly of the materialistic creeds supplanting Christianity is the belief system of pagan environmentalism. Whereas Christianity teaches brotherly love and inculcates respect for the precious gift of human life, the thought-leaders (priests) of this pseudo-religion<sup>18</sup> routinely characterize humans as a “disease,” openly long for catastrophes to shrink the human population, and advocate economic de-development even though the resulting impoverishment will contract the economic base which sustains and nourishes human life.<sup>19</sup>

These seemingly far-out ideas are having a pernicious effect, leading to policies inimical to human life. Two examples will illustrate this point: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, citing the Endangered Species Act, blocked construction of a much-needed hospital in San Bernadino

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<sup>15</sup> Schlossberg, *Idols*, 247.

<sup>16</sup> Schlossberg, *Idols*, 249.

<sup>17</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1m\\_k2dCj0M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1m_k2dCj0M).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the late Michael Crichton’s essay “Environmentalism as Religion,” Hawaii Free Press Web site, [www.hawaiifreepress.com/ArticlesMain/tabid/56/ID/2818/Crichton-Environmentalism-is-a-religion.aspx](http://www.hawaiifreepress.com/ArticlesMain/tabid/56/ID/2818/Crichton-Environmentalism-is-a-religion.aspx).

<sup>19</sup> “The planet is about to break out with fever, indeed it may already have, and we [human beings] are the disease.”—Thomas Lovejoy, assistant to Sec. of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, quoted in Dixy Lee Ray, *Trashing the Planet* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 167; “If I were to be reincarnated, I would like to return as a “killer virus to lower human population levels.”—His Royal Highness, Prince Philip of the United Kingdom, leader of the World Wildlife Fund, quoted in Ray, 169. “People are the cause of all the problems. We have too many of them; we need to get rid of some of them...”—Charles Wurster, founder of the Environmental Defense Fund, quoted in Reed Irvine and Joseph C. Goulden, “Holes in the Ozone Hole,” *The Washington Inquirer*, 12 June 1992, 5; Paul Ehrlich maintains, “We’ve already had too much economic growth in the United States. Economic growth in rich countries like ours is the disease, not the cure,” quoted in Ray, *Trashing*, 168.



County, California, to protect the Delhi Sands fly.<sup>20</sup> A short way to the south, the EPA ordered the city of San Diego to stop treating the sewage pouring into the Tijuana River Valley on the grounds that such actions disturbed the “sewage-based ecology” of the affected estuary—thereby placing the survival of bacteria that posed a threat to human health.<sup>21</sup> How strikingly this perverse value system illustrates the error that St. Paul described: “They exchanged God’s truth for a lie and worshipped and served the creation more than the Creator.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The family.**

One of the grimmest developments that has accompanied the decline in church attendance and the corresponding diminution of the influence of Christianity on American society during the last half-century has been the increased incidence of family breakdown. This is the bitter fruit of the so-called “sexual revolution” in societal mores that gained so much momentum in the 1960s. As in the economic sphere, the traditional Protestant ethic of deferring gratification gave way to an ethos of self-indulgence and self-gratification.

Christianity teaches the importance of disciplining one’s sexual nature with chastity for the sake of commitment to a single partner—one’s spouse—and the children that would follow from that union. In the wake of the sexual revolution, those teachings were increasingly disrespected and disregarded. The degraded motto of many became, “If it feels good, do it.” During the Vietnam War, political and cultural leftists strove to beguile my generation and dull our sense of patriotic duty with the facile and morally flaccid slogan, “Make love, not war.” Such sexually overt enticements were more than mere coincidence. This type of demoralization of American youth had been a long-standing goal of the Communist Party. “The Soviet Art of

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<sup>20</sup> Ike C. Sugg, “Flies Before People,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 February 1997, A2.

<sup>21</sup> “Trash Talk,” *Insight*, 17 January 1994, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 1: 25, ISV.

Brain-washing: A Synthesis of the Russian Textbook on Psychopolitics” outlined the strategies that Soviet agents were to employ to undermine American morale and patriotism. It included this explicit tactic:

By making readily available drugs of various kinds, by giving the teen-ager alcohol, by praising his wildness, by stimulating him with sex literature and advertising to him or her practices as taught at the Sexpol, the psychopolitical operator can create the necessary attitude of chaos, idleness and worthlessness into which can then be cast the solution which will give the teen-ager complete freedom everywhere—Communism.<sup>23</sup>

Also contributing to family breakdown have been various welfare programs that have created significant financial incentives for women with children to remain unmarried instead of married—what a Heritage Foundation analyst long ago memorably dubbed “the incentive system from hell.”

The societal impact of the breakdown of the family has been horrific—increased rates of poverty, emotionally disturbed children and consequent increases in criminal activity. There is a kind of “chicken and egg” relationship between the breakdown of the family and the decline in church attendance. For a long time, the dominant assumption was that, because Christian churches and biblical teachings comprise the “glue” that holds families together, the more people quit going to church, the more their families disintegrated; however, it appears that the reverse also is true: As families disintegrate, church attendance declines. In the words of scholar Mary Eberstadt (a research fellow at various top-notch think tanks, including the Hoover Institution and the American Enterprise Institute), the family and the church are “the double helix of society, each dependent on the strength of the other for successful reproduction.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This offensive document is available online. I quoted from an edition printed by The Noontide Press in Torrance, California (no date given, but ISBN: 0-911038-27-2), 26-7.

<sup>24</sup> See Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2013); quote taken from the book description found at [www.amazon.com/How-West-Really-Lost-](http://www.amazon.com/How-West-Really-Lost-)

The interdependent, mutually reinforcing declines of church and family have even darker undertones. The increasing self-indulgence and self-absorption of Americans necessarily involves a loss of love for children. Whereas Christianity has taught humans to value, cherish, and love children (e.g., “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward”<sup>25</sup>; “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me...for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’”<sup>26</sup>), and Christians often have found the love they have given to children to bring them their greatest sense of reward and fulfillment, the secular/pagan/materialistic approach takes an opposite view of children, often regarding children as a nuisance, a needless burden, an inconvenient cost, and/or an obstacle to one’s self-fulfillment. Consequently, a subtle hatred of children has seeped into American culture.

This hatred of children isn’t just manifest in the millions of people who believe in aborting fetuses—not to save the life of mothers, but simply for convenience. It is seen in the way older generations have abused children economically. Voting-age Americans have dumped trillions of dollars of debt onto the shoulders of those least able to defend themselves in our democratic system—those too young to vote.<sup>27</sup> Both Social Security and Medicare have conferred benefits on senior Americans to such an extent that today’s younger Americans are projected to never get back benefits equal to what they have surrendered to their elders.<sup>28</sup> We have also been stealing from future generations via inflation, bequeathing to them dollars of diminished purchasing power.

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[Secularization/dp/1599473798/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1385503046&sr=1-1&keywords=mary+eberstadt+how+the+west+really+lost+god](http://www.visionandvalues.org/2011/06/swindling-america-s-youth/) (accessed December 6, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Psalms 127:3.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 19:14.

<sup>27</sup> Mark W. Hendrickson, “Swindling America’s Youth,” 9 June 2011, [www.visionandvalues.org/2011/06/swindling-america-s-youth/](http://www.visionandvalues.org/2011/06/swindling-america-s-youth/).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mark Hendrickson, “Did You Really Pay For Your Medicare Benefits?” Forbes Web site, posted 7 March 2013, [www.forbes.com/sites/markhendrickson/2013/03/07/did-you-really-pay-for-your-medicare-benefits/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/markhendrickson/2013/03/07/did-you-really-pay-for-your-medicare-benefits/); Mark W. Hendrickson, “Social Security’s Problems: Past, Present and Future,” *The Washington Times*, October 27, 2011, [www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/27/social-securitys-problems-past-present-and-future/](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/27/social-securitys-problems-past-present-and-future/).

Ironically, but perhaps justly, some older Americans alive today will experience painful payback for their lack of concern about the rising generations. The era of self-love and the concomitant short-changing of children has unwittingly created a demographic time bomb. So intent have so many Americans been on indulging themselves and not bothering to have children, that there aren't enough younger Americans to fully fund the welfare-state benefits that they expect to receive. It turns out that not having children was a very shortsighted and fateful mistake, and the American addiction to immediate gratification and debt will exacerbate this trend. Most Americans don't realize it yet, but debt is decimating future generations. Just as the burden of college-related debt already is causing many Americans to postpone marriage and having children,<sup>29</sup> so the larger debt burden that older Americans are laying on the backs of our younger compatriots will (unless they repudiate the debt) lead many younger Americans to the conclusion that they simply cannot afford to have children; thus, we face the prospect of a population implosion comparable to those facing China, Japan, and many European countries. Regardless of one's religious beliefs, it is hard to disagree with the assertion that our society would be on sounder economic footing today if so many of us hadn't forsaken the Christian understanding of the importance of children.

### **Private property.**

It is very easy to conflate humanitarian goals with the Christian mandate to be charitable and generous to our neighbors. For example, Herbert Schlossberg relates the case of an

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. "To Pay Off Loans, Grads Put Off Marriage, Children," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2012, [wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304818404577350030559887086](http://wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304818404577350030559887086); "Study Suggests Young People Are Delaying Marriage Because Of Rising College Debt," *The Huffington Post*, 28 March 2012, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/28/study-college-debt-marriage-loans-rates-rising\\_n\\_1385548.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/28/study-college-debt-marriage-loans-rates-rising_n_1385548.html); Emily Driscoll, "Student Loan Debt Means Delays to Marriage, Children," *Fox Business*, 1 June 2012, [www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2012/06/01/student-loan-debt-means-delays-to-marriage-children-1786328240/](http://www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2012/06/01/student-loan-debt-means-delays-to-marriage-children-1786328240/).

archbishop who, understanding that the family is the primary social unit and worthy of preservation, then advocated that the state guarantee each family decent housing and a guaranteed income.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, a sincere desire to help the poor impels many Christians to align themselves with political movements professing the same goal. Indeed, this has been going on for a long time. The social gospel movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century evolved into the Social Justice Movement (and a more extreme variation—liberation theology) in the 20<sup>th</sup>, and that movement is alive and well in the present.

These movements have a very strong appeal for young idealistic Christians. I spoke with a young woman who officiated at a Protestant wedding ceremony I attended last August, and asked her why so few young people were attending church. She thought that the church had become largely passive and irrelevant, whereas young, idealistic people want to feel like they are making a difference in the world. She finds that sense of purpose and meaning in the Social Justice Movement.

I can certainly understand her choice, especially given my own enthusiasm for socialistic causes when I was younger. Indeed, one of the reasons observed for church congregations whose membership remained stagnant is that they “lose the evangelistic focus they once had, and instead adopt...a ‘club mentality.’”<sup>31</sup> Given that backdrop, no wonder young people gravitate toward where the action is. They want to be part of a movement that they believe is making a difference and improving human life.

Unfortunately, though, the Social Justice Movement within Christendom replaces some problems in the church with others. This movement, which often involves making common

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<sup>30</sup> Schlossberg, *Idol*, 241.

<sup>31</sup> Burns and Lowry, “Startling Facts.”

cause with Marxian and socialistic political movements, is a case of Christians getting off track. The Social Justice Movement is marred by economic ignorance, tends to be divisive and destructive to the church, strays into biblical error, and actually violates principles of justice. We need to elaborate on each of these four issues:

- 1) Economic ignorance is widespread, whether in or out of the Social Justice Movement, so it is not surprising that advocates of social justice are not immune from it. While economic errors are legion, I'll address two of the more egregious ones that confuse most social justice people. The first is the belief that profits are harmful or even immoral, and the second is the assertion made by the very vocal evangelical cheerleader for wealth redistribution, Jim Wallis, that the reason why there are poor people in poor countries is "because we [i.e., Americans and citizens in other developed countries] are rich."<sup>32</sup> In a free-market economy, profits are new wealth—the source of economic advancement for a society—and the sometimes-gaudy profits earned by a large corporation are merely the reflection of the immense value the corporation has created for large numbers of people. Wallis suffers from what Ludwig von Mises referred to as the "Montaigne dogma"—the mistaken notion that one person's gain is another's loss.<sup>33</sup> Subsequent economic enlightenment enables us to see clearly what today is self-evident: that in a private-property order, in which economic exchanges are voluntary, both sides gain (i.e. profit) from transactions, otherwise they would not have consented to the trade, and those who earn mega-profits have simply created more value for more people than others have (in other words, they are society's benefactors, not its enemies).

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<sup>32</sup> Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action (The Scholar's Edition)* (Auburn, AL: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998), 660.

- 2) Because social justice advocates often decry profits, they run the risk of alienating and driving away some of their church brethren. An honest successful businessperson may not be willing to sit in church and hear his or her success characterized as morally dubious at best. If a particular congregation becomes a focal point for a particular policy that divides members along partisan or ideological lines, then those who feel on the outside are likely to feel unwelcome and leave. Recall that St. Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>34</sup> In the church family, there are to be no divisions, whether of gender, ethnicity, political or economic status, and certainly not of partisan or ideological loyalties in the secular realm. Some might claim that Paul was a conservative, because he didn’t advocate political reforms, but that is not the way to look at him. (Paul was a spiritual radical, willing to give up his life in witness to his Lord; he just didn’t want the nascent Christian movement to be perceived by the authorities as a political movement that needed to be ferociously suppressed. In taking that position, Paul was emulating his Master and Savior who didn’t come to earth to destroy the power of Rome or lead an armed Jewish revolt, but to light the way to eternal freedom and salvation.)
- 3) The biblical errors embedded in the Social Justice Movement are manifold. First, it parts from Jesus’ directive, “Render...unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s”<sup>35</sup> by trying to make charity a function of the state instead of keeping it where it belongs—in the church. Additional biblical errors are the abrogation of private property rights in the desire to achieve greater economic

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<sup>34</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 22:21.

equality and the concomitant use of force—i.e., the government, with its power to tax, fine, and imprison those who defy its laws. The Eighth Commandment does not say, “Thou shalt not steal except by majority vote.” One of the false idols of too many Christians is the idol of democracy. There is nothing inherently right or justified or sanctified about a majority vote. It was such a vote that released Barabbas and condemned Jesus to the cross. Christians need no more proof than that unspeakable injustice to understand that democracy can be wrong. As expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, America’s Founding Fathers regarded man’s rights, including that of property, as God-given, and set up a system in which no majority would have the power to abrogate those rights. As many times as the Bible exhorts Christians to share their property with others when a need arises, never does the Bible authorize Christians to compel others to render charity unto their neighbor. In fact, when a man approached Jesus and asked him to tell his brother to share his inheritance with him, Jesus declined, with the Son of God saying, “Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?”<sup>36</sup> If the Lord didn’t feel qualified to redistribute wealth, how can any of his professed followers feel justified in doing so? When the rich man came to Jesus and asked how to gain eternal life, Jesus offered him a deal—a contract—the terms of which were simple: Give away his material possessions and receive eternal life. When the man declined to accept those terms, Jesus respected his decision. The Lord believed in free choice, in voluntary action, in contract rather than coercion. This is the essential difference between the law and the gospel—law may use organized force to protect each person’s God-given rights to be

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<sup>36</sup> Luke 12:14.



secure in life, liberty, and property, whereas Christ's gospel sets forth spiritual expectations that each believer is exhorted to perform, but which no other mortal may force him to do. Jesus expected his followers' actions to be impelled by the Christ-spirit within, not to be compelled by decrees of Caesar (the power of the state) without. That is the simple biblical truth that persistently eludes the social justice advocates. As the parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>37</sup> illustrates, Christian charity consists of helping others with one's own labor and property, not by using other people's money. Indeed, by supporting political programs that take the property of some to redistribute to others, social justice advocates are endorsing a most unchristian practice—economic slavery, whereby the fruit of one's labor is diverted, without compensation, to the benefit of another.

- 4) Those who espouse the cause of social justice seem to equate economic equality with justice, and that this belief justifies them in redistributing other people's property. In doing so, they are at war with God's creation. God made us different in talent, skill, motivation, etc., as the parable of the talents makes plain (recall that the buried talent was taken from him who had least and given to one who had more, but would put the talent to productive use). Indeed, there is considerable injustice in the world against which all Christians may unite—everything from bailouts, subsidies, protection, and other privileges for politically well-connected special interests to the unjust depreciation of the currency by the central bank, to unequal (discriminatory) rates of taxation, to bureaucratic and other official, government-sanctioned forms of oppression in poor countries. Instead of focusing on abating these injustices, the

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<sup>37</sup> Mark W. Hendrickson, "Christian Charity: Social Justice and the Good Samaritan," Vision & Values Web site, [www.visionandvalues.org/2010/03/christian-charity-social-justice-and-the-good-samaritan/](http://www.visionandvalues.org/2010/03/christian-charity-social-justice-and-the-good-samaritan/), posted 31 March 2010.

Social Justice Movement calls for higher taxes on the wealthy, thereby attacking the justice of the free-market system in which each is rewarded in proportion to the value he creates for others, and redistributing that wealth to people of “the majority’s” choice, rather than the individual property owner’s choice.

All in all, while the desire of those who espouse “social justice” to help the poor is admirable, they are extending the influence of those who denigrate property rights, which are the foundation of a tranquil and prosperous society. By making common cause with “progressives,” many of whom are socialists or crypto-socialists, they are strengthening the power of the state to abrogate man’s biblically ordained rights. Indeed, they have sided with those whose policies unjustly punish society’s “wise virgins”<sup>38</sup>—those (many of them practicing Christians) who have stayed on the straight and narrow, played by the rules, then are expected to bail out various cronies of those in power. We need to demonstrate to the social justice crowd that private property, not state redistribution of property, is the way of justice and prosperity—the biblical way.

### **Concluding remarks.**

Clearly, Christians have much to do to reverse the decades-long trend toward secular beliefs and practices. Unfortunately it may be said of the present generation of American Christians, as Jeremiah stated in the Old Testament, “...My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”<sup>39</sup> At some point, a remnant of God’s faithful will have to find a way to rectify these evils, a way to ignite a spiritual revival, one that will illuminate the wisdom

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Hendrickson, “Uncle Sam to America’s ‘Wise Virgins’: Drop Dead,” Forbes Web site, [forbes.com](http://forbes.com), [www.forbes.com/sites/markhendrickson/2013/08/29/uncle-sam-to-americas-wise-virgins-drop-dead/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/markhendrickson/2013/08/29/uncle-sam-to-americas-wise-virgins-drop-dead/), posted 29 August 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Jeremiah 2:13.

and practicality of God's revealed instructions and guidelines for the human race; one that will attract the young by being on fire with a lofty purpose and by offering biblical solutions (such as a debt jubilee) as evidence that we in the church love them far more genuinely than the seductive but destructive pseudo-religions of the secularists ever can.

The father of our country, George Washington, left wise advice and guidance to us in his Farewell Address:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

And one final comment: Christians need to restore Christian values and ethics to their former position of preeminence in American society—not just for the sake of the Christian churches, but for the sake of the country, for our history confirms repeatedly that the closer a people adhere to those biblical principles and restrict the power of government to infringe mankind's God-given rights, the more a country prospers. Even those who may not believe in the Deity or the Savior should desire a comeback for Christianity for the most rational reason of all—its practical benefits for the harmony and happiness of society.