

August 2007

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The Mission of America

I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. —John Wesley

In a recent speech, President Bush said, “We are a compassionate nation. When Americans see suffering and know that our country can help stop it, they expect our government to respond...it’s important for members of Congress and the people of this country to understand free trade is the best way to lift people out of poverty.” But critics of the President’s trade initiatives say, “It all depends.”

Joe Brewer, a research fellow with the *Rockridge Institute*, objects to the President’s link between good-hearted Americans and international trade. Says Brewer, “Americans are compassionate, but markets are not. Nor are they meant to be. Markets operate to maximize profit, whether they relieve suffering or not.”

In principle, the *Rockridge Institute*, a self-described progressive (left-leaning) think-tank, supports the transfer of wealth from rich nations to poor nations. But it is their opinion that trade proposals now on the table transfer little more than carbon dioxide-belching technology to the far corners of the globe and windfall profits to multi-national corporations.

Conservatives, too, are worried about the transfer of energy-consuming devices, i.e., sophisticated computers, weapons systems and space technology—especially to nations that make no secret of their future intentions. Some even fear an underlying “internationalist” agenda—further stoked last year when Mr. Bush endorsed the takeover of shipping operations at six major U.S. seaports by a company owned by the United Arab Emirates. That “trade” endeavor was quickly scuttled following strong public backlash.

But, historically speaking, liberals and conservatives—and the President, too—can document at least some of their competing claims. Mr. Brewer, for instance, is substantially correct that markets are designed to maximize profits whether suffering is relieved or not. The slave trade (still in existence) is perhaps profitable but increases human suffering. Yet, as Mr. Bush claims, cultures with a competitive market system have in fact relieved human suffering compared to those with other economic systems. South Korea v. North Korea comes to mind.

Trade and the search for new markets also prompted the Romans to develop roads and transportation routes utilized by Paul the apostle and his peers to deliver Good News to the uttermost parts of the world. But whether trade relieves human suffering and opens doors for the Gospel or the Gospel introduces a work ethic that fuels a competitive market system depends on who you talk to.

Some two centuries ago, John Wesley observed that prosperity inevitably follows the implementation of Christian principles. He said, “...I do not see how it is possible...for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion, almost necessarily, produce[s] both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches.”

“But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.”

Another observation linking trade to the Gospel rather than the Gospel to trade is modern China, virtually closed to the outside world between 1949 and 1972. The Church, thought to have been eradicated under severe communist rule, had instead exploded to 50 million strong, maybe more, before Dr. Kissinger and free trade came courting. North Korea could well be the next “surprise.”

Christians can also point to history to append their concerns regarding issues of virtue and national sovereignty. Civilizations once powerful and mighty, are no more—those whose gates are fallen and walls destroyed by the deceitfulness of riches. Even the wisest magistrate who ever lived brought down his house in the midst of wealth, foreign entanglements and pleasure.

WORLDWIDE EXPLOSION IN BUYING AND SELLING

The Bible informs us of certain things that will occur on earth immediately prior to the Lord’s return. One of them is a worldwide buying, selling, and trading frenzy—a vast commercial network operating at bust, if you will. Wilfred Hahn, a senior partner in a global portfolio management firm thinks that time may be now.

Hahn says that “Trading, exchanging, selling and buying of existing possessions have virtually exploded in recent years—both in North America and around the world.” Between 1994 and 2004, the value of stock market trading for the whole world has risen from \$11.5 trillion to more than \$42 trillion per year—a figure so large as to be “incomprehensible.”¹

In the short period from 1982 to 2004, the value of stocks, bonds and derivatives increased from \$1,920 to \$61,443 per person worldwide. In 1970, the daily foreign exchange transactions amounted to \$18 billion per year, an amount now traded every 13 minutes. In 2003, \$1.9 trillion was traded each day—a volume rising 27,500 times over 1970.

In America, even houses have become a hot commodity. In 1990, 2.8 million “homes” were sold. In 2004, that number more than doubled to 6.2 million. Homes are, as they say, “flipping” 13 times faster than population growth.

President Calvin Coolidge is often remembered for his statement, “The chief business of the American people is business.” Forgotten was his follow-up, “Prosperity is an instrument to be used, not a deity to be worshipped.” Wilfred Hahn believes prosperity is now our deity. He says, “Commerce and finance have thoroughly captured the heart of society, becoming the very essence of human existence.”

But commerce and its pursuits seem a far cry from America’s original mission statement recorded in such founding documents as the Charter of Virginia and the Mayflower Compact. If, deep down, national leaders believe the founders were aiming for something far grander than a commercial empire or a nation of merchants, now is the hour to say so.

A popular evening-hour commentator might even ask, “Church, what say YOU?”

Rick Forcier

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¹ Wilfred Hahn, Money Changers in the Temple: Then and Now, *Midnight Call*, 1/2006, pg.26