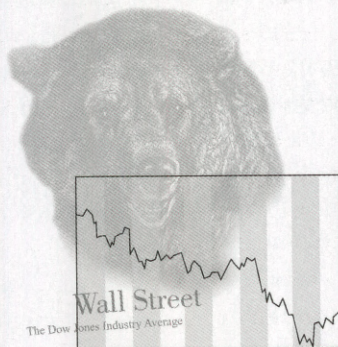


# Musings on the Market and an Old Memory Verse



*By A. Gregory Schneider*

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities,  
against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world,  
against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Eph. 6:12 KJV)

**T**his old memory verse is one of dozens my grade school classmates and I recited to each other in anxious anticipation of upcoming Bible quizzes. I imagined the “principalities and powers” as sinister, invasive, smoke-like beings lying in wait to invade my body and devour my mind. They were crafty, though, and could turn themselves into angels of light the better to lure me onto dangerous ground. I learned to fear the evil empire of Satan and his angels, who lurked in places and objects off limits to any proper young Seventh-day Adventist with a care for his soul: in séances and Ouija boards, in theaters—maybe, there was growing debate even in 1959, in bars and taverns—certainly, and in whatever else that Adventism’s forces of social control sought to warn me against.

I think the religion of my grade school memory verses was mostly an individualistic coping religion, one with a heavy moralistic cast, to be sure, but still designed primarily to inspire and guide my single soul through this dark world to the gates of light. That kind of religion is well and good, I suppose, but since at least my college years, I have been seeking also a religion that can guide me as a citizen of this world. How can my faith inspire and guide me as I consider “big picture” policy questions in my country, state, or local community? I am concerned, then, with what my graduate school professor, Martin E. Marty, has been calling “public religion.”<sup>1</sup>

With this concern for public religion in mind, what can we say about these “principalities and powers,” after all? First, the Greek words translated “principalities” (*arche*) and “powers” (*exousia*) are used the vast majority of the time to refer to human institutions and rulers, not otherworldly or supernatural powers. Second, as the book of Colossians asserts, they are created by and for Jesus Christ and “hold together” in him (Col. 1:16-17). Third, they are heavenly and earthly, divine and human, spiritual and political, invisible and visible. An important implication of this third point is that the various social sciences study the outward, visible, human aspects of powers and thus can give us important insights into the visible effects of the spiritual principles that actuate the powers. Fourth, and most important, the powers are good, the powers are fallen, and the powers are to be redeemed.

To say that the powers are good, is to say that they are part of the creation that God declared good at the foundation of the earth. To say that they are fallen means that they are subject to “the flesh” (*sarx*) rather than “the spirit” (*pneuma*). The flesh in the apostle Paul’s understanding is not about the pleasures and impulses of the body. Rather, to be subject to the flesh means to be in bondage to a whole way of living that places “I,” the flimsy but overweening human ego, at the center of the cosmos and at the top of all scales of value. Finally, the idea that the powers are to be redeemed suggests that they are part of the orders of creation without which we cannot be what God designs us to be. They are thus necessary to the salvation God has in store for us. All creation, including humanity and the powers that shape humanity, groan for God’s redemption (Rom. 8:22-23). These powers, then, are not necessarily destined to be consumed in an apocalyptic lake of fire.

### The “Ism Powers”

What are some examples of “the powers”? There is, for instance, the ordering, categorizing power of racism. Racism begins in a necessary and innocent activity of the mind. To notice similarities and differences, to group like with like and contrast one category with another is a fundamental and indispensable power that underlies the languages and other symbols with which we connect our minds with those of others. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle built comprehensive philosophies on this capacity of mind. Racism, however, classifies people by skin color or other visible

traits and infuses the classification system with the principle that says, “I and the cleaner, stronger, purer types who look like me over those who look different.” In its extreme form, racism is an alternative plan of salvation, an idolatrous and murderous belief in salvation by skin color. Other “-isms” are only variations on the theme:

Class: “I and the ‘better sort’ of people over the ‘lower’ class across the tracks or downtown.”

Sexism: “I and the other strong and wise men over the weak, foolish women.”

Professionalism: “I am my career and my career is everything.” Redemption through prestige.

Consumerism: “I want, therefore I am.” Redemption through shopping.

### The Primary Power of Today

This last example of the powers connects especially closely with the market, the primary fallen power, the dominant idol, that determines our existence today.

What does the spirit of the market say? In its fallen aspect, it promises redemption through acquisition and ownership, and it rationalizes its promise in language that is subtle and appealing:

Let all people become self-interested buyers and sellers. Set them all free to compete for advantage under the universal laws of supply and demand. They will learn that goods and services are scarce, but that their needs and wants are limitless. They will work hard, then, because they will feel they have to. They will be inventive too, because they have to be in order to get ahead and stay ahead of their competitors. They will produce more and more, and they will consume more and more, and prosperity will increase. They will become better people because they will have to cultivate the virtues of hard work and self-discipline, creativity and self-confidence. Believe the cardinal dogma of our market religion: that economic success or misfortune is the responsibility of the individual and his or hers alone. Accept the corollary: economic success or misfortune is therefore the mark of individual virtue or vice. Let the spirit of the market rule, and all will be well.<sup>2</sup>

Now this is a promise worthy of a medieval alchemist. The market claims to turn the base metal

of human selfishness into the precious substance of individual virtue and public good. Viewed with certain kinds of blinders on, this rationale sounds plausible, and when supported by the extraordinary levels of hype that we have heard for the last quarter century this gospel of the market has almost been enshrined as common sense. Yet Christians should be wary of being taken in by the Spirit of the Age. Claims for the beneficence of the market, especially in these times when it has no serious rival, should not be given the benefit of the doubt; they should be tested, skeptically.

Christians who take the Bible seriously should be able to see through the idolatry of the market. From the foundations of Israelite society in the laws of

“held in slavery by [our] fear of death” (2:15 NIV). It is the bondage dictated in our age by the market. When we allow the gospel of Jesus Christ to free us from our fear, however, we will have grace and peace of mind enough to take a sober and compassionate look at the human condition as the market has helped construct it in our time.

We know, for instance, that economic inequality is becoming ever more extreme, both in the United States and across the globe.<sup>3</sup> Evangelists of the market like George Gilder, sage of the 1980s Reagan Revolution, say that such inequality can be an advantage to society, spurring people on to greater aspirations and achievements.<sup>4</sup> Seventh-day Adventist

**“With every credit card transaction, every writing of a check, every phone order or computer catalog that clogs my mailbox, I partake of the market’s means of grace.”**

Leviticus and Deuteronomy through the testimonies of the prophets to the message and ministry of Jesus there is a consistent message that extremes of inequality are not good and that God cares especially for the poor, the marginalized, the “widow, orphan, and alien.” Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, for instance, make it quite clear that the Israelite society, although allowing for something like the market’s games of acquisition and ownership, should not allow the game to harden into disparities of wealth that were wide or permanent.

However, most Christians do not read their Bibles in a way that unmasks the idolatry of the market. I confess it is hard for me to do so. I think it may be because the rituals and sacred tokens of market religion are such pervasive and insistent parts of my daily life. With every credit card transaction, every writing of a check, every phone order or computer order catalog that clogs my mailbox, I partake of the market’s means of grace, and by identifying with the commodities I buy, I learn my worth and meaning in the eyes of the market deity. The market’s grace is not free, however; it must be earned. The anxiety that comes with the getting and spending is a major motive for my persistent tendency to narrow my reading of Scripture into a quest for personal reassurance, peace, and comfort. Prophetic calls to seek justice in my community and society are not so welcome to people in my anxious class.

We are, in the words of the book of Hebrews,

Christians, with their traditions of health reform, might take note, however, of the growing body of research that identifies inequality in industrial societies as a public health hazard with a power to shorten a population’s life expectancy equal to cigarette smoking.

For example, Japanese men who smoke, living in a society with low inequality, have longer average life spans than American men who do not smoke.<sup>5</sup> Apostles of economic growth as the preeminent cure for social ills repeat the snappy promise, “A rising tide lifts all boats!” But the majority of wage earners in the United States have seen the real, inflation-adjusted value of their earnings decline for about the last twenty-five years. Only the top 10 or 20 percent of income earners in the “general public” has benefited in any substantial way.<sup>6</sup> It would seem that our recent rising tides have lifted mostly the yachts, while raising storms that poke holes in many of the canoes and rowboats.

But the powers, I have argued, are redeemable. What can that mean? One of the most fruitful features of the Biblical theology of the powers is the idea that each of them has its vocation, its calling, in God’s order of creation. The general calling of all the powers, as of each human being, is to praise God and serve humanity. The specific divine callings of each of the institutions that structure our common life must be thought out within those two great stipulations.

Health care powers are called to nurture and to heal; public media are called to propagate truthful

information about all our other institutions and to provide a forum for discussion of policy options. The market is called to produce and distribute the goods and services that human communities need to promote healthy and dignified lives among families and individuals. The great virtues of the market system are the unparalleled efficiency and productivity it has achieved for certain portions of the global human community. Its great vices are the inequality, privation, injustice, and corruption of humane values briefly mentioned and illustrated above, vices that result from its inner fallen spirit that claims supremacy over all other principalities and keeps vast numbers of people in bondage through fear of death. How may Christians, as citizens of their nations and members of the world community of Christian faith, participate in God's call to the market to return to its true vocation?

One small, local example I am aware of is the Dwelling House Savings and Loan Association, which has helped significantly raise the ratio of homeowners to renters in the poor, mostly African-American Hill district of Pittsburgh. Dwelling House has been lender of last resort in a neighborhood that was long a victim of redlining, the practice of denying loans to people of certain racial groups or living in neighborhoods considered poor economic risks. Robert R. Lavelle, son a poor black preacher, took over the savings and loan in 1957 as part of a strategy to help his struggling real estate business get off the ground. Since then, operating on the principle that Christians are to love their fellow beings and use their money, he has made 1,154 mortgages and 300 home improvement loans, many to people whom most commercial banks would never consider.

Dwelling House carries a huge 30 percent delinquency rate due to a policy of not foreclosing until there is no other option. "We don't give up on them until they give up on themselves," Lavelle said. Instead Lavelle has taken on the role of preacher and pastor to his delinquent customers—exhorting, counseling, teaching, praying—all for the sake of leading them into the joys of personal responsibility and respectable home ownership. He lives in the neighborhood where he does business, and lets his nice home speak tangibly about what people can achieve by learning to play by the rules of the capitalistic system, a system in which he fervently believes. What makes Robert Lavelle's capitalism markedly different from the vast majority of enterprises, however, is the determination to be

profit-sensitive but not profit-motivated, to serve people and his local community rather than the fallen Spirit of Self-Interest. Many more development projects and enterprises are now flowing into this community to build on the foundation Lavelle has laid.<sup>7</sup>

This small-business example can inspire our imaginations, but wistfully imagining what the marketplace might be like "if only" more individuals were like Robert Lavelle will do little to call the market back its proper vocation. The modern corporate, bureaucratized structures of finance and capital are vast, impersonal, and increasingly unaccountable to any groups or institutions that stand for values other than efficiency, productivity, and profit. In most places in the market, behavior like Robert Lavelle's is swiftly punished and usually extinguished.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, realistic initiatives to call the fallen market back to its true vocation must take into account the need for countervailing powers.<sup>9</sup> The idea is to balance and control the market and its centers of corporate power, to resist their natural fallen tendency to dominate and corrupt the other principalities and powers that have their own proper vocations.

### Church Power, State Power, and Labor Power

Some segments of the wider Christian church are in a position to be "conscience" not only to government, as our new President George W. Bush would have it, but also to certain corporate actors in the market. I recently had the privilege to participate in conversations about "public religion" in connection with business and heard a story about how certain professors and consultants in business from the University of Notre Dame were able to counsel some major business executives in the midst of the Tylenol scare some years ago.

Some capsules of the over-the-counter pain killer had been discovered to be laced with cyanide, a malicious tampering by a person entirely unconnected with the company, which nevertheless had injured and killed a small number of people. The question before the executives was whether to limit their voluntary recall of the product to the areas where the tampering had been discovered and then put their public relations "spin machine" in full operation to protect the company from public pressure, or to take a more proactive

and costly approach of a nationwide recall. The Notre Dame consultants, drawing on the Roman Catholic faith and the longstanding personal relationships they shared with these corporate executives, persuaded their friends to take the latter course on grounds of keeping faith with a consumer public that trusted the corporation and its products.

I would hope that all denominational communities within the larger Christian church, especially the Seventh-day Adventist community, would become

stridently on "big government" as the source of all social ills.

At the level of a somewhat more concrete policy proposal, I would join those who are urging government at both federal and state levels to rethink the corporate charters that define the corporation as a private enterprise. This vision of the corporation is a product only of the nineteenth century. It was established against public resistance that clung for decades to the understanding that these concentrations of

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increasingly self-conscious about developing an active "conscience" function for market activities in which they have influence. For those who have control of capital and must manage its investment, for instance, there is the now quite easy step of seeking "socially responsible investment" opportunities where the conduct of companies toward communities where they are located, toward the environment, toward employees and so on is monitored for its adherence to high ethical standards. This is one small but growing way in which not only churches, but also individuals and other nonmarket and nongovernment organizations can begin to exert some balancing force on the market's runaway irresponsibility.

There is no escaping, however, the need for the state to play its appropriate countervailing role. What that role is, of course, is a matter of fierce debate, with sincere and reasonable Christian folk on all sides of all issues in dispute. My contribution here to these debates is twofold. At the level of general principle, I would plead that even the state has its vocation, a vocation to pursue justice—not just retributive justice—distributive and substantive justice, as well. It must see that the God-given rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness are not abridged by the coercions of deprivation and desperation so readily imposed by "market discipline." I reject the extremes of the "neocapitalist" ideology that has harped ever more

capital and power were creations of governments, were obliged therefore to serve the public interest, and were therefore subject to constant supervision by legislatures and other agencies of government.<sup>10</sup> If we retrieve some of our lost history, we might find ways to make these major agents of the market more accountable to the wider human community. It is, of course, not the business of churches to engage themselves directly in this kind of policy advocacy, but it is the business of church members to draw upon the spiritual resources and ethical guidance of their religious communities in seeking, as citizens, a world more in accord with what they understand to be God's will.

Related to the defense of basic human rights by the state is the power of labor, especially organized labor, which also has a vocation. Labor's calling includes defending the honor and integrity of good work, uniting workers across divides of religion, nation, race, and gender for the sake of a joint struggle for justice, furthering democratic participation in the workplace and in the labor organizations themselves, and other tasks yet to be thought of. Churches, especially those whom history and divine providence have placed in positions to serve laboring segments of the nations, have roles to play in helping maintain a spirit of hope among these peoples. Churches may also serve as "conscience" to labor, to help guard against the excesses to which any of the fallen principalities are liable.<sup>11</sup>

## A Balance of Powers

The way to call the fallen powers to their vocations, I am suggesting, is through seeking a balance of powers, none dominating, none suppressed, each exercising checks over the others. In a fallen world, this is likely the best that can be hoped for. I can imagine readers objecting to any endorsement of the state or labor based on the evils and corruptions of which they have been guilty. Certainly they are fallen. So is the church. The church is often self-absorbed, more concerned for its own power and survival than its call to serve humanity; it is divided and compromised by the powers of race, class, and gender.


Nevertheless, I cling to the church because I believe it is the power in this fallen world that God has chosen above all others to spread his grace and communicate his callings to the rest of the world. The church is called to be the keeper of Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God and to seek in each generation the best ways to bring the world closer to that vision. I have no illusions about establishing some kind of utopian reign of God in present human history, before the coming of Christ. I do know, however, that if I am not discerning and allying myself with God's redemptive actions in our present historical moment, I will not be ready for the fullness of his reign when it does come.

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Greg Schneider is professor of behavioral science at Pacific Union College.  
ggschneid@puc.edu

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