

STOP GIVING MONEY AWAY – (Paraphrasing Isaiah 1)

Redemptive Economics - A Theology Built While Working to Take Down a Broken Industry

Much of the wealth advisory industry is designed to turn “ten-talent stewards” into “one-talent fools” who now seek to bury their talents so as not to lose them.

When Isaiah says to stop giving money away, he’s not trying to end generosity. He’s calling the whole system out for trying to give to God while ignoring how the money was made through injustice. He understood that *charity will always be downstream from economy.*

While followers of the Way are deeply versed in the “red” redemptive thread of scripture that ties Genesis to Revelation in one big story of God’s sacrificial love to reconcile people to Himself (which is of course a story worth telling!) we have largely ignored the interwoven “silver” thread of God’s economic plan to reconcile creation to himself, through these broken, reconciled people; His signet/image bearers.

The human interface with the red redemptive thread is the role of the priest, to right-set the relationship between God and man. The human interface in the silver economic thread is the role of the King, for the purpose of right-setting the relationship between man and creation.

These are meant to be intertwined. A co-reigning within society of the priest and the king.

The writer of Hebrews denigrates the tithe to Levi (the priest) when compared to the tithe to Melchizedek (the king). Hebrews 7:9

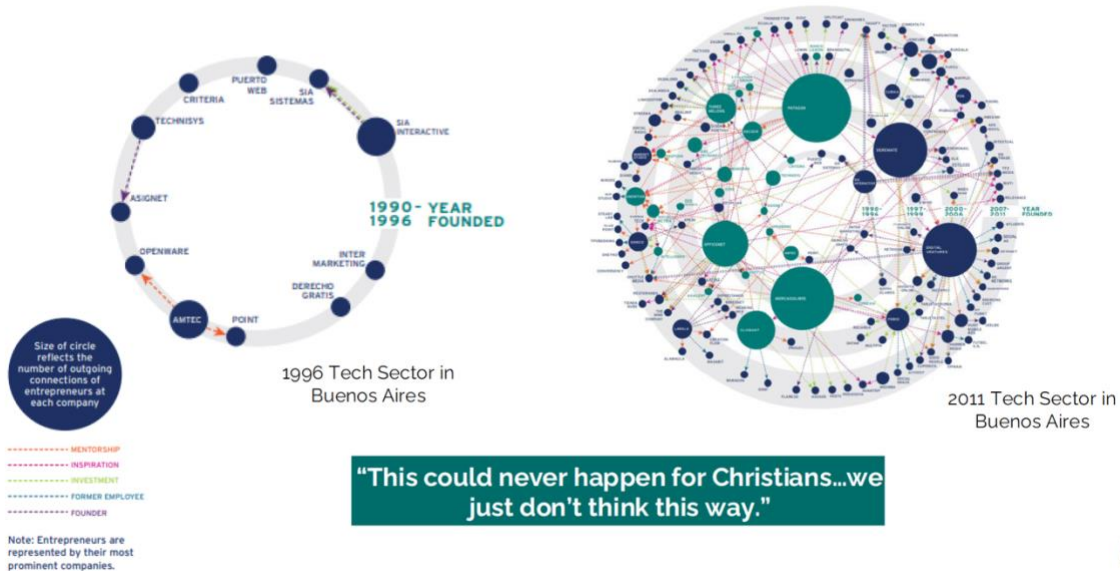
Before we dive deeper into the Scriptures, let’s look at how this incomplete theology has robbed us of influence.

In 2013, Endeavor Global commissioned a research project seeking to discover the building blocks of thriving entrepreneurial ecosystems. The result led to the discovery of three cities that were head-and-shoulders above their neighbors: Buenos Aires, Istanbul and Amman. In all three cases, they uncovered a concept I’ve dubbed “grandfather companies.”

These companies were active in their communities for 3+ generations, by being open-handed with employees and entrepreneurs around them, investing and mentoring them as they built the companies that would influence their markets and their culture.

Look at the chart below that maps out the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Buenos Aires. The circle on the left shows the companies that were present in 1996, the chart on the right shows the difference just 15 years later in 2011. The spider-web of lines connecting the circles and generations (each circle represents a company and each concentric ring a “generation”), are colored differently to represent five influence levers: 1) Mentorship, 2) Inspiration, 3) Investment, 4) Former Employer, 5) Founder.

How to Create Thriving Entrepreneurial Ecosystems?



By engaging for 3+ generations, these companies exerted great influence on their markets and nations, likely more influence than the church. Joel Montgomery, who shared this research with me, said something I've never forgotten: "This will never happen for us as believers, we just don't think this way."

He meant that we are 1) so often focused on making as much money as we can on the "for-profit" side of the spectrum, and 2) giving away as much as we can on the "non-profit" side, that what we are NOT doing is "minding the shop". We are abdicating our role of leadership over the business and economic activities of our societies.

As alluded to in the title of this paper, my favorite paraphrase of Isaiah 1 says this, "Stop giving money away, stop worshipping me, and stop praying until you fix the economic injustice of how you made your money." Again, *charity is downstream from economy*.

The Original, Original Sin

Ezekiel 28 tells the story of the fall of Lucifer. It calls him the "guardian cherub" and seems to use the language associated with a position of authority. The "seal of perfection" indicates a signet-ring bearer of the Almighty. It goes on to say: "out of the abundance of your trade you became filled with violence and full of pride" and "out of the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries." This seems to indicate that Lucifer's original sin was economic in nature and had to do with Lucifer choosing a scarcity economic model that put him above others versus what we can assume was an abundance-based economy that reflected God's intent for creation.

After Adam and Eve also “corrupt their wisdom for the sake of their splendor,” Satan begins his diabolical plan to deceive the nations (Rev 20), and God begins His jaw-dropping plan to replace His “Signet Bearer” (Lucifer) with a new Signet Bearer, one that though made a little lower than the angels, has been crowned with glory - man (Romans 8:19-21).

Thanks to the totality of scripture, we can catch a glimpse of the end of the story for Lucifer’s economy. Revelation 18 tells the story of a world gone mad, drunk on the maddening wine of “economic Babylon,” filled with kings and merchants who have made themselves rich off of her excessive luxuries. It goes on to list some of the commodities traded in this Babylonian system, but the last “commodity” is the point of the list: “human beings sold as slaves.”

The natural endpoint to the economic system of Babylon is the commodification of the imago Dei, abused and denigrated into nothing more than a means to economic gain.

In the midst of all of this, a haunting call from God: “Come out of her my people, so you will not be complicit in her sins, so you will not receive the plagues that are coming to her.” (Rev. 18:4)

(SIDE NOTE: Israel was separated from Egypt so as not to receive her plagues. Those that were complicit in the commodification of imago dei were hit.)

Notice that this is completely different language from Jeremiah’s words to the exiles in Babylon who were supposed to pray for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Why the difference? I’m convinced it has to do with complicity; the exiles in ancient Babylon were not complicit in her sins, the King did not consult the exiles on the fringes of his kingdom about his exploitative practices. However, in modern day Economic Babylon, we *are* complicit. I think this is the insidious genius of our system. We may not win as much as the most exploitative funds, but if we own the same shares in exploitative businesses that commodify image bearers, we also win some of the profits and are thus complicit.

God’s Response

God is not okay with humanity marching towards economic hell in a handbasket, so He launches His alternative plan...a family. He begins to build the culture of a nation through the faith of his servant Abraham, giving himself an economic name in Abraham’s mouth (Jehovah Jireh), and prophesying that his descendants would dispossess their enemies of their land and be a blessing to all nations; that his descendants would step into their roles as signet bearers. God then begins his plan to make Abraham’s family (Israel) a light to the nations, to, in a sense, make them a “come and see” nation in order that the world be saved.

He then teaches them how to do so in the Torah.

Infinite Assets

Every economy in history has treated two assets as if they are commodities; in the Torah, God tells His people that they CANNOT do this. He proceeds to take Land and People off the “balance sheet” of Israel’s economic society and gives them both time limits, in essence, claiming them as His own. He puts land into a 49-year freedom cycle, and people into a seven-year one – Jubilee!

It's like He's saying that every society in history will try to quantify the value of its land and people (through slavery OR salary) and in God's economy it seems that both have the ability to produce far more value than one could ever pay for them. It's a whole new accounting system perfect for God's economy and the result is to be a “come and see” economy without generational poverty, economic captivity, or systemic oppression.

One could write an entire additional paper on the economic ramifications of any society that tried this but consider that in this model every generation is guaranteed the right to apply their creativity, labor, faithfulness and time to a piece of land, and when coupled with God's provision and protection, that land can produce an abundance. Also, notice that God's plan for discipleship is the family, but the back-up plan is not the church or the temple, it's another family business, where someone in debt would be yoked to for seven years in order to be re-launched into society, fully capitalized by the family that “re-trained” them (Dt 15).

There's just one problem.

Ancient Israel never once follows this pattern, even though it's enshrined in the TORAH. (Jeremiah 35)

So, God sends a prophet who tells the world that this economic system of God is GOING to happen. “The spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me for the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, freedom for the captives and the releasing of the oppressed, in short, to declare the year of the Lord's favor,” or the year of the Lord's economic system of Jubilee.” (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Imagine the landless poor of Isaiah's day, looking at each other as this message is proclaimed to the public as a Word from the Lord. “Are we getting our land back?”

The short answer is, of course, no, but as you and I know this passage was never intended to be fulfilled in 700 BC, it was for eight centuries later when Jesus shows up on the scene and announces Himself in Luke 4, not as the redemptive fulfillment of the TORAH, but as the economic fulfillment of the TORAH!

He then goes on to teach us to pray that God's kingdom would come here on earth as it is in heaven and to send us out to make disciples of all nations (notice the contrast from Revelation 20 where Satan is deceiving the nations). Jesus is setting up a collision!

Our Response

Thankfully the sacred-secular divide has been eroding and we have fantastic work being done all over the world to train faith-filled investors and entrepreneurs. However, I think it's time to take our game to a different level. Followers of Jesus should aim to use our capital, our talent, our businesses and our networks to ***radically transform industry – the very concept of how business is done.***

Power aggregates in the middle of any supply chain. If you can control the disbursement of capital to the creators at the top of the supply chain, and the distribution of goods to the consumers at the bottom, then you can deflate the value paid to the creators and inflate the price paid by the consumers. When this is done effectively, Wall Street cheers and investors “toast” your business model and those who do it repeatedly write books about how it's done.

However, there are major losers in this model: Society, Humanity, Human Flourishing, Image bearers have been efficiently commoditized.

Creators, and therefore creativity, suffers for it is not sufficiently valued and the world gets less innovation.

In this world, access to innovation is also stunted through inflated prices and the effective monopolization (or concentration) of industry.

In economic supply chains, the creators and the consumers are “the least.” And if the concentrated powers with outsized influence in the middle want to follow Jesus, they need to learn to serve the least.

We desperately need a new breed of entrepreneurs and investors who:

1. Begin with lament and grieve the rampant exploitation in their industry or city—*especially when we find ourselves complicit.*
2. Pray for a creative, restorative answer (new biz/investment) which is likely to be rooted in service of the “least” and the exploited: creators / suppliers / farmers / producers on the top end of the supply chain, and consumers on the bottom end.
3. Build based on Jubilee and work to discover business models to get the most productive assets into the hands of the most productive people.
4. Extend dominion, to “dispossess and bless” and not to “sell out,” or “exit”.

LivFul as a Model

While the above sounds an awful lot like theology, I can assure you in LivFul, we are primarily practitioners. Our theology has been built as we have built our company. It's hard to tell where the company ends, and the theology begins.

LivFul seeks to employ this economic theology by first defining the least in its industry of health innovation.

On one side are the researchers, medical doctors and scientists who are creating new technologies and medicines that are principally designed to save lives and make a positive impact in the world. For many of them, it's personal as they have often lost a loved one to a horrific and tortuous disease that they are now dedicating their lives to stopping. They don't want anyone else to experience that pain and suffering. Unfortunately, they are generally only offered money for their innovation and the vast majority of *acquired* IP assets never make it to market. The pharmaceutical industry is littered with broken dreams. Much of the time this is due to profitability concerns, not efficacy. The power in the middle is addicted to margins and cannot afford anything other than a very high profit margin.

On the other side you have patients that desperately need more innovation not less. Death and destruction are proliferated due to these bad economic systems.

LivFul believes that it can control the supply chain from IP to Impact, from Discovery to Distribution, and by telling a better story to the two most important players in the industry (the creators and the patients) it can increase IP efficiency to market and drastically lowering the cost and time for a life-saving innovation to make it to market.

And it's happening. Some of the best scientists in the world are foregoing the money that has been offered to them by traditional industry players and choosing to work with LivFul instead.

Additionally, some of the world's best clinical researchers are offering MUCH lower cost clinical trials and shorter timelines because of the brokenness of the model and their desire to work with LivFul to create a new way.

Not Just in Health Innovation

In the newly forming contrarian redemptive economic community, leaders are lamenting together over the economic brokenness of this world and praying together for creative alternatives to each industry, each geography, and each asset class. All lamenters with a bent towards action are welcome.

Come Lord Jesus.

If you'd like to follow our journey deeper into the practical implications of redemptive economics as we seek to restore a broken health innovation industry, we'd love to have you join our weekly prayer call. Email me at melsberry@livful.com and I will add you up.