

## THE THIRD WAY

(Address – MEDA Luncheon on April 9, 1987)

The third way, neither capitalism nor socialism. On March 5<sup>th</sup> Rev. Garry Loewen challenged us to get beyond a mindless embrace of the free enterprise system and to recognize that political and economic systems are not the God but of man. He ended by challenging Christians to seek the third way, neither socialism nor capitalism.

Loewen was very articulate in pointing out that free enterprise and Christianity are not synonymous – just as socialism and Christianity are not. But when it came to the third way, I left with some bewilderment as to what that way was. Is the third way along the continuum between socialism and capitalism or is it the third point of a triangle? The Bible is hardly a book of economics so how do we know when we are living by the rules of the third way. Loewen made two proposals, although he stated clearly that this did not represent an all-encompassing philosophy. The two proposals were:

- 1.) Christians should become more involved in the political process.
- 2.) Our criteria for involvement or action should always be on behalf of the marginalized or lowest 15 or 20%.

I have reflected on the talk and these proposals during the intervening weeks, and felt as I normally do after one of these talks. The line of reasoning was sound until one tries to identify the details of the third way. I can hardly argue with the criteria of being concerned with the marginalized, but there are many situations where the issues require a different set of criteria. The purpose of this talk is not to challenge anything said by Loewen, but to try to build on his very helpful analysis and attempt to create a better understanding of the so-called third way.

Is the third way another economic philosophy? Is there a single word or idea which captures its essence? Can we speak of the 'Way of Love', the 'Way of Peace', the 'Way of Justice', the 'Way of Equality', the 'Way of Integrity' or some other way? Is the third way doing a list of right things rather than wrong things? For example, is profit-sharing better than not sharing profit? It's not difficult to say a general "yes" to such a proposition. How about sharing 20% of profit versus 10%? We could still say yes with some ease. What about sharing 50%, 80%, or 100%? Suddenly thoughts enter your mind about the reward to the risk-taker, or the accumulation of capital for the growth of the business, job security and so forth. The point is that there is some percentage along that continuum, varying in different circumstances, where the negative consequences may outweigh the positive. The same test can be applied to pay equity, affirmative action, environmental concerns, access to health care or any other issue. It seems that when we move from one extreme to correct an inequity, we may create new problems when we approach the other extreme.

We are used to thinking of Christianity in terms of absolutes. Love with no limits, forgiveness without hesitation, absolute integrity. Is the 'third way' simply a collection of absolute values adhered to like the rules of the Pharisees? Remember the story of Jesus observing the collection box at the temple and the very small offering by the widow. Do we think that the

Pharisees did not recognize that charity was a relative quality? They certainly did – but it's obvious that the value of a person had come to be defined in terms of the value of his gift, not the sacrifice in his giving. Jesus did not create a new moral law, He simply pointed out the hypocrisy between what was preached and what was practiced. In many of Jesus parables and examples the same pattern is followed. He takes a moral value and doesn't suggest that the extreme is the target, but points to the hypocrisy in the way that particular moral value is practiced. There is a very human and tolerant quality in much of Christ's teaching which we often overlook. He seldom condemned people for not knowing what the appropriate moral response was, but for being hypocritical in their application.

Let's return to our topic – the third way, neither capitalism nor socialism. My thesis is that these represent two polarities in terms of most aspects of economic practice. I further postulate that neither of these ideas exclude the possibility of being moral, but they are not in themselves necessarily moral. Let's make a quick review of the essentials of these two polarities.

We normally attribute certain things to socialism.

- less inequality
- claims to have a moral base
- creates loss of individual freedom
- history of poor economic performance
- socialism seems to tend toward tyranny.

Likewise, we have relatively fixed ideals about free enterprise.

- very effective at the creation of wealth
- lacks a moral basis
- tends to create victims.

Both ideologies seem to have their pluses and minuses. Since these terms and ideas have become so loaded with prejudices, most of us cannot make intelligent decisions if put into those categories. Sometimes it is useful to use other terminology which does not have as many automatic biases. Let's look at our life and actions in terms of three categories. These are the political realm, the economic realm and the realm of values.

Let's begin with the political realm: Most choices can be defined in terms of a contrast or a polarity between two forces or ideas or extremes. For example in the political realm we think of:

tyranny	- versus -	-	individual liberty
strong		-	weak
majority		-	minority
collective		-	individual

In the economic realm there are similar polarities:

collective	-	individual
equality	-	inequality
government	-	private
regulation	-	laissez-faire

Finally, in the realm of values, which can also be called culture or religion there are other polarities:

community	-	individual
oppression	-	freedom
faith	-	unbelief
selfish	-	love
honesty	-	dishonesty

If we analyze each of these polarities and choose which word we feel most comfortable with, most of the choices may not be that difficult. Few of us would choose tyranny over individual liberty and few Christians would prefer the word selfish over love. Yet capitalism is recognizing that society is much more complex than a choice between two ideologies. We make many other choices each day and these choices overlap. Our attitudes toward the rights of minorities may be strongly influenced by our values. In fact, won't everything be influenced by our values?

What I am suggesting is that to base our actions on a simple polarity like free enterprise versus socialism is very dangerous. Our goal should be a healthy stable society which permits most of its citizens to meet their needs and their goals. In order for this to happen, the three realms of politics, economics and values must synchronize or be in harmony. If we permit an extreme in one realm, it may have an undesirable effect elsewhere. For example, an open political system will tend to encourage a reasonable free economic system. On the other hand, a rigid political structure like Russia feels threatened if the economy operates too freely.

We have had recent examples of fanatical religious values resulting in tyrannical political systems. A good example is Iran, but also Cambodia, since I consider radical Communism as much a religion as radical Islam.

An interesting historical example is Britain which made the first move toward democracy, was the home of the industrial revolution and home to a diverse and intense flowering of Protestantism. China today is successfully experimenting with more economic freedom only to discover that students think political freedom should not be left behind. Taiwan has a very open economy but a rigid right-wing government at the opposite extreme of mainland China. It is instructive that a more open economy is pulling both of their political systems to the centre. This would seem to suggest that if our economy is less free, it may also threaten our political freedom from either the right or the left.

When we speak of an open economy, we must be careful and not automatically equate open economy with free enterprise or capitalism. Everything tends toward an extreme unless it is guarded against. Political systems entrench themselves and become tyrannical. Free enterprise and unbridled greed result in ever-increasing concentration of power. Soon industry after industry is dominated by a few decision-makers. This tends to limit entry, limit consumer choice, limit the effectiveness of government policy – in other words it is economic tyranny. If the economically strong co-operate with the politically strong, we can just as easily have a tyranny of the right as of the left.

Where do Christians want to be on the political and economic spectrums? Can we effectively practice our Christian principles and teach our children if there is a tyranny of either extreme? Do we want a radical, absolute Christian society which is intolerant of the preferences of others? What kind of society will create the greatest opportunity for Christians to practice their faith?

I believe that the goal of Christians should be to prevent society from moving to the extremes. There is no simple definition of such a position but one term may be pluralism. Pluralism is a democracy where the majority respects the minority. A pluralistic society is one where the different ideas are always in competition but not excluded. A society of competing ideas and ideals will never be static, but always moving in various ways toward extremes – and extremes often represent some form of tyranny or compulsion.

What this suggests is that we cannot create a perfect, static society in an imperfect world, but the best situation for the most people is a fluid, dynamic society where the needs of different elements of society remain on the agenda. So what is the role of a Christian in such a society? One approach is to lean into the wind, to take actions which counter the drift toward tyranny.

Is the third way really leaning into the wind or countering a drift toward either extreme? If there is too much Government – we should actively promote the private sector. But what if there is too much corporate concentration, unhealthy monopoly, dishonesty or Wall Street? Do we then lean into the other direction? If society is too libertarian, presumably Christians promote moral values. But what if religious extremists promote McCarthy-type witch hunts? We promote a free market place for labour, but what if the discrimination against women, immigrants, or natives is not based on objective factors such as education or ability? Do we lean into the wind and try to make pay equity work before there is rigid legislation? Do we instinctively fight unions? What if they are an appropriate response to bad management practices?

The third way is not a fixed position but a tension between the poles of reality. We need criteria to determine which way we lean on a particular issue, and these criteria must have a basis in the teaching of the Bible. Here we return to the earlier discussion of whether Jesus was only laying down a series of absolutes, or whether He was also speaking about hypocrisy and compassion. Garry Loewen suggested that our criteria should be the impact on the poorest element in society. I would heartily endorse that we should test any issue to determine its impact on the marginalized. However, if we assume that the poor also have a stake in a pluralistic society which keeps various options alive, we cannot decide every issue on such a narrow criterion.

How do we begin the process? Loewen suggests a healthy skepticism of the gospel of free enterprise. That should be broadened to include a healthy skepticism of all aspects of secular society.

A stand-up Canadian comic was speaking to an American audience. “I understand that you are having a little problem with your President. It appears that some people suspect that he hasn’t been telling the truth. – pause – smiles, etc. – We in Canada don’t have that problem with our prime minister. We know!” The real joke is that the story was about Nixon and Trudeau – but the same story could be told about Reagan and Mulroney. Americans tend to raise their leaders

on a pedestal and are liable to be disappointed. Our dishonest leaders in Canada are nothing to be proud of, but our skepticism of their abilities and integrity may be healthy.

This definition of the third way or the Christian way may be difficult for many of us to accept since it doesn't seem to have absolute reference points of good and bad. However, it may suggest that Loewen's other recommendation for business people to become more politically involved may have particular merit. One way to become politically involved is to seek office. Another way is to become involved with the issues. A way of clarifying what is means to lean into the wind is to take leadership on issues we are concerned about. Let's look at examples of current issues.

Day Care: There is undoubtedly a need and it is clear that there will be more government involvement. One of the negative aspects of the increasing Government involvement is that many of the intermediate solutions such as care in another home or church-sponsored daycares may become obsolete because of regulation or compulsory participation in Government centres.

What is a productive role for the church and the business community? We should lean in the direction of more day-care spaces of an attainable quality, but then we should lean against the wind which says that everything must be standardized and run by bureaucrats. One way is to speak out on the issues, but another is to give practical leadership in our churches, communities and possibly through our business to encourage and establish more daycares but in a manner which retains a pluralistic approach to its delivery.

Workers Compensation: The present system in Manitoba is running wildly out of control. While it may benefit some individuals who cannot be employed for a number of reasons, it is doing nothing to improve safety practices and will soon have a detrimental effect on the desirability of creating jobs in Manitoba. We need to promote fairness and workplace safety, but also separate the issue of a welfare program from a workplace insurance fund.

There are many issues in our society today and it isn't always clear which way to lean. What about the issue of corporate concentration, pay equity, employment of minorities, a greater degree of self-determination for our aboriginal peoples, pollution of the environment, promotion of gambling by our government, integrity the investment industry, employee ownership, profit-sharing?

If you think about that list carefully, you will note that on about half of these issues you could be easily leaning left and on the other half to the right, using left or right as it is popularly viewed.

The third way is not simply finding the safe middle road as Canada's Liberal Party has done for decades. They don't lean into the wind but with the wind. The safe middle ground has been described by Malcolm Muggeridge as the "soggy centre called consensus". We are not merely seeking consensus but to be a positive force on current issues. Christians often appear to either buy into the values of our society and don't question what is going on, or they take extreme and idealistic positions which render them irrelevant and ineffective. The idea of leaning into the wind suggests that one is engaged where the wind is blowing. We are not simply taking the path of least resistance, nor are we being critical from a remote perspective.

The third way demands that the values and direction of society should always be tested. Our goal should not be a perfect society as we see it, because that will be an oppressive society for many others. Our goal should be a pluralistic society which permits initiative, but corrects excess; it exhibits compassion but does not reward indolence or irresponsibility. We may find a moving target uncomfortable but a dynamic changing world is in fact the reality. We were told by our Master that we were "in the world, yet not of it". This tension between the ideal and reality is of God, it is the very essence of the human condition.

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