

The Irresistible Revolution by Shane Claiborne (a critique)

Cord of 2 strands unwoven

Woven throughout this book are 2 cords: one of which resonates strongly with me; the other drove me to write this. I wouldn't wish to discourage anybody from reading the book because the good parts are so good (chapter 6 is practically a must read for modern Christians); but I can't resist registering my disagreements because I think some ideological tendencies are harmful to people. One reason I'm writing this is because I want my kids to read the book when they are older. I want to tell them to live like Shane – only read this critique. I'll list what I think are the good and bad and elaborate afterwards.

Some of the good:

- Community.
- Allegiance to the kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of this world. American patriotism, flying the U.S. Flag in church – this is unscriptural.
- Anti materialism / simplicity.

The bad:

- Global economy made into a bad thing.
- Encouragement of wealth redistribution.
- Pacifism in the extreme.
- Mentioning race.

Community

The following sections focus on disagreement, but I must start with wholehearted agreement; Chapter 6 really focuses on community. Modern Christians should get back somewhere near an Acts 4 mentality. Some of the ideas found in the chapter around sharing resources and lives are exciting. I was very interested in

- relationaltithes.com
- Collectives for emergencies instead of insurance (3).
- Doing more things together as a group; striving to lend each other (and non-Christians) a hand.
- medi-share.com(2)

The Evil Global Economy

While I would tend to agree with Shane about consumerism gone amok in general, there is no doubting positive side effects. He decries the “corporate global economy”(1) but it's ironic that consumerism has done far more for the poor in India (for instance) in the past decade than all the missionaries and “momma T” ever did. If you wish simply to help the poor - become more of a consumerist! Now, of course, this did nothing to spiritually benefit the Indians as the missionaries did. My point is that poverty is not to be the focus. Yes, Jesus

wants us to give to the poor – in some part to keep our focus away from our material things. The focus of the kingdom is spiritual, not physical.

Race

I am strongly of the opinion that the best course is to completely disregard race. That's why on the last official census, I refused to answer the question asking to declare my race (though technically I was breaking the law in doing so). Keeping lists by race only puts people in different camps to be pitted against each other. If we must put people in groups (Biblically we must discern “dogs”, “swine”, etc. negative though that sounds) then so be it. I don't think race/ethnicity is one we must observe. I point this out because of

- Derogatory reference to “white men”.(4)
- Malcolm X (a racist leader of a pagan religion) referred to as a saint/prophet.(5)
- Proudly mentions wearing a “rage against the machine” shirt.(6) Lyrics from the group's most famous song includes “Those who died are justified, for wearing the badge, they're chosen whites” (apparently praising cop killing and racism), and “F*** you, I won't do what you tell me” (the quintessential rejection of authority).

Christian view of Conservatism vs. Liberalism

I maintain that the focus of the Christian is on the kingdom: the spiritual kingdom. We needn't bother ourselves with the entanglements of this world. I don't believe we have any business getting involved in politics. I used to be somewhat involved and quite strongly supportive of conservative politicians. At some point I realized

- We have nothing to do with the “kingdoms” of this world.
- We owe no allegiance to our country above what the Bible prescribes.
- This (U.S.) was never a Christian nation.

Nonetheless, political ideologies and their repercussions is a discussion of some benefit - mostly to attempt to dissuade those who have fallen prey to the false allure of modern Liberalism. When I decided to stop giving support to conservative politicians, I reasoned that supporting the Gospel is always more important and that a convert will naturally end up supporting conservatives anyway. Now I realize that the second half of that line of reasoning does not naturally follow. In fact one Christian organization even promotes Marxism! (16)

Poverty

Shane is very much concerned with the plight of the poor. All Christians should be, though I'm not sure to that extent. He writes that it's “God's will to end poverty”(7). Where is that in Scripture? I believe that our assistance to the poor is more a way of making the message attractive to those who are probably more inclined to accept it. Physical poverty is not portrayed as the worst thing or even necessarily a bad thing in Scripture; but spiritual poverty is.

Setting aside the issue of people who voluntarily live on the street, can many in this country really be considered poor? How many of the “poor” have things like televisions, plenty of

clothing, and weight problems? Despite this, Shane obviously espouses public redistribution of wealth.(8) Much could be said, not the least of which that the “poor” in this country need other things more than government assistance. The physical needs in this country are almost totally met; there is however, a great spiritual need. That kind of need will not only *not* come from government; it will actually be *hindered* as government grows.

What about other countries? Why are people in such countries poor? Is there something fundamentally different about the people? Are we smarter? No, the problem is *government*. The reason people are desperately poor in some African nations, for instance, is that the corrupt governments do nothing but *take* (resources and opportunities) and fail to *give*. The governments have *all* the power; the people have *none*. With little to prevent it from doing so, this is the natural progression of government. Sinful men will *always* crave power and wealth. If we want to do any one thing to help poor people in such nations, we need to do what we can to transform and *decrease the power of government*. I'm speaking in the natural here; it's always more beneficial to help spiritually.

The Bottom Line

Liberalism is at it's core an ideology that says that government is the highest power, and as such, is humanity's hope for a better world. We must grow government to make a better world. Conservatism says the opposite. Which ideology better fits history and the teaching of Scripture? Yes, Jesus teaches us to give to the poor. He doesn't teach us to give to the government, though; that would be the same as giving to the Sadducees and Pharisees or Judas controlling the purse. Yes there should be a redistributionism as expressed in Acts 4, we should all only have what we need – but this redistribution should occur among believers. Shane writes, “ If we shared, there would be enough for everybody” .(13) This is true for the kindgom of God, but a recipe for disaster for the kingdoms of this world. In the name of sharing so that there's enough for all (w/o the Spirit leading the revolution), people will force their fellow man to starve to death.(14) If government gets involved, we will only create problems. Shane mentioned “Live 8”(9). Such silly concert events do nothing to help the poor and almost surely only aid the corrupt governments where the poor live.(11) Government is a necessary *evil*. We should only support it insofar as it carries out it's legitimate functions (see final section below). It has no business aiding the poor, providing for our health care, or any other of the myriad things it naturally gravitates towards in it's attempt to usurp the role of God.

Economics

Concerning economic markets, the same principle applies. Getting governments involved will *always* result in a play for power. Government will inevitably desire to tax or control the system to their advantage. If markets are free, however, then the people who participate in those markets control them by their habits (the most democratic system possible). As Christians, we should opt to live simpler, but this doesn't mean excess economic activity is bad thing. There will always be unbelievers, and their economic activity has a beneficial

effect on poorer countries (as long as there is free trade between those countries). Shane writes that we should start asking “why people are poor”.(12) I agree that that's an interesting question, but I'm pretty sure we would come to different conclusions. We both might think that the poor are there because of injustice. The only difference is that I think that injustice is derived from government, not potentially curbed by government.

The Proper Application of Government

It's interesting that Shane and I seem to have exactly opposing opinions of what the proper role of government should be. According to Scripture, the primary role of government is the punishment of the wicked(10), but he somehow comes to the opposite conclusion.(15) In fact, he seems to ignore the fact that God does execute vengeance and parents must discipline their children. Does it violate love to punish criminals? I would argue that it would violate love *not to*. In my opinion Shane makes a common error among Liberalism; he confuses interpersonal relationships with government responsibility. This is seen in the tortured argument that children learn to hit each other from the fact that government executes murderers or wages war on terrorists.(17) Government is mandated by God to do the former, and perhaps by extension the latter (whether or not Christians should involve themselves in war – that's another debate). In this country's war on terrorism, the goal is to safeguard it's own citizens by the highly discriminate use of force against the world's most violent murderers. If there's a lesson for children in there, it's *respect life*.

Ideas have consequences; choose your ideology carefully.

Notes

- 1) P. 153
- 2) P. 178 doesn't mention medi-share by name but it sounds exactly like it. It's strange that whatever organization used is not referenced since he maintains a comprehensive list otherwise.
- 3) P. 348
- 4) P. 32,95
- 5) P. 37
- 6) P. 97
- 7) P. 160
- 8) P. 308
- 9) P. 17
- 10) 1 Pet. 2:14, Gen 9:5-6, Rom 13:1-4 (note that “the sword” is the ancient world's application of deadly force).
- 11) <http://tinyurl.com/2wjd9u> (or search “Concerts Without Purpose”); <http://tinyurl.com/3cmjvz> (or search “nearly a billion dollars flowed into Ethiopia during”).
- 12) P. 129
- 13) P. 344

- 14) "What did 'total collectivization' mean? Systematically robbing the farming families of their produce. Said the Communist employee, it meant 'scouring the countryside, searching for hidden grain, testing the earth with an iron rod for loose spots that might lead to buried grain.' The government raiders would search entire homes, rifling through personal belongings, ignoring the protests and cries of the women and children. The raiders felt justified because they were 'accomplishing the great and necessary transformation... the people who lived there would be better off for it; that their distress and suffering were a result of their own ignorance or the machinations of the class enemy.' The government, the planners, the leaders who directed the robbery, even the government employees themselves 'know better than the peasants how they should live, and what they should sow and when they should plough.' In spring 1931: 'I saw people dying from hunger. I saw women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes. And corpses – corpses in ragged sheepskin coats and cheap felt boots; corpses in peasant huts, in the melting snow... under the bridges...' For some raiders, the suffering and dying of fellow Soviet citizens all around them did not cause them even to question their motives or their superiors – they would still 'take away the peasants' grain in the winter,' and in the spring 'persuade the barely walking, skeleton-thin or sickly-swollen people to go into the fields in order to 'fulfill the bolshevik sowing plan...'" - Death by Gun Control, P. 168 quoting eyewitness source. There are many other examples in history.
- 15) Pages 123, 152, 261: opposing state sanctioned execution and the "prison industrial complex".
- 16) I read of this in "The bottom billion" by Paul Collier (chapter 10). This book, and especially this chapter, "Trade Policy for Reversing Marginalization" makes a very strong case for encouraging trade as one part of a strategy to greatly reduce poverty.
- 17) Pages 153, 205