Virtuous Citizenship and Economic Wisdom

Part 2 of 2: A Biblical Worldview and Economic Flourishing
with Darrell Bock, Greg Forster
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You know, a lot of philosophy does talk about society, and they use the picture of the home or the house as a way to talk about it, and the other image, of course, is the image of the city. But it strikes me the more harmonious the home is, the better it functions and the better people work together. Where there’s a home where there’s conflict and tension and rivalry and that kind of thing, I’ll use a picture, there’s static in getting to that cooperation and that relational working side by side.

So the picture of infusing shalom, it seems to me, is trying to contribute in as helpful a way as possible towards the mutual betterment, another concept that sometimes comes up in philosophical discussions. I think it’s a concept we’ve completely lost sight of in our culture is the concept of the common good.

When you’re moving towards goals that you can share together and move towards one another together about and through so that you are able to cooperate with one another, in some cases even in the midst of [it] you’re aware yes, there are also differences between us. But there is something in common, and there’s something good that we both can work towards as we sort out where our tensions are, that kind of thing.

Right. And in my opinion, the reason we’ve lost the idea of a common good is we no longer believe that cultural integrity is possible. We no longer believe that it is possible for people of diverse beliefs and backgrounds to have a shared culture, to have a culture that fits together. Well, if you don’t have a culture that fits together, naturally there is no such thing as a good that is shared in common.

Yeah, and it becomes unconceptual.

Our conception of the good is cultural.

Yes, and the alternative then becomes forms of tribalism.

Yes.
Darrell Bock: If you don’t have common good, then each group stands up for what it represents, and is kind of in the face of the other group that might challenge it, and, obviously, that’s a much more hostile way to relate than the pursuit of common good.

Greg Forster: My professional training is in political philosophy, and the special glory and honor of politics in God’s design is to give us concepts of justice that are not tribal. I think that’s the great challenge we have is to have that idea of a shared life that does not simply reduce to the will of our group as against the will of your group. So conceptions like democracy, freedom, these are the concepts that our culture historically has used to develop some ideas of how we can live together in a way that is not simply the assertion of dominance by one group.

Darrell Bock: And the individualization, both at an individual level or in a group level, actually erodes those concepts, and I actually think that’s what we’re seeing today in a lot of our culture.

Greg Forster: Yeah. And this is all in de Tocqueville. Alexis de Tocqueville has this image of when individuals become isolated from one another society becomes a great dust of individuals. Like if every individual is a speck of dust, because they’re disconnected and there are no clumps or piles or forms, the dust just spreads out flat. There’s a flat dust of individuals.

Darrell Bock: It’s dirty when there’s a lot of dust.

Greg Forster: No. That’s right. His point is that is when the tyrant steps in because there is nothing to resist the strongman from walking over this dust, because we don’t have the ability as isolated individuals to resist it. So giving people a sense of community, a sense of culture that is shared across groups, and that is a sense of common good is really necessary to avoid either tribalism or sort of just dictatorship.
Interesting. Like I said, that’s a whole other topic. It’s actually something I’m very concerned about. I feel like our form of individualism has cannibalized our ability to think corporately and across corporate lines, and in that process we’ve done our body politic a lot of damage, and we’re seeing it so regularly now. We have a very dysfunctional way in which many things function, and it’s because we have an inability to think beyond our own group, and that ends up really eating away at our ability to function alongside one another in the midst of our differences.

But I’m not going to take this podcast there. That’s a whole other topic, but I say that alongside something else that I do want to add this element. You know, Os Guinness has a concept that there’s a kind of freedom, a kind of sense of individual freedom that’s suicidal, and that when it’s applied, when the individual is so much the focus without any discipline or constraint, that actually what you do is you exercise freedom, but it’s not a liberty that liberates. It’s a liberty that destroys. It’s a suicidal kind of liberty, and I think that that’s also part of what we’re seeing here; that if we can’t get to the place where we can model a concern and a service and an outreach that looks beyond ourselves, that even though we think we may be defending virtue in a positive kind of way, we actually may be leading to its undermining in many ways.

Yeah. I think historically it used to be understood that rights arose from duties; that you had a right as an individual to something only if you had a duty that you had to perform, and that the basis of your right as an individual was because you needed the freedom to carry out your duty, and so if someone took away your right, they were obstructing you from doing something that you had a moral duty to do. So the right to freedom of religion was present only because people had a duty to worship God according to their conscience. The right to liberty was present only because people had a duty to be good stewards of their own lives and to take action for the common good, and so your liberty was there to free you to take action for the common good, to live for the common good.

Property rights were there because you, as a human being, require property to carry out your stewardship duties. The only basis of property rights was that the human person needed property to be a good steward, and we need to recover a sense of stewardship. We need to recover a sense of duty if we’re going to restore any of these freedoms and rights to a constructive rather than destructive role.
Now I don’t want to give up these rights and freedoms.

Darrell Bock
Not at all.

Greg Forster
I think that would be a major step back, but we’ve got to restore them to a constructive role rather than a destructive role.

Darrell Bock
Yet another concept in here, I feel like I’m just doing a potpourri of concepts here, but there’s a lot to work with, is the concept of the “church gathered” versus the “church scattered.” Most people in the church, I think, understand and can get their hands around the “church gathered,” but it’s the “church scattered” part that we tend to struggle with, and really that’s what we’ve been talking about. We’ve been talking about how does the church function scattered across the community, mixed in like salt and pepper in the larger community, and do so in a way in that it brings savor, if I can keep the metaphor, to the places where God has placed us? That’s the image.

Greg Forster
I think the basic concept here, like you say, this is everything we’ve been talking about, it’s that the church is still the church even when it’s not Sunday morning.

Darrell Bock
That’s right.

Greg Forster
Or your Wednesday night Bible study or whatever the formal gathering is.

Darrell Bock
Or you’re not engaged in ministry sometime outside. Ministry is always happening.

Greg Forster
Right. All Christians are in full-time service to Christ.

Darrell Bock
Yeah, 24/7.
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**Greg Forster**

Yeah, and again, to return to a theme, that is not an isolated individual experience. We think about Christianity as a group activity Sunday morning and Wednesday evening, but we don’t think about Christianity as a group activity during the other time when we’re not doing those formal church-gathered activities, but we need to begin to think about Christianity as a group activity, something that we do together with other Christians when we are not the church gathered on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening.

Joining together with our Christians in our vocational fields, in our neighborhoods, wherever we end up living our lives, to carry on common purposes together.

**Darrell Bock**

You know, I think it’s interesting. I know that there are some churches that have begun to organize their small groups around vocations so that all the artists meet together, all the lawyers meet together, that kind of thing. And I think it’s an interesting concept, because what it’s designed to do is to help people encourage one another out of their faith commitment on the one hand, but where they are also living and they have shared expertise on the other in the rest of their lives. And rather than just having a mix and a match, in some cases having these specialized vocational small groups it seems to me is an acknowledgement of appreciating what the church scattered can and ought to be.

**Greg Forster**

Uh-huh. I think it’s not just appreciating it. That is it. That’s empowering it, and it’s necessary because we’re made for relationship, and we’re made for community. We need to get together with people in our fields and think about what does it mean to practice Christian virtue as a scholar or as an artist or a lawyer.

Now that can be very different in, say, a blue-collar type of setting rather than in a white-collar type of setting, and it may not be the Christian factory workers get together in a vocational group for factory workers, but, believe me, there is community to be had. There is relationship to be had, and that sort of mutual reinforcing of Christian virtue in our vocations is something that I think we all need.

**Darrell Bock**

You know, it’s like you knew where I wanted to go next. I have a staff that is looking at this piece, theology that works as we work, and actually sending me questions that they think I should ask, of which I’ve only asked a few, which is shame on me.
But anyway, there were two sets of questions here that I thought immediately come to mind in light of what you’ve just said that they raise, and as we’re kind of wrapping up here, I’m getting ready to come to a section in which you talk about the special responsibility that business leaders have because of the way in which they have oversight over larger corporate structures that influence society.

And you’re also getting ready to make the point that clergy in this level of laity have very little cross contact. I think you site a thing that says: “Almost two-thirds of Christians in elite social positions are not active in their local churches,” which shows a complete disconnect in that area. I’m going to come back to that later, but I’m setting the stage for the question I’m going to ask, and it has to do with what about the people who have kind of the “average, everyday job?”

You know, they’re not manager; they’re not controlling where companies go; they’re not CEOs, and so he says: “How do we communicate the concept of entrepreneurial blessing to a congregation which includes people who do not see themselves as entrepreneurial” or I might add, do not function in kind of what we traditionally see as entrepreneurial roles or “how do we communicate to people the idea of infusing shalom into a society of they don’t perceive themselves as leaders or influencers in the community and, in fact, they may not be?” They may have a very, for lack of a better description, common role and a common job. How does this work for that level of our society?

Greg Forster

Yeah. And I think it is a real growth need in the faith and work movement nationally to be able to speak more to people who have less agency in their work, who are not able to control the environment or the structures of their work, who don’t get to decide how they do the work because they have a boss who tells them how the work is to be done. So I think it’s a very important question.

I think, first of all –two things that stood out to me: One, people who don’t see themselves as entrepreneurs; and, two, people who don’t see themselves as leaders or influencers. And I think in both cases part of what we need to do is help people think of themselves in that way wherever they are, and those words may not be the best words for doing that, but to be an entrepreneur is not simply about owning your own business.
An entrepreneurial mindset is about having agency, seeing yourself as someone who does rather than someone who is acted upon [crosstalk].

**Darrell Bock** Someone who can be an influence wherever they have.

**Greg Forster** Right, and that’s why it’s connected to that. I’d say your sphere of influence may be small, but you have a sphere of influence because to be human is to have a sphere of influence. That stewardship that God made human beings for is not eradicated. We are stewards, and you cannot escape that. You’re a steward whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not. You have influence on the people around you.

And a good illustration of that: You think about on a factory floor typically there may be a guy who’s been there for 30 years, and everybody knows him, and he has a reputation as the guy who looks out for people or the guy who helps you get things done that need to get done or something like that. That person is an influencer and a leader. You get to any institution that’s been around for a while, pretty quickly you discover there are people who are not high on the org chart, per se, but have a lot of influence and power – sometimes for good and sometimes for bad. But one way or another there will be people who either because of their good example or for whatever reason have become leaders and influencers, and I think we all have that opportunity to some extent.

So I think we want to help people see themselves as actors, not simply being acted upon, and as someone who has an influence, even if it’s in a small sphere.

**Darrell Bock** Well, this brings us to the last area, and this is a terrible way to end ‘cause we’re at the end of this section, and yet at the same time I sense it may be setting up a transition in the larger piece, and that is this on the one hand this desire that there be a partnership between clergy and laity, particularly laity that do have more direct agency to use your words, people who are in positions of influence, and the current lack of connection that exists between these two groups, and certainly lack of dialogue that exists between these two groups.
I suspect that what we’ve just walked into is exactly why the Kern Family Foundation exists, and that it is this gap in particular that is certainly one of the things that is why the Foundation has put this topic on the table for the church to urge the church to think about it and what the impact is if this gap would be reduced and dealt with.

Greg Forster

Just a small correction to something you said: I’d say it’s why our program on faith, work and economics exists. We have other programs dealing with other issues and other challenges, but our program on helping the church reconnect with this area of work and economy, it would not be necessary if there were not this widespread estrangement between religious professionals and economic professionals.

They each bring something indispensable to the table. Religious professionals have a store of knowledge and wisdom about the word of God and the historic Christian faith that we all need, and the pastor is an indispensable member of both the faith community and the human community, and the economic professionals are the people who do the work and the people who understand the world of work that is outside the walls of the church, and their knowledge needs to be on the table as well; that just as every individual human being is both a creature of God and a creature of human culture, we need both religious professionals and economic professionals bringing their knowledge to the table.

And part of the problem is very often one side will not recognize that the other side has knowledge. This is something that was transformational for me when I read Dallas Willard’s book, Knowing Christ Today, and one of the things I got out of that book is huge amounts of the way we live both in the church and in human society is based on who[m] we think has knowledge. Who[m] do you think are the people with knowledge?

So I think we need to recognize that pastors and seminary professors and other religious professionals have a knowledge that we need to learn from, and we also need to recognize that economic professionals have knowledge that we need to learn from, and that you’re not allowed to simply dictate to the other side what their approach should be on the conceit that you understand this issue and they don’t.
Rather, we all need to come to the table and say: “Okay. Both sides have some knowledge that needs to be integrated,” and returning to this theme again – we’re made for relationship. We’re made for community. The Lord has not made us to be “Lone Ranger Christians” and figure out our faith on our own. The Lord has made us for a faith community in which we build each other up.

And this is a picture of the kind of potential for reconciliation that also is at the center of what we’re talking about: This ability to recognize that you have skills and gifts that I don’t have, and that we are much better drawing on that larger pool together than each of us functioning individually in our own more isolated worlds.

Yes. C.S. Lewis said: “When there are two Christians together, there is not twice as much Christianity. There is 16 times as much.”

That’s interesting.

There’s a lot to that. To give you a positive and optimistic upbeat note to end on, there is a lot of power waiting to be tapped, and because we are not without hope in the world, we have the ability to start tapping it, and it’s starting to happen now, and I’ve been very encouraged by the changes we’ve seen in the last few years.

Well, we’re only really just about 40 percent through this document in the two podcasts that we’ve done, and we have much more to go. There’s much more to explore, but I sense we’re laying a good groundwork for people, and that there’s a lot here to reflect on.

I used to say about the center that the center was a wonderful place for theological reflection, for practical reflection, but without some good core sociology it wasn’t going to make any sense. And what I’m excited about and what we’re talking about is that I think we’re helping people who don’t have a sociology degree or don’t think about sociology and economics and politics and that kind of thing as a regular basis. Give them some hooks to hang on and to think about as they think about the integration of their lives, as they think about how God walks into certain spheres of life.
They certainly know God has them active in because every nine to five they’re there where God has them, and hopefully with some thought about how that can impact their life in a positive way so that when they invest their time and their energy into those relationships and into those responsibilities, into those duties, if you will, they do it with such virtue and with such character and with such shalom and such blessing that they are productive and they change the environment that they work in, and their work becomes more fulfilling as a result.

How’s that for positives?

*Greg Forster*  
Amen to all that. Amen to all that.

*Darrell Bock*  
Well, great.

*Greg Forster*  
I’m not a sociologist, but I am a social scientist, and I’m eager to bring our knowledge to the table and get theology and social science into dialogue for the life of the church.

*Darrell Bock*  
Well, that’s what we’re attempting to do, and I really appreciate you taking time to do it. Obviously you’re going to be invited back ‘cause we’re going through the document till we’re done. We’re going from A to Z, and we’re probably at about letter J or something at this point, so we’ve got a ways to go.

Thank you again, Greg, for being a part of our discussion, and we thank you for being a part of The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture.