

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

September 26, 2017

As you may be aware, we're approaching the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his "95 Theses" on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, an action credited with launching what would become known as "the Protestant Reformation." We'll be having more to say about that during the next few weeks.

In those ninety-five theses, Luther challenged prevailing views about authority, salvation, and faith . . . and money.<sup>1</sup> One author noted that "If there's a constant refrain to Luther's attitude toward money, it is that the purpose of money is to further God's kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

With respect to his own money, Luther was well-known as a very generous man—perhaps to a fault. He was so given to giving away any money that he had that his wife, Katharina, had to hide some of their money so she could care for their family.<sup>3</sup>

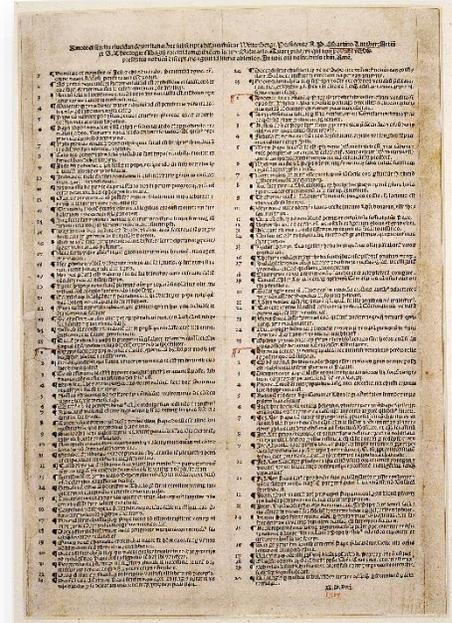
Luther never took any royalties from his books, though they sold well. While he supported bans on begging, seeing almsgiving as contributing to the problems of poverty, he was instrumental in creating community-based social welfare programs.

Luther's example in the areas of finance and stewardship continues to highlight the questions of whom and what we serve with our finances. We in the rich world need to be challenged again and again to approach money as a tool rather than as a goal.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in the 1960's, our college students began telling surveyors that they were more interested in learning how to make a lot of money than in learning how to live a meaningful life. So it is that we have begun talking of *homo economicus*—a sub-species that believes its only purpose is to make money, no matter what the effect on anyone else might be. There is more truth than is comfortable in the redefinition of MBA as ***Me Before Anyone***.

Peter Drucker has observed that the morality of the U. S. economy has a lot more to do with over-paid executives than it does with immigrant labor. In fact, were Jesus to tell "The Good Samaritan" parable in our day, it would no doubt be about "The Good Mexican."

The daily news reminds us that many affluent American Christians cherish our mortgage and charitable giving deductions and government-guaranteed investments while deploring the social safety net for those in need. And it goes without saying—but maybe it



<sup>1</sup> Michael Foust, "Luther's Money Reformation: The German Reformer's Attitudes about Money were Nearly as Influential as His Views on Grace," *Christianity Today*, March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Sorensen, *Martin Luther and the German Reformation* (Anthem Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Even so, when Luther died, he named Katharina as his beneficiary, which was extremely uncommon in that day.

<sup>4</sup> Brad Hewitt, CEO of Thrivent Financial, *Your New Money Mindset: Create a Healthy Relationship with Money* (Tyndale, 2015).

should be said, anyway—that any nation with more than its share of the world’s wealth will have to maintain a strong military in order to prevent others from taking their part back.

## Real Greatness

The question then, may not be so much about “Making America Great Again,” as it is a question about what real greatness really is.<sup>5</sup> Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out long ago

that “Nationalism is one of the effective ways in which modern man escapes life’s ethical problems.”

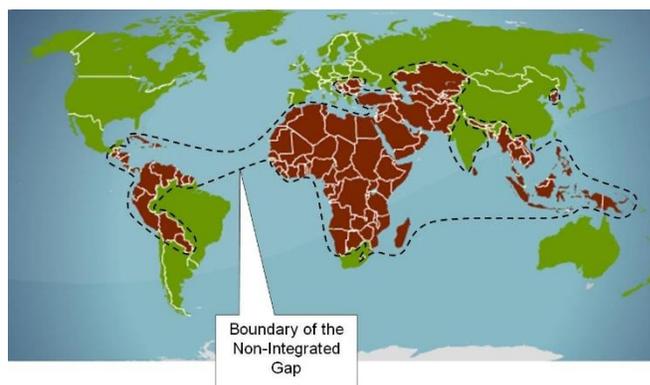
In ancient Rome, only 3% of people had significant surplus resources, and only 15% had modest surplus resources. In America today, those two groups are about 30% each, but as Jimmy Carter famously observed nearly forty years ago, “We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.”

America’s income inequality is now at levels last seen just before the Great Depression; but our wealth inequality is even worse. A recent survey discovered that nearly 60% of Americans could not afford an unexpected expense of \$500. At the same time, about 10% of Americans own about 80% of public stock.

*The Economist* has estimated that the net worth of the average human—including everyone on earth—is \$2,222. That obviously means that half have less than that. David Cloutier has calculated that it takes about \$50,000 in annual income to provide the basic necessities of contemporary American life . . . “Having more than that is not in and of itself wrong, but it does move us into the land of risky ethical choices.”<sup>6</sup>

In the face of “Make America Great Again,” *Christianity Today* has reminded its readers that the more we read and understand the Bible, the more we see that it tends to be a “left-leaning” text.<sup>7</sup> Management guru, Peter Drucker (a Lutheran, in keeping with this week’s theme), noted that “I am for the free market. Even though it doesn’t work too well, nothing else works at all. But I have serious reservations about capitalism as a system, because it idolizes economics as the be-all and end-all of life.”

Contrary to the directions currently being pursued by our government, Drucker presciently pointed out that **“The developed countries have a tremendous stake in the Third World.** Unless there is rapid development there—both economic and social—the developed countries will be inundated by a human flood of Third World immigrants far beyond their economic, social or cultural capacity to absorb.” Pentagon strategist, Thomas Barnett, a Catholic, agrees with Drucker that it is not only wise for the United States to be involved in “nation



<sup>5</sup> Gary Moore, “Responsible Capitalism: Moral Solutions to Economic Problems Today’s Politics Won’t Fix,” *Christian Ethics Today*, Spring 2017.

<sup>6</sup> David Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age* (Georgetown University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/survey-bible-reading-liberal.html>

building,” but that such investment is crucial for our own survival.<sup>8</sup>

So what are we to do with all this? There’s not one answer that fits us all, but Gary Moore, a follower of Jesus who spent forty years on Wall Street, has suggested that “Investors might consider the very proven mutual funds from American, Pioneer and Templeton that avoid the ‘sin stocks’ of alcohol, tobacco and gambling companies. Even more conscientious investors might consider socially and ‘biblically-responsible’ options for our IRAs and investments. Pacifists might consider a Praxis mutual fund from the Mennonites that will not invest in weapons manufacturers.

“More conservative investors might consider making an insured deposit in a ‘community development financial institution’ that makes loans that create jobs and wealth among the needy in our inner-cities, Appalachia, native American areas, and so on. With American stocks being in bubble territory, we might invest more in mutual funds that finance growth in developing and Third World ‘frontier’ markets. We might even give or loan some money to Christian ‘micro-enterprise’ organizations like World Vision and Opportunity International that make tiny loans to the desperately poor in the Third World.”

The point is this: *the person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).*



<sup>8</sup> Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the 21st Century* (Berkeley, 2005); *Blueprint for Action: A Future Worth Creating* (Berkeley, 2006); *Great Powers: America and the World after Bush* (Berkeley, 2010).