



Episode 662: The Christian Libertarian: Oxymoron, or a Natural Fit?

Guest: Norman Horn

WOODS: I think it's been many hundreds of episodes since I talked to you last, so we have a lot to talk about. We talked about the general subject of LibertarianChristians.com, the sorts of subjects that you guys talk about there. We talked about this very phenomenon of Christian libertarianism. Let's pick up that conversation, because I bet even people who listened to that one don't remember a word we said. It could be that it was extremely memorable and people memorized it, but maybe not. So I have some places I'd like to go with this, but let's start off with a recent debate you had, I guess it was on the radio, with somebody from — was it somebody at a seminary, and it was on the subject of libertarianism and Christianity?

HORN: Yeah, this was on the Up for Debate radio network a little over a month ago with a gentleman named Dr. Al Mohler. Dr. Mohler is a really well known Christian theologian in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He's the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, probably one of the most influential evangelicals out there right now. So I had some good people working behind the scenes who kind of helped put that together, and the whole idea was to get Dr. Mohler and me on the show together and really have a discussion about whether or not Christianity and libertarianism are compatible. Dr. Mohler's position being the very strictly Christian conservative type, and not just theologically conservative but very politically conservative as well, is of the opinion of course that libertarianism and Christianity are not compatible. And it was my job to try and correct some of those issues that he had in his mind.

And in my estimation, I felt like it went very well, but there were also some real significant issues that we didn't really get to discuss. I still feel that there are a ton of confusions out there with people who are conservative Christians, regarding what libertarianism actually is. And that's really what we're trying to do as the Libertarian Christian Institute now, the following of LibertarianChristians.com, is to really try and explain this idea to Christians everywhere, that Christianity and libertarianism work really well together and it really is the most consistent way that Christians can hold a political philosophy.

WOODS: Of course there are plenty of libertarians, too, who think that Christianity and libertarianism don't work together, but we'll talk about that in a little while. But I've dealt with a lot of people who fit the description of the person you just

mentioned, and it's true that I know all about their point of view and they have this crazy caricature of mine. Or I — just the other day, just the other day I was reading — and one of these days I might get Rod Dreher on the show. You think that would be a productive conversation?

HORN: Probably so.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, I think that would be interesting, even if we don't agree. He seems like a congenial guy. Well anyway, he did an interview with the founder of the Free State Project, who is — I don't know if he's an atheist, but he's not a Christian. And they had a very, very productive and fruitful conversation. I really liked — now, of course, the comments section, unfortunately, over at *The American Conservative*, was deeply disappointing. It's just all people throwing brickbats at libertarians, which is a shame, because Rod Dreher was trying to find some common ground, and the comments are all, you know, backbiting sniping and whatever. But they had a very, very fruitful discussion.

But one of the comments said, you know, gosh, these libertarians, it's like — libertarianism is totally incompatible with the idea of original sin. And I thought, wait a minute, what? Why? Why? And of course what the person I'm sure would say is, you know, it assumes everybody's good. But it makes no such assumption. It simply says, don't commit aggression against people. It says nothing about people are good, people are bad. And to the contrary, if you thought that people had an inclination toward evil, wouldn't you want to break up political power and disperse it as widely and as decentralized a way as possible?

HORN: Yeah, absolutely, and to that point as well, it's well known that James Madison once said, if men were angels, we wouldn't need government. But in many respects, the libertarian response to that is it's precisely because men are not angels that we should not give them power over other people in this way. And once we kind of realize that, the Christian critique against the state itself can really come into focus as being actually very consistent with the idea that men are sinful. Whatever position you take on original sin and however you nuance that, because there are some differences in opinion there, you can't get away from the fact that men are sinful, that men do these terrible things to each other, and that to endow people with this sort of power through the state is really quite lunacy.

WOODS: You know, I had an episode, again, a long time ago — last week I did an episode about episodes. I went through and looked through 650+ episodes, and —

HORN: That's so meta, Tom.

WOODS: Yeah, really, it was. And I thought, well, maybe I should wait for Episode 1,000 to do that, and I thought, eh, to heck with it; it's my show; I want to do it now. And one of the episodes that I talked about was this one with Professor George Kalantzis, who has written a book on early Christian attitudes toward war. And, talk about countercultural. The early Christians took an extremely antiwar

position, anti-military position, and not just for the reasons that the standard textbook would tell you: well, because they thought that the Roman army was pagan or whatever. Yeah, that was part of it, but it was a much deeper critique than that. So —

HORN: Yeah, they had a very great aversion to just violence itself —

WOODS: Yeah.

HORN: — and in part because of the persecution that they endured. They believed that it was just flat wrong to do such things, and, gee, when you look at the words of Jesus, is it really that big of a surprise?

WOODS: Right.

HORN: It's amazing that modern Christians don't really take that into account.

WOODS: You know, and I get people saying to me, oh, well, such and such person thought you could execute heretics and so on. Well, yeah, okay, I get that. I can find all kinds of people and all kinds of points of view who had all kinds of opinions. But it's interesting; exactly what you said, Saint Augustine's view was that, well, I'm glad nobody killed me, because then I would have never had a chance to come around. So that was his view, that of course you don't actually do that.

So anyway, I talk about Kalantzis, because that surprises a lot of people, because I think — I mean, let's — I just can't help mentioning this. Let's talk about libertarians for a minute. I do want to deal with the issue of libertarians who say, look, I look through the Bible and I see a lot of non-libertarian stuff in it and a lot of non-libertarian maxims. It seems to me like it's wishful thinking. Like, you guys, you want to be libertarians and you like being Christians, so you've come up with this weird, awkward compromise, where you're living in this alternative universe where these parts of the Bible and Christian tradition just don't exist. How do you answer that accusation?

HORN: Well, first of all, we need to go back to kind of the roots of the problem, and that's that, you know, what is the biblical view of the state. And it's our contention at the Libertarian Christian Institute that if you look at the whole of the Bible from front to back, that you see that the state is ultimately the enemy of God. And this goes back to even the beginning of the Book of Genesis and even what we would call the origin story of the state and the Tower of Babel. But furthermore, we have a personal aversion to the idea of aggression itself, and that comes, again, from scriptural principles that say, look, you don't need to — whether you're looking at the Ten Commandments or the words of Jesus, that initiating force against other people to get what you want is clearly not within the purview of what Christian authority is. That's not something we're about.

And so if we take these to fundamental ideas, the idea that the state is the enemy of God and that our responsibility as Christians is to not initiate force against other

people, then it's pretty easy to actually go from there to say, look, libertarianism really is the most consistent expression of Christian political thought. And so we can start from there and really move on to understand how that applies to how we kind of proceed through typical libertarian arguments at that point.

It is only a special view of libertarianism, in so far as we go to the Scriptures in order to see how God looks at government and the role of violence in society. We recognize that this also is consistent with natural law, as well, and once people begin to realize that, I think that it becomes a lot easier to say, like, oh, well, very clearly then libertarians and Christians have a lot of common ground, even if we don't believe certain things fundamentally the same way, then we still have a lot of ways in which we can live peacefully with one another and not get at each others' throats whenever we come up with a disagreement.

WOODS: All right, I'm sorry I've been all over the place with this, but I said to you beforehand, let's just talk the way we would in person, and in person I'm all over the place.

HORN: (laughing) Yeah.

WOODS: I'm not organized; I don't have an outline. I just talk about what comes to mind. Let's get back to that debate. The reason I got into that whole thing about Rod Dreher was just that there was somebody in there who said that the idea of original sin obviously is not compatible with libertarianism. Was that the type of objection you get? What kind of objections was Al Mohler giving you?

HORN: So Al was really under the impression that there's two big problems with libertarianism with respect to Christians. One is that it's essential Randianism. He has this really flawed understanding of libertarianism, that it all comes out of Ayn Rand. And even if that has some partial truth with respect to some libertarians, that is certainly not the way I came to it, and it's certainly not the way that so many of my other Christian libertarian friends have come to it as well, in addition to many of my other just libertarian friends who are not Christians. So that's something that we really have to battle against, is to get out of the idea that Rand is somehow the genesis of this type of thought. And so I tried to even explain how this comes back in history. There's a long libertarian streak in American thought and in Christian theological thought, too, if you really want to get down to it.

The second big misunderstanding from his point of view, I think, is that he feels that libertarianism is trying to become a comprehensive world view for all people. And that's just simply not the case. And I tried to explain that libertarianism fundamentally is a political philosophy. It is not a comprehensive philosophy. It doesn't claim to answer all questions of ethics, all questions of morals, all questions of what is man's purpose in life and whatnot. It is just used to explain what is the proper role of force in civilized society. So the fact that he just was frankly kind of unwilling to look at that from any other point of view was rather disappointing.

But I was pleased that many of the callers that called in really seemed to get it. In fact, there were a couple people who said, you know, I didn't know what a libertarian was before this, but I think I'm a Christian libertarian now. And there was a guy from Baltimore who said that, and I thought that was very complimentary. And even the host was I think beginning to see some differences in how I thought versus how Dr. Mohler thought, and even though she probably was not fully convinced, I think she's on her way to understanding things at a little bit of a deeper level than even what Dr. Mohler was getting at.

WOODS: It sounds like he is thinking about libertarianism the way I think people ought to think about left liberalism, which is that it claims to be this neutral approach to public life, that we're not going to take any stands on substantial goods; we just want to carve out spaces for people to live out their own destinies the way they wish. But then in practice – if only left liberals thought that way. They won't leave you alone. They hector you about, what do you believe about this; what do you believe about that; we're going to drive you out of society if you believe such and such; we're going to force you to have interactions with people you don't want to have interactions with. It has gone from claiming to be this neutral point of view to having a very clear and totalitarian-style agenda.

Whereas libertarianism really is, or let's just say, ought to be what it claims to be. It really is saying don't commit violence against other people. But then libertarianism doesn't tell you what to do after that. And realize that if all you can say about your life is that you haven't committed aggression against other people, that's a pretty pathetic life, so libertarianism is not teaching you how to live. It's teaching you the absolute barebones requirement of civilized life. But then what you do beyond that is up to you. And somebody like Rod Dreher and possibly Al Mohler would say, but that's very empty, because that doesn't tell you what the good life is about. It's very atomistic. But the trouble is I just don't see that there are people who could be trusted with political power who would be able to reliably tell me what the good life is all about. I will trust people in my community, people in my church, my family, whatever. That's where I would look to figure out what the good life is. I would not, for heaven's sake, want to know what some guy in the nation's capital thinks.

HORN: Well, and moreover too, there's a strong argument here for, look, if your particular point of view is leading you in a direction against what is fundamentally true about the universe, then maybe you do need to get back to something that is a bit simpler and a bit more basic than trying to explicate something with a lot more philosophizing than is necessary. And that's sometimes the problem with Christian conservatives, is that they have a very nuanced view of morality, and we have – and I would consider myself very theologically conservative and morally conservative as a person, but that doesn't mean that, just because I have a nuanced view of all of these aspects of morality that I then can just abandon this very basic principle of what is appropriate for me to impose those morals on other people. I'm not allowed to do that.

I have a certain responsibility to try and persuade people and to bring people over to the Christian way of life. We call that evangelism, right? We want to do that, but that doesn't mean that I can push that upon people in a way that says you're going to do this or else I'm going to throw you in a prison, or else I'll burn you at the state, or else I'll run through you with a sword. That's the way of the world. That's the way of an uncivilized society. That's not the way of a Christian.

WOODS: Do you think libertarianism becomes, if not more coherent, let's say more complete or defensible or comprehensive – do you think it makes more sense or is stronger in a Christian context? What does Christian – does Christianity bring anything to libertarianism? I guess that's what I'm asking.

HORN: I think in many respects yes, because of course, even though natural law is the basis of what we would call basic libertarianism, there's some interesting things about anthropology and about the way in which we can view history even at times that I think that Christianity can bring to the table. But also that's just because I believe that Christianity is the truth, so I would think that because this is the truth and there is a lot of stuff from the Bible that we can bring into this, that there's something that can be added, there's something that we can learn from it. And I think there's a way in which we can look at, especially in the way that Jesus lived and realizing that his peaceful way of living, his way of working with people to persuade, to change people's lives is very coherent and complementary to human flourishing and what we would say is going, in a sense, beyond libertarianism at that point, but is complementary to it. I like to think that Christians can bring a lot to the libertarian movement that would help us explain that to more people.

WOODS: Is there something that you would want to say to non-libertarian but maybe conservative Christians that might get them thinking? And I hope it's – I want it to be more than just don't impose your morality on other people. I mean, I just – yeah, I don't do that either, but I just hate that. That just sounds like such a wimpy phrase. I just don't like that way of thinking, because they're just going to come back and say, I can't live in a society in which, yeah, I have these beliefs and then everybody else has totally different beliefs. How can we interact with each other if we don't have some moral rules that are enforced, if we don't have some philosophical common ground? You're proposing that we all walk around like isolated atoms with his own private views of what the good is, that he's not allowed to really act upon in society. I think that's the way they think.

HORN: Yeah, that is the way they think. That's what they think that libertarians propose to them at times, and I think that, well, to that point, first of all, imposing morality is not necessarily the best words we can use, because everybody has a set of morals and whatnot. Everybody has ethics, and even with what we talk about in libertarianism, we expect that people are not going to initiate violence against other people.

WOODS: And if I may interject very quickly, left liberals do not hesitate to impose their morality.

HORN: That's right.

WOODS: They do it every single day. People are in court because of their morality being imposed on them. So a lot of the times those people have no hesitation about doing it either. Okay, I'm sorry; go ahead.

HORN: Yeah, so it's not as though we have no view on morality that we expect that people should follow. That's not true. But there's a certain subset of morals that we believe ought not to be forced on other people and that those are appropriate for means of persuasion and not for means of force. And everybody believes that as well. Some people just have a different view about what subset of morals that is. And the reason that our subset of morals is slightly different than others is because of our more basic, fundamental political view that the foundational principle of how we should interact in society is that we do not initiate force against other people. So that's really the first part.

But if there were something I wanted to say in particular to just conservative Christians that would help to kind of allay some of the confusion that they often have is that I would say don't look towards – and I'm going to quote a scripture here for a second – don't look solely towards Romans 13 as your main view of how the state should operate. That is oftentimes – I can't tell you how many times I would be in a conversation with someone about Christianity and politics, and what happens is that they – "Well, Romans 13, your argument is invalid," is basically the response you'll sometimes get. And what's really kind of amazing, is that they believe that just by – they can prooftext and throw out Romans 13 as just an automatic conversation-ender. "Well, that does it."

And yeah, it's a complicated scripture, and it does pose some challenges to how we should interpret it. But I think if we start with Romans 13, we end up in the wrong spot of where we want to be in understanding how the state operates, and instead we have to look at the rest of the Bible first and then get to Romans 13. There's a lot of material on LibertarianChristians.com; that's the Libertarian Christian Institute website that explains this in much more detail than we have time to do here today. But I would definitely encourage all Christians who are investigating this issue to not just look at Romans 13 as the basis for a philosophy about the state.

WOODS: Are you going to send me some links? Because people are going to want to read about Romans 13. Do you have stuff?

HORN: Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, I've got multiple essays and papers on Romans 13 and exegesis of that passage, as well as other passages, including Matthew 4, the Book of Genesis, the Book of Revelation. We look at a lot of different places in order to understand this philosophy better.

WOODS: All right, so that'll be at TomWoods.com/662. Let's interrupt ourselves for a minute to say something about your upcoming conference. Now, we're talking in the

year 2016 here, so for anybody listening later, you missed it, but maybe there's another conference in the year that you're listening to this.

HORN: Yeah, definitely. So the Libertarian Christian Institute is now hosting yearly conferences called the Christians for Liberty Conference. Two years ago, Tom, as you may recall, we actually announced it for the first time on your show, and at that point in time we were not the Libertarian Christian Institute; we were sort of exploring that, becoming a 501(c)(3). We actually a little over a year later applied for our 501(c)(3) status, got it in four days, I kid you not. Unbelievably so, it was a miracle, we think. But now we are the Libertarian Christian Institute. We host these conferences.

The Christians for Liberty Conference this year is going to be on August 6th, 2016. It's going to be in Austin, Texas at St. Edward's University. This is a really interesting ecumenical opportunity if you're interested in those sorts of things, because it's a Catholic university; we have an Orthodox faculty sponsor and a Protestant keynote speaker, in fact, who is none other than one of your good friends and one of my good friends, Dr. Robert Murphy. We're very excited to welcome him as our keynote speaker for the day. And you'll also hear from a lot of other great Christian speakers. I'll be there, of course. Jason Rink is one of my great friends; he'll be there. Doug Stuart. We'll have Jacqueline Isaacs and Elise Daniel, who'll be presenting on a new book that they're publishing; I'll be writing the foreword to it here very soon. And Dr. Mark Cherry, who's the professor at St. Edward's who's our faculty sponsor, he's a wonderful man; he'll be talking about ethics and Christian thought.

It's going to be a great day, full of fellowship, full of good humor, good food, and just great people. I'm really looking forward to it this year, and I just highly encourage you to start making your plans now to come to Austin on August 6th, 2016. You can find out more about it at LibertarianChristians.com/CFL, and you can sign up for our mailing list there and be informed when we open up registration.

WOODS: All right, let me ask you this. Obviously with something like libertarian Christians, I mean, there wasn't really such a thing, in terms of a self-identified group, where they were self-consciously belonging to an ideological category. There may have been people who could be described as libertarian Christians; I can think of some. But definitely in recent years, there's been more of a conscious awareness that we are a thing; whereas that didn't exist before. And as that happens, in the same way that libertarianism has become more mainstream, more people are aware of it, it gets a lot more attacks. Well, likewise, I'm sure that's been the case for you. What do you find are the most common objections? Are they the ones from Al Mohler, or are they other ones? Are there things, in other words, that you feel like you're answering every five seconds?

HORN: (laughing) Yeah, definitely. So we've talked about a number of them today already. The Romans 13 question is a big one. The "libertarians try to be atomists" is another one. The libertarians talking about the imposition of morality issue is another one I see. I think there are some policy issues, though, that also don't – that I

commonly get either attacked by or get questioned about, and those would probably be – the two most common ones would be war and charity.

So first off, you have the Christians out there unfortunately who are very concerned about Islamic militants and whatnot and believe that the United States needs to be out there intervening all across the world in order to make sure that we don't see another 9/11 or something to that effect. So answering that requires sort of like a two-pronged response.

One is the more straight-up libertarian response that all of your listeners I'm sure are very well aware of those arguments; things like which you've talked about with Scott Horton and whatnot and understanding history of the Middle East and what it is that we've talked about with respect to interventionism, what Ron Paul has said for years, of course.

And the second prong of that attack, though, is realizing the Christian critique of war and empire itself is really important, and as we talked a little earlier, the early Christians had quite an aversion to war, and it's really unfortunate that we have lost this aversion to violence in many respects in the Christian tradition of life. I think that's something that we are trying very hard to reinstate, if you will, through the Libertarian Christian Institute, is to bring us back to a more peaceful way of looking at foreign affairs from a Christian point of view.

With regards to charity, of course, there's a strong contingent of Christians out there, often from the more liberal type, the more neoliberal types, who believe that if we did not have taxation and government welfare helping people out of poverty, out of bad education situations and healthcare and whatnot, then things would just go downhill. And that's an economic argument, and we again have a two-pronged assault on how we would answer that. First is the more typical libertarian position, where we explain solid economics and why it is that the free market works and why it is that government healthcare is a bad idea and why taxation is theft and all those sorts of nice things.

But then as a Christian, we would try to bring into the argument that, look, this is not something that we should be participating in in the way that you think. It's the Christian responsibility to do these sorts of things, to help other people, and to educate, to help people get good healthcare and whatnot, but we don't need to do that by initiating force and stealing from other people. And in fact, that's the exact opposite of what we're called to do in the Bible, and instead of actually taking from other people in order to give to someone else, we recognize that it's our responsibility to produce and then to give of ourselves and of that and to voluntarily contribute to those sorts of endeavors. So to pass that off as being the government's responsibility is just not the right thing to do for Christians. And so we can come up with those two types of responses there, and we hope that that helps people to really understand how to understand this better.

WOODS: You know, of course when you talk about foreign policy, it should bring to mind the whole Ron Paul thing, because people would say to you, I love Ron Paul except for foreign policy. I agree with him except on foreign policy. We all had that conversation with somebody.

HORN: (laughing) Yeah.

WOODS: And then somebody came up with a Facebook meme – I don't know if you remember this – that was absolutely – some people thought it was just out-of-bounds unfair. But it was a picture of Christ, and it said, I agree with him, except about foreign policy (laughing).

HORN: Yeah, exactly.

WOODS: Yeah, except about that whole peace thing. Other than that (laughing) –

HORN: Yeah, I agree with you, Jesus, except about this "turning the other cheek" deal. That I can't abide.

WOODS: Yeah, right, right. Yeah, I actually thought, no, I think that is fair. I mean, that one's okay.

HORN: It might be. Yeah, I think it might be.

WOODS: And you know what? Look, sometimes those things really do make people stop and think.

HORN: Yeah.

WOODS: Sometimes they do work. All right, tell me what people are going to find over at LibertarianChristians.com.

HORN: Well, so, LibertarianChristians.com has just a ton of material on it now, both from a theological point of view, trying to explicate Scripture and trying to understand how libertarianism fits into our Christian theology, and also just a bunch of just general libertarian ideas. And so you can learn about economics; you can learn about ethics; you can learn about history; you can learn about war and interventionism; you can learn about all these sorts of things – policy, politics, all of it – as well as understanding theology, as well as understanding all of the things that we hold dear as libertarians. So you can find all this stuff there. You can find podcasts; you can find all this stuff. We very much encourage you to come and check us out. We are trying to ramp up our programs. We do these conferences now; we hope you'll come and check us out in that respect. And we'll be doing even more in the coming years as we are trying to actually come into our own as an organization, and we're looking forward to serving the libertarian community and the Christian community even more in the upcoming years.

WOODS: Well, sounds great. That and everything else will be linked at TomWoods.com/662. Best of luck with the conference, Norman, and thanks for your time.

HORN: Hey, thank you, Tom. It's always great to be with you.