

# THE MARKET AND THE CROSS

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A free-market economy is good for people. The extent to which a nation's markets are free so that people can exchange money, goods and services without restriction determines the prosperity of that nation. The proof of this contention is the empirical reality of the prosperity of free-market nations as opposed to the deprivation experienced in controlled economies. Since there is no such thing as a totally free market or a totally controlled one, there are gradations on the scale of poverty to prosperity.

Still and all, free-market economies do a better job for the people in them than other types of economy. This is not to say that such economies do not have some negative characteristics. If one is not careful it is easy to become materialistic in a society made affluent by free economies. As the Communists demonstrated, this can also happen in controlled systems.

The success of free-market economies has other unintended consequences. One of these is the effect on the Christian religion. It seems to me that the rise of what may be called the "prosperity gospel" has coincided with the increased effectiveness of western free economies. The preaching of prosperity is not a new thing. Such sermons can be found in the literature from the days of the Industrial Revolution forward to the present.

Our problem is not just a matter of history. It is both present and practical. The effect of free-market economies on the Christian religion is multi-dimensional. The church is not immune to this influence. Too many of our affluent congregations (large and small) have become market-driven. We do well to examine the matter carefully.

A discernable influence of our economy on our religion is a mutation of the standard of success. What does it mean to be a successful Christian? In many circles, a man is elevated in the church or thought well of by other Christians in part because he has done well materially. Though material prosperity and spiritual health are not mutually exclusive, neither are they absolute predictors of each other. Yet, the free-market culture has conditioned us to judge the man who is of modest circumstances less significant than a man who has much of this world's goods. A successful Christian is one who lives close to God (James 4:8) without regards to his level of material wealth.

Another matter of economic influence on religion has to do with congregations. Which of them do we view as successful? Often we consider the size of the building and the number of folks attending. We look at the contribution, the more the better. Missionaries among us know very well that many churches with elaborate buildings do not spend as much (as a percentage of the contribution) on mission efforts as they do building and maintaining facilities that will, in the minds of their leadership, draw people from the community. Such churches see themselves in a market where they must compete or lose market-share. There is transference of the corporate definition of success to the church. Truth is subjugated to pragmatism. Frequently, questionable or frivolous programs are instituted to “keep folks coming.” All of this is understandable in that the influence of the market is potent. But I am afraid that it is not acceptable (Matthew 6:33).

It seems clear that the problem, huge as it is, might be remedied by a simple refocusing. We know that we live in a world that demands certain sophistication with material matters if we are to survive at all. Jesus told us to be wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16) and this we can do. But when it comes to spiritual matters and especially when it comes to how we judge other people, our churches and particularly ourselves, we must focus on the more important, spiritual realities.

Specifically, we must focus on the Cross-. Jesus said, “*And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me*” (John 12:32). Our economic system can make us comfortable. It may indeed help us sin. But it will not save us.

*Bill Inby*