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## Great Commission Utilitarianism

**By Darrow L. Miller**

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Recently a friend told me of his growing concern for the impact of the concept of Great Commission utilitarianism on the church. As someone who is relatively well read and is currently writing a book on the Great Commission, needless to say I was intrigued about the concept. A Google search on the phrase returned only five documents: not too much discussion about something that my friend is so concerned about.

So what is this Great Commission utilitarianism and why might it elicit so much concern from my friend and so little discussion within the church?

### Great Commission Utilitarianism Defined

First, let us define utilitarianism itself. The word utilitarian refers to something that is *useful*. It is derived from Philosophical Pragmatism, a movement born in America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and popularized by the atheistic humanistic philosopher John Dewey in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Philosophic Pragmatism determines that something is valuable if it is functional; it is good if it works! There is no sense in asking if that thing is beautiful, good or true, only if it is useful. Unfortunately, many Christians have, perhaps unconsciously, denied the biblical virtues of truth, beauty and goodness for utilitarianism.

Great Commission utilitarianism [GCU] refers specifically to a prevailing Christian view of work and wealth. Work is separated from God's purpose and viewed as a necessary evil, or even a curse. Wealth is not something to be pursued for God's glory and as part of God's intentions for families, communities and even nations. Instead, wealth exists for utilitarian purposes such as the need to feed ones family and provide basic house and simple clothing. Any other use of wealth would be a waste. In addition, a person who has amassed wealth is expected to use it to support "spiritual purposes". This should include his or her local church, missions and charitable organizations. People who spend wealth on themselves (outside of a utilitarian framework) are often made to feel guilty, "How can one afford a new vehicle when the church bus is falling apart?"

Stated another way, GCU sees wealth as bad in itself and thus should be rejected. Wealth can only be deemed "good" if it has utility, in other words if it is used to support

something that is spiritual. Enjoying material things such as a good meal, going to the theater, owning a beautiful home and clothes, enjoying art and good music, owning a well-built vehicle is seen as worldly. Mediocrity and utility are virtues of GCU. To die with wealth is evil.

Like wealth, work is good in-so-far as it 1) is spiritual work – missions, evangelism, church planting or being a theologian; 2) is “ministry” - helping people who are hungry (relief or aid workers) or sick (health workers) or teaching; or 3) contributes to the support of spiritual workers. All other work is considered worldly or secular. Being a farmer, auto mechanic, homemaker, entrepreneur or artist is thought to be inferior to religious vocations. Work has been devalued from its biblical glory, to being a curse.

This view of work is not what the Bible calls for, however. As ordained in Genesis 1-2, work is a sacred task. It is mankind’s contribution to fulfillment of the Creation Mandate to build Godly culture. Work is the human contribution to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation and to the end of history – *telos*, the completion of the garden-city – the City of God. In this framework, work is worship, our dignity as human beings. We were made to be *economic man*! The meaning of the Greek word for economics refers to being stewards of [God’s] house; from the beginning, we are meant to labor, to create, to generate bounty in our communities and nations. The earth, our families, communities and nations are all to prosper and to reach their fruition. This is what it meant to be economic man. Or to say it differently, work is what human beings do to steward creation, to bring forth all its potential and bring God’s intention to fulfillment.

From this crescendo of understanding, the glorious biblical concept of work and wealth has been reduced to the utilitarian need to support missions and spiritual causes, and the necessity to put food on the table. The biblical mandate to work, and to be rewarded with wealth for this work, is now seen instead to be a curse and thus something to be avoided.

### **What are the foundations of GCU?**

Every theme or issue has its grounding in a worldview or several worldviews. Utilitarianism was born out of a materialistic, pragmatic worldview. This was driven into Western thinking through secular humanists like Darwin, Dewey and Freud.

Instead of defending biblical theism when atheism made its onslaught into Western culture, Christians abdicated by either embracing the materialistic worldview or the ancient Greek worldview of dualism, what might be called Evangelical Gnosticism. In this view, the secular was separated from the sacred; nature was divorced from grace, work from worship, ministry from vocation, and success from meaning. The sacred, spiritual activities were seen as “higher” or more important, while the rest of life was seen as secular and “lower.” Things in this lower area included all types of work (outside of formal spiritual ministry), economics, and wealth-creation. These “secular” things could only be redeemed if they contributed somehow to things in the higher, spiritual area. So secular work and wealth creation were seen in a very pragmatic light,

with their only value (beyond a means of mere survival) in funding activities in the higher, spiritual realm.

### **Living as if the Bible were True!**

What is faith?

“Now faith is the **reality** of what is hoped for, the **proof** of what is not seen” (Heb. 11:1, HCSB, emphasis added). Or as Darby translated the same passage: “Now faith is the **substantiating** of things hoped for, the **conviction** of things not seen” (emphasis added). We see in these translations the objectiveness expressed in the key words of the passage. What is faith? It is living in the reality of the unseen world. It is giving substance to the things that we hope for; it is the certitude of the things that are not visible.

The word “reality” is the Greek word *hupostasis* which means “that which has actual existence . . . a substance, real being . . . the substantial quality, nature, of a person or thing.”<sup>i</sup> Something may be invisible and yet still real. In our modern way of thinking, only those things that can be apprehended by the senses are real. Not so in a Biblical frame. The word “proof” or “conviction” is the Greek word *elegchos* and means “that by which a thing is proved or tested.”<sup>ii</sup>

Too often Christians function from a distant memory of something being true or out of habit, the way their parents did it. In my early years as a Christian, I thought that Christianity was true *because* I believed it. My faith was in “faith”; it was merely a subjective experience. When challenged by a friend, I realized that I was thinking like an atheist, that Christianity is true because I believe it. It slowly dawned on me that Christianity was true, even if I *did not* believe it. It is true because God exists; there is an objective reality. Faith is to give substance to this reality by the way I live my life.

What is the backdrop before which we live our lives? It can be a small backdrop, limited by our own imagination or it can be a setting that is bigger than the universe itself. We live present day lives in light of the end we have in mind.

To live a *proleptic*<sup>iii</sup> life is to live in the reality of the future, today. In other words, we are to live as if the future were present. We are to live in the world we now see, what we know is true in the unseen world. It is our lives revealing in the *now*, the *not yet* of the coming of the kingdom of God.

Many in the modern world live with the end being a garage full of toys (boats, cars, snowmobiles, etc.), a large house on a hill in the best part of town, or for “retirement” to do the things one always wanted to do. Now it is important to note that these things are not bad in themselves. They may in fact be good things. But when they define the end for which we live our lives, our vision is too small and does not align with the ends to which God and all of history are working.

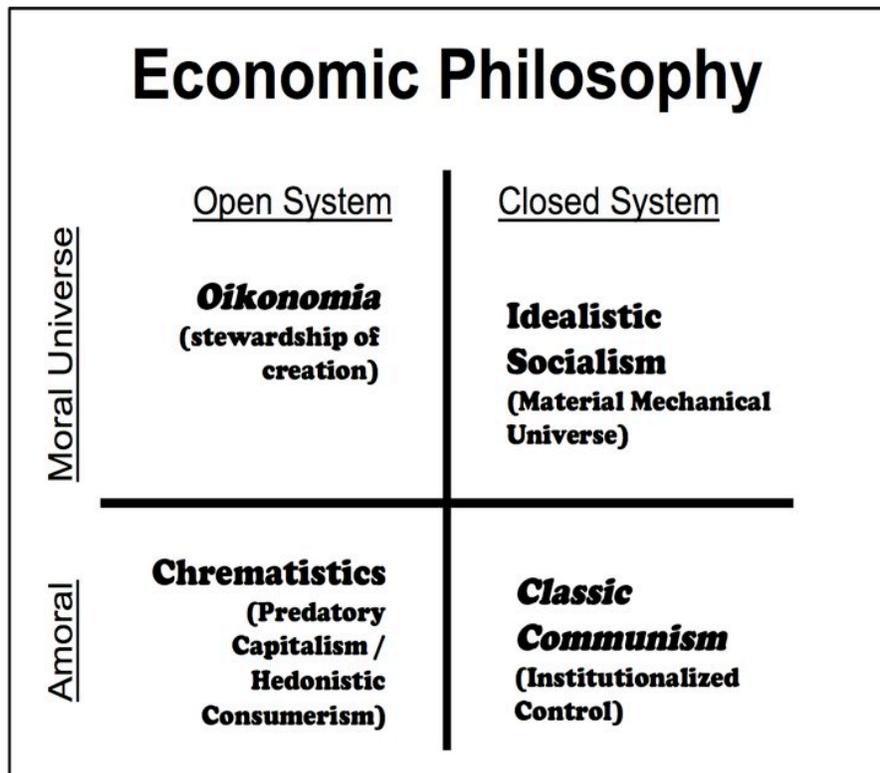
Some who have professed Christ have discovered the vision for the boundless life – the *telos* – the end of all of history. This is variously described as “the Glory of the Lord

filling the earth” (Isa. 6:3, Hab. 2:14), “the Coming of Christ and the consummation of his kingdom” (Rev. 21) or our nation disciplined (Mat. 28:18-20). Creating wealth and working for the glory of God are animated by the *telos* – the End!

### Oikonomia vs. Chrematistics

In direct opposition to what those possessing a GCU mindset state, God’s ends reveal that human beings are placed on earth for economic purposes, to be the catalysts to allow families, communities and nations to reach their fruition. We see this unfold in the biblical concept of *oikonomia* – administration of the house. The English word economics is derived from this concept. *Oikonomia* creates a unique economic philosophy and practice.

*Oikonomia* is derived from the intersection of two views for understanding the universe: Open vs. Closed System and Moral vs. A-moral Universe. The intersection of these two frameworks creates four quadrants: Oikonomia, Chrematistics, Idealistic Socialism and Classic Communism:



In order to help you gain a true understanding of God’s view and purpose for work, let’s study each of these quadrants.

1. *Oikonomia* – The intersection of a Moral Universe and an Open System is internally consistent in that they are both derived from a universe in which God exists; the universe is both moral and open. In this quadrant, justice is defined as inalienable rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness and all human beings are equal before God and before the law.

The tenants of this economic philosophy are that human beings are made in the image of God and the universe is his creation. Human beings are God’s vice-regents, placed here to manage the household – God’s creation, and to create wealth; the world was designed by God to flourish. We were placed here to make families, nations and the world bountiful (Gen. 1:26-28). Resources are only limited by imagination and moral stewardship. Wealth is created through **long-term** time horizons (multi-generation); the end of history includes *the wealth of nations* (Isa. 60:5; 61:6; 66:11-13; Rev. 21:23-26). Through moral stewardship of creation, the land—the farm, the forest—is left healthier, and the world wealthier for the next generation. In this quadrant, God is God; neither poverty nor riches are idolized (Prov. 30:8-9). The goal is wholesomeness, health, bounty, justice and wisdom for all families and nations. The idea of *oikonomia* is to be naturally held by Judeo-Christian theists.

2. *Chrematistics* – The intersection of an A-Moral Universe and an Open System is internally inconsistent, since part of the quadrant is derived from a theistic framework and part from an atheistic framework. *Chrematistics* was identified by Aristotle as the counter point to *oikonomia*. This quadrant is inhabited by people who are either consciously or functionally atheists, who are self focused with no moral framework but are living inconsistently on the biblical memory of an open system where wealth can be created. These people define justice as freedom from interference in their personal gain and use of wealth.

The tenants are that human beings are highly evolved consuming animals. The universe is one cosmic machine that exists for man to exploit. Manipulation of property and wealth to maximize **short-term** exchange value (there is no tomorrow) for **individual consumption** is the name of the game. Because there are no moral constraints, any means may be used to maximize wealth, including bribery, dishonest scales, raping the land and destroying forests and communities.

This quadrant idolizes opulence and conspicuous consumption. It is held by atheist materialists from the West who are living off a memory of biblical theism’s Open System. They are known as hedonistic consumers, predatory “Capitalists,” Libertarians, and in some cases evangelical Gnostics who function religiously from a theistic point of view but who exhibit the same lifestyles as hedonistic consumers.

3. *Idealistic-Socialism* – A Moral Universe with a Closed System. Those who promote this are internally inconsistent, living on the memory of a biblical morality and yet consciously/unconsciously operating from a closed system model of the universe. They define justice as “equal outcome” of economic activity.

The basic tenants of *Idealistic-Socialism* are that human beings are highly evolved consuming animals. The universe is one cosmic machine that exists for man to exploit.

Resources are physical things in the ground and are limited. If some people are poor it is because the rich have stolen from them. The solution is to redistribute scarce resources so that all have equal outcome. Poverty tends to be idolized here, and wealth demonized. This position is held by Liberation theologians, and liberal evangelicals like Ron Sider, author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, and others with a moral conscience who are aware of the needs of the poor and who have consciously rejected hedonistic consumerism.

4. *Classic Communism* – The meeting of an A-Moral Universe with a Closed System. Like those who articulate and live out *oikonomia*, classic communists are internally consistent but from an atheistic, rather than a Theistic, paradigm. They define justice as equal outcome where everyone ends with the same. As Karl Marx has said: “From each according to his ability to each according to his need.”

The basic tenants are that human beings are highly evolved consuming animals. The universe is one cosmic machine that exists for man to exploit. Resources are physical things in the ground and are limited. Some nations are rich at the expense of other nations that are poor. The forced redistribution of scarce resources allowing all people to end with the same economic condition is the solution to the problem of poverty. Wealth is generally demonized, along with those who create it. This position is held by Marxists, Maoists and many Western intellectual elite.

## Work and Wealth

In the biblical framework of *oikonomia*, work and the creation of wealth are intrinsically good and are to contribute to the end - the telos - to which all of history is moving: the Glory of God, and the return of Christ and his kingdom.

The work of human beings is *carried forward* from time into eternity, from the “old earth” to the new heaven and new earth. To say it differently, the work of human imagination and man’s hands, godly ideas and artifacts, will transcend with the redeemed from time to eternity, earth to heaven.

As Revelation 21:23-26 discloses: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and **the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.** On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. **The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it**” (emphasis added). The wealth of the nations will be brought into the garden-city as a tribute to Christ the king.

This wealth may consist of the natural treasures of a nation that have been cultivated by the people of the nation, such as gold, frankincense, or cedars of Lebanon. It may be material artifacts that were born from human creativity such as art, music (from Bach and Handel to the harmonies of Africa), beautiful fabrics, sculpture, as well as beautiful human artifacts such as furniture built by the Shaker communities. It may be the discoveries of human beings such as the ancient civilizations’ creation of the wheel, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century creation of paper by the Chinese, or the 17<sup>th</sup> century English scientist Robert

Hooke's invention of glass. It may be the ideals birthed in nations, the 'Dignity of Labor' in Germany, 'Peacemaking' in Norway or 'Freedom' in the USA.

### **The City on the Hill**

The Great Commission is not great when it is utilitarian. It is reduced to what Dr. Bob Moffitt has called the Greek Commission, to save souls for heaven. It is the Great Commission when it has a kingdom focus. Jesus taught his disciples to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." He has commissioned his people to disciple nations.

When the Puritans came to America they were enlivened by a *proleptic* vision to build a nation that was a manifestation of the coming kingdom. Did they do it perfectly? No! Was there sin? Yes! But the vision was a Godly vision of the kingdom of God coming to earth.

In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus created a most electrifying image. He said: "You are the light of the world. **A city on a hill cannot be hidden.** Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, **let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven**" (emphasis added).

The Apostle Paul continues this theme when he wrote in Philippians 2:5: "... so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, **in which you shine like stars in the universe**" (emphasis added). The Great Commission is about being a light on the hill.

This vision was to consciously shape the American experiment. In 1630, not long before landing in the New World, from the deck of the Puritans flagship the *Arabella*, John Winthrop, the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, **preached** a sermon titled "A Modell of Christian Charity" (sic). **His image was taken directly from Christ's beatific vision.** He told the community that they would be "a city upon a hill" that would be watched by the whole world:

"For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken . . . we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God. . . We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us til we be consumed out of the good land whither we are a-going."<sup>iv</sup>

Here is faith substantiating things hoped for, providing evidence of things not seen. This light on a hill has drawn the poor and humble masses from all over the world. This vision of freedom, this humble proleptic attempt of a people to work towards the kingdom of God, has manifest in the building of a nation.

Speaking from a memory, perhaps rather than a personal Puritan-like faith, President-elect John Kennedy delivered a speech on January 9, 1961 to the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in which he refers to Winthrop's sermon:

“. . . that we shall be as a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us. . . Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us – our government, in every branch, at every level, national, state, and local, must be a city upon a hill – constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities.”<sup>v</sup>

Likewise President Ronald Reagan used the phrase in his farewell speech to the nation on January 11, 1989:

“The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the '**shining city upon a hill.**' The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined.

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still.”<sup>vi</sup>

While Kennedy and Reagan were likely speaking out of historic memory, Christians, today, are to live out of biblical conviction.

The dualistic paradigm has caused the Church to separate work from worship and wealth from the building of communities and nations. We need to return to the richness of the biblical paradigm and leave behind the anemic vision of Great Commission Utilitarianism for the GREAT COMMISSION of giving substance to things hoped for. Let us shine like stars in the universe, let us build cities on the hill.

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<sup>i</sup> *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, s.v. "hupostasis."

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. "elegchos."

<sup>iii</sup> The English word 'proleptic' comes from the Latin *prolepsis*, and from the Greek *prolambanein* which means "to anticipate before". In our context, we are to "anticipate" the coming of the kingdom of God by the way we live our lives, *before* the fullness of the kingdom comes at the return of Christ.

<sup>iv</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. "City upon a Hill"

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*