Stewardship and The Common Good

Part 2 of 2: Politics, Economics and the Common Good
with Darrell L. Bock and Dr Greg Forster
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Dr. Darrell Bock

Let’s turn our attention to other issues that are related to the gathering of wealth. And obviously one of the features that has become big in our time is the whole relationship of work and life to technology on the one hand and what it enables us to do and what it can get in the way of our doing depending on how you view it. I love watching people talk about technology because they either are techno files, they really love technology or they really have questions about it and they want to go back to an era that I’m afraid we have permanently left. And then issues of the environment. So let’s talk about this what does technology do for us and how can it work against us?

Dr. Greg Forster

Well I think it comes back to that question, what is creation? If we have that static model of creation I was talking about before then we will think that the natural world is in its right state when human beings are not affecting it. But actually if you look at Genesis 1 and 2 there are all kinds of clear indications that it’s God’s intention that human work with interact with the natural environment and to some degree transform it so that the goal or ideal is not an natural environment in which human impact has been zero. And that idea of developing, cultivating, building, coming up with new and better ways to do things I think is a part of the original plan. That human beings are intended to develop technologically as well as economically. That human beings are intended to come up with better and better and better ways of doing things. Now there are limits to this even before the fall. So for example we are told that the natural world, reflects or manifests or declares Gods glory and that would in fact place a limit to how extensively we could transform it. If the forest and the oceans and the sky’s manifest Gods glory then that means we cannot have simply an arbitrary and unlimited mandate to do whatever we want with them right. So I appreciate that limitation and it’s important and worth bearing in mind. And similarly we only want to use technology, invent technology in ways that are beneficial. The fall really — surprisingly the fall complicates things. Can you imagine that.

Dr. Darrell Bock

That’s right.
Dr. Greg Forster

It creates this inherent or intrinsic tendency of development in the wrong direction. We see that especially in the story of the Tower of Babel. Where the story is framed in terms of a technological development. The people at Babel invent a better brick making technology and that’s what prompts them to think, “Hey let’s build the biggest city that the world has ever seen and we’ll really be somebody.” Right. So there’s this after the fall there’s this natural default tendency for technology to be used again to create that universe in which I am the God. Right. Like you were talking about before. But again the redemptive turn that centers on Christ and that we are supposed to be cooperating with does not consist of getting back to Eden. Does not consist of restoring a pristine natural world where human beings have had no impact. Again the narrative ends with a city. Right. God cannot be against cities just because the Tower of Babel was bad because we know that the new Jerusalem is coming. The city is a good thing. Human beings are made to be city builders. And obviously that doesn’t mean that you’re a better Christian if you live in an urban center rather than a suburb or a rural area because those are communities too. Human beings are made to be community builders. But technology and economic development, which go hand in hand, are not intrinsically bad, they’re just fallen and need that redirection toward their original created intention.

Dr. Darrell Bock

And so again we’re back to the theme about the need to be good stewards of that which God has given us and to handle that stewardship responsible. You allude to something here that I don’t think I know the background story to this. You talk about the destructive case of ethanol in talking about the environment. And to be honest with you I had no idea what you were alluding to. So I’m all ears.
Dr. Greg Forster

Well it’s a useful illustration. If you’re interested Time magazine did a huge cover story on this a while back but it’s been written about in quite a lot of places. There’s all kinds of places you can find information on it. Basically, ethanol as you probably know is made from corn. And it’s additive that they mix into gasoline because there is a law requiring them to do it. The theory is that it reduces pollution from your cars emission to mix this ethanol in. Unfortunately the evidence is accumulated pretty strongly that ethanol does not have an environmental benefit. But requiring people to put ethanol in cars has a huge benefit for corn growers who are able to organize politically and whenever there’s a struggle over this, the people who are paying for it are only losing tiny bit. Right. The amount of money that you lose because of the ethanol mandate is very small but the people who gain, gain tremendously. And we see this across many issues. This is the perennial problem of democratic politics that it’s easy to create programs where a few people benefit a great deal and everyone else loses a tiny bit. And these programs can be very destructive but it’s hard to mobilize anybody against them. The worst part of it is these programs cause the price of corn on the open market to go up. Because when you buy more, you have an artificially created demand for more corn, to purchase more corn but the ability to scale up corn production is limited. There’s a cycle and there are limitations to how much cultivatable land is available and so forth. What that means is food prices are higher. Now you and I can probably afford to pay more for corn and for corn based food products but in parts of the world where people are living on margin. A small increment in the price of food could have a devastating effect on people’s ability to feed their families. So what we’re seeing is a policy that’s justified out of environmental concern but actually doesn’t seem to benefit the environment very much but it does have the impact of making food more expensive for people who need it.
Okay. Well you’ve explained the destructive case of ethanol for me there. Let’s turn our attention to the challenges of citizenship in this area and here you raise the question of freedom of religion as a social model, the importance of freedom of religion. We’ve done lots of podcasts with lawyers about religious liberty and the importance of that dimension of things and creating a certain kind of climate and environment for people to operate both personally in terms of their conscious and spiritually. I like to make the point that freedom of religion is a benefit that actually benefits anyone whether they’re religious or not because part of it is about freedom of consciousness to operate. And then you talk about politics being primarily about justice. And of course justice is a very complex topic. So let’s take them one at a time. Freedom of religion and you have this statement in the paper. I’ve exerted it out because I think it’s worth reading. The challenge arises from freedom of religion as a social model, this was noted above, social consensus about religion and morality has broken down. People do not share a common language for working out their difference for what is right or fair. Society has increasingly turned the corrosive power of the state to resolve it’s disputes because society lacks a common knowledge of moral concepts there’s little shared basis for understanding what actions are good or legitimate. So more and more social conflicts come to be settled through political power struggles. So that makes us sound like we’re kind of in a WWF of life here in which we’ve got people battling with one another. How do we get out of that cycle or is there a way out of that cycle?
Dr. Greg Forster  

Well if I had an easy answer for that I’d be off implementing it rather than doing podcasts here but I don’t have an easy answer but I’m increasingly convinced that the key issue is we have to stop thinking only in terms of law and start thinking in terms of social model. That religious freedom is a model of society before it is a legal and constitutional institution. And that means what we really have to do is make religious freedom plausible to people. Make it plausible that people ought to have this freedom and the heart of that is restoring that common language of what’s good and fair. Giving people a sense that yes we can work out our differences. Maybe not ultimately but sufficiently for peaceful life with one another. That we can find a formula of peace as Peter Berger puts it in his new book and I think the major battle field on which that’s going to happen is work in economics frankly because it is in workplaces where people develop common language to solve problems in a diverse pluralistic environment. A workplace may have a Christian and a Buddhist and an Atheist and then one guy who’s spiritual but not religious and then another guy who doesn’t know what he is. But those people have got to have a common language for solving problems or they’re not going to be able to keep the factory open or keep the store front open or keep whatever they’re doing it’s going to fall apart if they don’t have a common language. It’s in the workplace where we learn to talk to each other, understand each other and trust each other in spite of the fact that we have different ultimate beliefs. I think the more Christians can get out into workplaces and businesses and create flourishing there. The more it’s going to be plausible to people that yeah, in fact we want a society in which people live out their faith in every aspect of their life and they have the freedom to do that.
Dr. Darrell Bock  
Well it strikes me that the goal of creating religious freedom and what I think is the corollary with it, freedom of conscious is, is that there’s a space for the heart which says this is a space in to which the state is not allowed and in those areas that don’t relate to the business of the state allowing people to have that freedom of expression and that freedom of being who they are, the way God has made them is a freedom worth protecting and it’s interesting that someone as diverse as Thomas Jefferson who was a well-known Unitarian on one hand and John Adams who was about as orthodox a Christian as you could have found in the time in which he lived, that they shared a common value in terms of how to build a society around this idea that there should be a Bill of Rights in which religious freedom was certainly a part of what was going on and a part of what should be affirmed that the state has no business dictating where the heart of a person should and how the heart of a person should function.

Dr. Greg Forster  
Absolutely and I think part of what we’ve lost I come back to again is a sense of putting the good on the table before we talk about the bad. A sense of what is it that’s good about that area of activity that the state doesn’t intrude into. What is the benefit? What is the thing that’s satisfying and meaningful to people that would then jeopardized if the state invades that space? So restoring a sense of human beings as responsible agents under God. A sense of human beings who are responsible to the transcendent as Vaclav Havel put it.

Dr. Darrell Bock  
Now when we turn to the subject of justice and there are lots of places I can go here but I think there’s one place I want to kind of zero in on. We’ve got a discussion that sometimes is raised or a distinction that is sometimes raised that’s worth contemplating and that’s the difference between what we might call civil or natural justice versus theological justice and as we consider what that means and we’ve lost Greg here so let’s wait and see if we can get him back.

Dr. Greg Forster  
Yeah. Can you hear me? You dropped out but now your back.

Dr. Darrell Bock  
Okay. Good. We’ve lost the picture but we’ve got the sound. So I’ll just resume. So as we think about the difference between civil and natural justice and theological justice and your discussing politics and economics as a moral phenomenon, what do you have in mind when you’re raising these areas in relationship to each other?
Dr. Greg Forster

Well you mentioned before in the context of religious freedom that as people lose that common moral language they increasingly turn to power to solve their problems. So you had this image of sort of this pro wrestling arena and I think we are seeing politics degrade into a pro wrestling arena. And what I have in mind when I wrote that passage is that increasingly people are thinking that that’s the only model of politics that’s possible. That politics is finally about power. And I want to push back as hard as I can on that because if we give that ground, if we say politics is really about power we abandon any possibility of humane politics. We abandon any possibility of justice that includes the civil order.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Yeah. It would be the battle of special interests.

Dr. Greg Forster

No that’s right. Well and we don’t get the option of checking out from the civil order to go pursue justice in an apolitical way because you may not be interested in politics but politics is interested in you. And I don’t mean that in a sinister way I mean that because human beings are made to be members of their communities. Human beings are sexual creatures and familial creatures, they are economic creatures, they are also political creatures. That is one part of who we are as God’s created beings. So if we kind of say well politics yeah that’s all about power. Then we’re ceding ground we can’t afford to cede. So that’s why I think it’s important to restore a sense that politics is about justice with all the complicated issues that it raises for us.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Yeah. And I think a contrastive model of thinking about politics being about power is to raise the question of politics being about the pursuit in diverse society of what we might call the common good and wrestling hard for trying to figure out what that ground is which forces these diverse groups actually to interact with one another in a way in which you’re treating someone as neighbor.

Dr. Greg Forster

Absolutely.

Dr. Darrell Bock

In very relational kinds of terms. So I think that the politics of power ends up devolving into a kind of confrontation on a tribal scale. I’ve got – go ahead.
Dr. Greg Forster: I think that’s right. And I think it comes back to that common language we were talking about that you cannot have a common good if you don’t have a common moral language. Because if I talk about the common good and mean one thing but you talk about the common good and you mean something completely different it’s not common, right.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Yes. In fact I once was on a panel, I write for a blog here the Dallas Morning News Weekly that asks religious questions. I’ve been doing it for about eight years. And we once had a panel of seven of us and this panel is up of people as diverse as you can imagine because it’s a reflection of the larger society that’s part of what the paper’s trying to achieve. And the discussion was the common good. And I opened the panel by saying well the difficulty is that everyone on the surface likes the idea of common good but what do you when you can’t agree on what the good is and you don’t hold things in common. Then how do you get to a common good.

Dr. Greg Forster: Right.

Dr. Darrell Bock: And the only way to get there is to work hard to have a conversation about the things that you can at least potentially share in. The spaces that you might disagree about and then figure out how to disagree well if I can say it that way.

Dr. Greg Forster: Yes.

Dr. Darrell Bock: And then go from there.
Dr. Greg Forster: I think this question was central to what the American founders had in mind when they designed the constitution. You will hear people say that the main point of Federalist 10 is that there is no common good there’s only competition among factions. That is not at all what Federalist 10 actually says. Federalist 10 says what we need is a system in which no faction is dominant so that the common good can have some space to emerge. There is absolutely that there is an assumption that there is a common good and that the goal of politics is to promote the common good. But the founders were very shroud in thinking about creating a system in which people would have the right to disagree and that would be a pluralistic system in which because it’s pluralistic no one faction has enough power to simply get it’s way. That compromise and sort struggle that leads to compromise, rather than struggle that leads to violent conflict or injustice and suppression.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Or triumph in vanquishing.

Dr. Greg Forster: Right. And the idea is not a perfect world where there is no struggle or disagreement. The idea is how do we bring about disagreement that ends in compromise rather than disagreement ending in injustice or violence.

Dr. Darrell Bock: And a compromise that ends up being functional in a way that society doesn’t break down and become so dysfunctional that you can’t live with the person next to you in the home next to you whose beliefs may be different then your own.

Dr. Greg Forster: Right. One thing that I like to say is that Jean Jacque Russo said it is impossible to live in peace with people who you think are damned. And part of what – I’m unashamed in my love for the American experiment. What I love about the American experiment is that we’re out to prove him wrong. We’re out to prove that that’s not true that we can live in peace with people who we think worship the wrong Gods and have an eternal fate that is horrifying beyond imagining.

Dr. Darrell Bock: And vice versa. I mean the people that think that way about us.

Dr. Greg Forster: Absolutely. That’s right. We’re all in this together out to prove Russo wrong on that.
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**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Yeah. Well it’s an interesting question and I sometimes think that the Church forgets that the place where the society is supposed to reflect the standard of God, the primary place is the actual believing community. That it’s the place where the spirit resides, where people are set a part and sanctified where the opportunity to overcome that which is represented by the fall where that which leaves us short is compensated for by the gifts of grace that God gives to us. Those are the communities where we’re supposed to see really functional relationships and even in that context we live in a fallen world and it comes up short but at least there’s a chance. Where as to expect that of the larger outside more diverse world is probably a very unrealistic expectation and means that we have to think through how we live in that kind of – in the under deemed spaces of our creation.

**Dr. Greg Forster**  Well an expectation that is not at all supported by scripture itself either. I find it useful to distinguish between justice in the natural justice and supernatural justice is the perfect standard that God rightly expects of all people but that is actually only manifested by those that have supernatural help to achieve it but then scripture and Christian historic political philosophy have recognized justice in another sense, justice at the natural level, what the natural man is capable of doing even after the fall.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Well we’re almost done here. We’ve got one more major topic before we summarize and that is a category in a section that you entitled the “Rule of Law” and here you discuss the goal of government and economics and you say it is to provide conditions for what we call natural justice necessary for human flourishing in an economic context it requires fair, impartial, and stable laws. And this raises the question of how we do that and I think in two ways. One providing an environment in which our society functions through its businesses and through its market places that allows for the development and growth of an environment for human flourishing. And then the other half of the equation and sometimes these things are pitted against one another perhaps unfortunately, in fact almost for sure unfortunately, and that is the challenge of acting out of the legitimate concern for the poor and developing our policies in relationship to the poor in such a way that we are careful not to create a dependency that undercuts human dignity but actually allows for real growth as part of that flourishing. So put that all together for me in a big pie.
Dr. Greg Forster

I’m glad that you’ve related the rule of law to the problem of dependency. The essential characteristic of the rule of law is that all people in society are under the same rules. You don’t have a ruling class that is not bound to the law and a ruled class that is bound to the law but everyone from the top to the bottom is under the same rules. This relates to dependency because I think the danger that we need to be concerned about is the emergence of a two tiered society in which the upper half is seen to be productive economically and essentially they can be trusted to run their own lives but a lower half that has broken families and break down of work relationships and economic relationships and the perception unfortunately will come that people in that bottom half are not capable of managing their own lives and I think there’s a serious danger of their rights being taken away because of the perception that they’re not able to be trusted to be stewards. I mean it comes back, we started with stewardship now let’s come back to stewardship. All human beings no exceptions are made to be stewards of the world. We are all fellow stewards together and a society that says some people are stewards and that other people are not stewards they are rather to be stewarded by the stewards is a society that loses the rule of law and I can’t even begin to describe the evils that flow from that.

Dr. Darrell Bock

So the point here is to work on having law that allows for the growth of the individual, for the opportunity for the person to be productive in contributing to the society in a way that helps it move along. And then on the other hand for the people who are kind of on the edge of that society and risk falling off the edge if I can say it that way to use a picture, figuring out a way to help them but to help them hopefully in a way that they don’t become permanently dependent on the pullback but actually have a chance of moving out of that dependency.

Dr. Greg Forster

Absolutely. I think those go hand and glove. If we’re not doing the one we’re going to lose the other. I think my friends on the right who are enthusiastic about you know economic macro structures but are not actively working to provide that hand up to the poor. My friends on the left who are enthusiastic about a hand up for the poor but don’t want to hear about the rule of law and property rights and that kind of thing. To me that’s chocolate and peanut butter. It’s two great tastes that taste great together. You’re not going to keep one if you don’t have the other.
Dr. Darrell Bock  

Yeah. So you wrap up this way when you come to this section it says, “Concerning care for the good of our neighbors, which should be our bedrock concern in all the areas canvased above, begins with respect for their irreducible dignity as persons. That respect is most basically expressed in our refusal to treat human beings as property. This is why the rule of law is fundamental to virtuous citizenship, arbitrary exercise of corrosive power is almost the definition of what it means to treat people as property. As we carry out the challenge of retrieving virtuous citizenship let us look first to the dignity of all our neighbors and thus affirm that the rule of law must structure the states coercive power, shunning it’s use of its power for any end outside those bounds. This will not only keep out cultural engagement humane it also will reassure those outside the church that our desire to impact the culture does not come at the expense of their rights and will in fact be a blessing to them and not a threat.” And what strikes me about that citation is ministering to the culture in such a way with such a service with such a concern that people understand inherently that you are out for their best. Even in those places where the conversations might get uncomfortable because you might challenge them at certain moral levels there is no doubt that what is motivating that conversation in every case is an effort to be concerned for the best of what the person can experience in life.

Dr. Greg Forster  

Absolutely and I think if we don’t have that we’re not going to accomplish much else. I wrote an article not long ago under the title “Love is our King” And I said that one of the most dangerous things of all is the attempt by people outside the church to persuade people that Christians don’t love their neighbors, that we’re out to get people. I said we cannot afford to lose that. In the chess game we can lose a pawn or we can lose a bishop or we can lose a rook but if we don’t love our neighbors and if we’re not seen to be loving our neighbors that’s the king in this game. We’ve got to be loving our neighbors and we’ve got to be seen to be loving our neighbors.

Dr. Darrell Bock  

And that doesn’t necessarily mean leaving them alone. That means caring for them enough to engage with them in an honest kind of way but in an honest and humble way that in the midst of the challenge the person has not doubt that what is creating this sense of our challenging them in some cases is our very deep concern for their well-being. Even if they don’t agree with the nature of the challenge.
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Dr. Greg Forster  ~And this is why I think Christians manifesting their faith in the way they do things like work and buy and sell and do business creates the plausibility of that. That when Christianity is seen as an isolated decontextualized Gospel message and nothing else, it doesn’t come across as something credible but when Christians manifest a way of life that is clearly grounded in love of God and neighbor and death to self for the sake of God and neighbor it makes the Gospel plausible. That’s why integrating our faith with our work and manifesting our faith in the market place I think is critical not only to the future of our culture and the health of the church but also to the credibility to the Gospel in the world.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Yeah the example that I love to come back to on this is that when Katrina happened and all the faith community banded together to rescue the multitudes of people that needed help, even that spiritual organ of pietistic reflection, the New York Times wrote an editorial saying, What a mess we would have been in had not these houses of faith stepped in and given the man power and the care and the service that they gave to reach out and help people who were in need. And a great self-sacrifice in doing so and accomplishing something the government was unable to accomplish.

Dr. Greg Forster  And I think the transition we need to make now is we can’t wait for the hurricane. We can’t sit around waiting for a disaster so we can go love our neighbors. We’ve got to figure out how this happens 24/7.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Yeah. I think that’s a great suggestion. Well that’s a terrific note to close out on. We’ve got one more of these commentaries to do where we kind of pull everything together in the whole work and review some of the ground that we’ve covered. This has been a fascinating journey of reflection of how theology and work come together, how to rescue ourselves from our tendency to be dualistic and to maybe even approach our work the way we’re often taught in a secular environment to do so which is to say you know there’s your work that you do over here and you earn your money to do the spiritual things that go on over there and you know maybe the twain never meet and I think the Biblical position is what God has joined together let no man put asunder.

Dr. Greg Forster  Amen to that.
Dr. Darrell Bock  That faith and work and life and theology all go together. It’s a 24/7 operation. God is calling us to be his people whereever he has us whenever he has and that every conscious moment is dedicated in ministry and service to God.

Dr. Greg Forster  Amen to that.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Well thank you again Greg we appreciate your being with us and we thank you for joining us on the table and hope that you’ll be with us again soon.