

Imagine an economy that's quite small—perhaps that of a remote village long ago where maybe fifty people live in a half-dozen huts. These people often lead a very bleak life economically—a life centered around what's called subsistence farming. That's when nearly all of the crops or livestock raised are used to support each and every family. And the key here is the words “nearly all.” That's right, there's often little evidence of any particular family having any real abundance. Yeah, just meeting their basic needs.

Subsistence farming has been around pretty much since the Fall...and, truth be told, it's still a rather common condition in a number of places around the world. But slowly that has changed for many folks, leveraged by trade routes and ships navigating the seas. Yeah, people started exchanging goods widely—yes, that what was more common in one place was scarce and highly valued in another. Here's the deal: locals could get a premium price for their goods elsewhere and, in turn, spend that extra money on goods brought from afar. In that way, both parties in each transaction were bettered—by virtue of exercising their gifting and their free choice to trade as stewards for their customers...their families...and their God.

And from the so-called Industrial Revolution, say, from the mid-1700s to the digital revolution and beyond today, free trade has flourished in amazing ways around the world. In this way, great wealth was created everywhere free trade was allowed to flourish. And often, in free societies, the majority of the population was largely much better off—if they each pursued diligent stewardship of their gifting with hard work.

This ongoing happening is labeled with names like *capitalism*, *free trade*, and *free markets*...sometimes in a lauding fashion...but quite often with others sneering at it. But the undeniable fact is that wherever the condition of free trade is fostered by just the right measure of law, then supported, and extolled, it creates a whole lot of general prosperity through the specific prosperity for its diligent, flexible participants.

And just the opposite is clearly the result of *socialism* and *protectionism*—yeah, protectionism is the opposite of free trade...it's protecting one supplier at the expense of its competitors and consumers. The jury's verdict on these approaches is well-established in this regard: wherever free trade is fostered with many trading partners, general prosperity increases. Wherever it is not, nations and their citizens languish.

There is no greater real-world laboratory to show this than with two cases...first, the Great Depression of the 1930s. With the crash of the U.S. stock market, many nations often worked to become protectionist, limiting trade with others. And in so doing, their economies languished. Look, if a country like Switzerland is good at making chocolates and watches but its neighbors won't trade with Switzerland, the seemingly natural, resulting thing to do is for the Swiss to not buy what *those* countries are good at!

This mindset often took the form of governments' formal actions of tariffs. Yeah, tariffs are taxes on other countries' goods they are trying to sell. But of course, then the other country's instinct is to retaliate and put large tariffs on the country charging the tariffs. Unsurprisingly, very soon, countries simply drastically reduce buying the goods made by other countries. Yes, in our example, the Swiss are left with idled labor and underutilized chocolate and watch factories—and thus don't have the prosperity to buy other countries' goods. In the United States, this destructive thinking took the form of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930. This law by Congress raised taxes on imported goods by about 20% and, of course, also worked to decrease U.S. exports and prosperity—all making the Great Depression worse!

Our other example came later in the same century...but this one's a positive case study. In the latter half of the 20th century, free trade began to truly flourish in many countries, spurred on by lowered tariffs, tech innovation, transportation improvements, operating efficiencies and specialization in each country. Yes, the Swiss could manufacture more chocolate and watches than ever and bought all kinds of goods from folks in other countries that those folks were better at making! World prosperity increased—at least in those many countries who generally fostered free trade!

Trouble is, most everyone who've lived in places like the U.S. the last 70 years very much tend to take free trade for granted, not appreciating how much their prosperity is fostered by long-anchoring free trade.

Now let's zag and take another direction now. This phenomenon of more global free trade over past decades has helped undergird the success of the Great Commission that Jesus commanded His disciples to go and do. The truth is, the features of successful free trade help facilitate the spread of and belief in the Gospel. Let's unpack why that's the case...

Here are four key points that anchor widespread prosperity: free trade creates mutual betterment for those involved—in fact, that's the purpose of that activity. ...Free trade fosters fruitful connection and collaboration in each individual transaction. ...Free trade fosters highly differentiated offerings to rise to the top of a heap of opportunity far beyond what people previously thought was possible. ...And free trade fosters highly specialized stewardship by both the suppliers and consumers of what's being offered.

And here's the truly amazing thing about all that: those four points are exactly why and how the Gospel has been shared! That's right—the great collaborative stewardship of the Gospel by a very intentional fragment of the Church has changed the lives of hundreds of millions worldwide over recent decades! So, let's detail those principles we just enumerated that are shared by the free trade of goods and the spread of the Gospel.

Mutual betterment. The already-paid-for opportunity for an unbeliever believing in Christ unto eternal life is the ultimate in a person's betterment. But that is simultaneously providing amazing betterment and rewards for the believer who obediently shared the Gospel to the unbeliever! Both are winners! And, of course, that's the heartbeat of God...evidenced by the great sacrifice of Christ—and our great inheritance!

Fruitful connection and collaboration. Hey, excited about a relentless diet of potatoes in a remote village? Or do you prefer the incredible connection and collaboration across scores of people to provide potato chips, bicycles, medicines, greeting cards and much more at a Walmart? Free trade creates prosperity through connection and collaboration. So it is with the Kingdom of God, too. God uses connection to Christ unto salvation and sanctification—as well as collaboration in everyday processes of Christ's Kingdom like praying, preaching, teaching, proclaiming, discipling...yes, witnessing to all people! Some will bask in the benefits of that, but some will walk away—like the rich young ruler did from Jesus! Yes, just like free trade.

Highly differentiated offerings. Free trade fosters the choosing from a huge number of alternatives. Amazon alone touts having over 300 million product offerings available for purchase. Of course, some of those offerings are highly differentiated...others less so. The point is that free trade fosters Amazon offering consumers their best choices. But the greatest differentiation ever is the offering of Jesus—radically different than that of Buddha or Muhammad or any number of religious, philosophical, cultural, and political competitors. And long before Amazon, Christ commanded His followers to go forth and make disciples of those responding to the utterly unique offering at the Cross! A highly differentiated offering...

Highly localized stewardships. Free trade boils down to execution by every person within an enterprise, a person who's devoted to highly specialized stewardship of a key offering. Is it luxury cars, like Mercedes? Is it affordable necessities, like Walmart? Is it free search capabilities to all, like Google? Or is it everyday believers stewarding the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24)—an offering by Christ that is free to all?

Look, those four ideas are what drive fruitful free trade around the world. And we see that, in parallel fashion, that's what has fostered the Great Commission fruitfulness the past couple hundred years. In this way, these two have spread somewhat hand-in-hand as people historically more confined to their nation and cultural ways became aware that free trade helps offer a wide buffet of opportunities, secular and sacred. 'Course, many buffet offerings should be declined—but discerning people will choose wisely!

We live in a time when free trade is being disparaged by political leaders in favor of protectionism. But the free Gospel has nothing to fear from competition. The Apostle Paul used seagoing ships, the amazing road system of the Roman Empire, and his skills at tentmaking to effect pioneering mission trips. Paul was intentionally focused on the great collaborative stewardship of the Gospel! *We're privileged to do no less!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you support free trade when it comes to the amazing advantages that you enjoy as a consumer of so many goods and services...yet still want your particular job, your particular skill set, your particular company, or your particular industry protected from domestic or international competitors? Discuss.

2. When it comes to the Great Commission set before all His disciples then and now by Christ Himself, does your church have highly differentiated, impacting, effective efforts—ranging for your locale to the end of the earth? Discuss.

3. Is your highly specialized stewardship of your skills matched up well with your workplace's offerings? ...Your church's focus? ...God's commandment to go forth and make disciples? Discuss.