ESSAY

Creating and Redeeming Institutions:
A Christian Approach

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"All his life long, man is imprisoned by our institutions."
Rousseau, Emile, Book 1

In the last decade, politicians, academics, and activists have called for abolishing various institutions (e.g., "abolish the police," "abolish USAID"). These calls emerge out of the declining trust in almost every institution, which is at a historic low for particular institutions and institutions as a whole. These calls for abolishing particular institutions are also inspired by the problematic habits formed in contemporary academia.

In the past half-century, academics have championed postmodern forms of deconstruction. When you destroy trust in the institutions that make up both civil society and government by only or primarily deconstructing them, people hold them in contempt, and society looks for substitutes. Usually what takes their place though are authoritarian leaders and the centralized government entities they create that can be trusted even less and are even more difficult to change. That's why it is not surprising that scholars find postmodern beliefs correlated with authoritarian tendencies on both the political right and the political left. James K.A. Smith once asked, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* Based on its influence on our political attitudes, we all should be.

I saw this process firsthand in post-communist countries that had utterly decimated civil society in the name of social justice (those voluntarily formed institutions not related to the family or government). Authoritarian leaders then tried to fill the gap with government-controlled institutions but never could.

Today, Christians must step up consistently and continually offer a Christian approach to creating, critiquing, and redeeming our institutions that does not simply attempt to take a

sledgehammer to institutions when it finds evil amidst them (which it always will). I offer these reflections as an initial outline.

Creation

First, we need to start with the right anthropology. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who I quoted at the beginning of this essay, did not. He saw human civilization, such as institutions, as the source of human corruption and slavery. The problem though is that Rousseau had a distorted anthropology that contained half-truths. He declared,

> In the natural order, men are all equal and their common calling is that of manhood, so that a well-educated man cannot fail to do well in that calling and those related to it. It matters little to me whether my pupil is intended for the army, the church, or the law. Before his parents chose a calling for him nature called him to be a man.

Rousseau is correct that we are all created to be of equal worth and value and that our basic human identity should establish how we think about our common calling, but he leaves out the Creator in his story. Christians understand that God first calls us not simply "to be a man [or a woman]." God calls us to be and bear His image.

As image bearers, just as God is a creator, God has called us to create—and that includes creating institutions.[1] Human institutions can be wonderful creations and extensions of being image-bearers of God. As an entity, we should celebrate them and never condemn them wholesale (like Rousseau).

If you're around college students who yearn for authenticity, you'll often hear their wholesale critiques of institutions or "programs" (usually said with a derisive sneer). They, like Rousseau, think true creativity and flourishing happen through authentic relationships and are inhibited by older institutions and the scaffolding they provide (with these critiques often including the Church).

However, they do not realize that institutional structures support those God-ordained relationships and endeavors (e.g., residential life, a university). Moreover, it may take years, decades, and centuries to build such institutions. These are expressions of our being made in the image of God and allow us to cooperate in massive undertakings that advance human development and civilization. Eight-hundred-year-old universities, such as the University of Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge do not simply happen through authentically unencumbered relationships.

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[1] For more on this point see J. Richard Middleton. 2005. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

Fall

Unfortunately, universities have not always passed along the virtues, such as intellectual gratitude, humility, and love, necessary to sustain their continued flourishing. As mentioned in the introduction, the dominant intellectual approach of a highly influential group of scholars teaching students today is deconstruction—a focus on the fallenness of past and present institutions.

In most respects, this emphasis is parasitic upon Christianity. Christians recognize the need to expose the fruitless deeds of the darkness (Eph. 5:11). Moreover, Christians should recognize that every institution created by humans is fallen and in need of repair. The problem is that these academic forms of institutional deconstruction often fail to recognize both creation and redemption beyond a vague natural law understanding of justice. And while a dream of a future utopia is often behind such efforts, these reformers usually see the way to reach that utopia as being through politics, and if that is unsuccessful, through violence and destruction.

I remember traveling to Santiago, Chile immediately after a series of 2019 riots regarding calls to revise the country's constitution. Throughout the city, there were signs of destruction, windows broken, and graffiti. A Catholic university I visited had numerous buildings with broken windows as did numerous businesses. It reminded me of the constant divide I see throughout the world between the creators and destroyers.

Now, I want to be clear. There is something important behind these destroyers that we Christians should always acknowledge and join at times. Yes, "The thief comes to steal and to kill and to destroy…" (John 10:10a) but "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." (I John 3:8b). Just like Jesus, we too must join with Jesus in destroying the devil's work.

That means that we too should join in destroying institutions that serve corrupt ends (e.g., the slave trade, the mafia, brothels, etc.), and we should destroy those parts of institutions with noble ends but use corrupt means. The problem is that while it is good to take a sledgehammer to the slave trade, the mafia, and the brothel, most institutions require something closer to renovation and in many cases precise forms of surgery, so as not to destroy the health of the whole institution.

Consider the institutions associated with professional licensure. Some have become a mafia-like racket that in the name of health, safety, and protecting the weak and naïve prevent the creativity and service to others that God designed humans to exercise and the accountability that fallen institutions need. A reviewer of a recent book on such licensure gave one such example,

At the Tennessee board of alarm-system contractors, most of the complaints come from consumers who report the sort of issues that licensing is meant to prevent: poor installation, code violations, high-pressure sales tactics, and exploitation of the elderly. But the board dismisses most of these complaints against its own members and is far more aggressive in disciplining unlicensed handymen who occasionally install alarm systems.

He noted that licensure enforcement efforts "tend to protect turf more than consumers."

That's a fallen institution. Should we destroy professional licensure? Perhaps in certain cases where it is doing more harm than good or its ends are corrupted. Yet, we must realize that keeping institutions accountable requires hard work, and assembling the proper structures to support accountability can take years and decades. Tearing them down can be accomplished in days. More often, if their ends are good, institutions need carefully designed forms of redemption (which I am here defining broadly as the reversal of the fall) that address the problems.

Yet too often, the sons and daughters of academic deconstructionists want to use authoritarian methods or the methods of revolution to tear down institutions. They forget that most revolutions are bloody messes that leave hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of dead in their wake—all in the name of social justice. At rare times they accomplish some partial good end (e.g., the American Revolution or Orange Revolution in Ukraine) but most often they do not (e.g., any Marxist-inspired revolution in any country). Instead, they leave a trail of broken lives, families, and institutions.

Christians must prioritize taking other approaches to redeeming institutions.

Redemption and Restoration

The redemption of most institutions requires careful attention to processes, accountability, and creative mechanisms of reform that often, like Christ's redemptive work, entail suffering. Thus, just as the great physician heals us by expertly destroying the cancer of sin, we too must engage in institutional redemption in the same careful, long-suffering manner. Furthermore, God has revealed to us that we needed a Savior and a new social organization founded by that Messiah to reverse the Fall. That institution, the Church has existed for over two thousand years (Col. 1:24). Of course, it too demonstrates the effects of the Fall in too many ways, but it must take the lead in redeeming institutions.

The Church has undertaken that redemption when it comes to various areas of life such as health care, care for orphans, etc. Consider orphanages. I tend to think that Rousseau hated institutions because he felt guilty about taking the five children he had with his mistress to an

orphanage where they likely died—since its mortality rate was around 67%.[2] Historically, orphanages were often horrific places that offered little hope. In contrast, I think about the Methodist Children's Home in Waco today which now provides orphans with a holistic education and upbringing and truly does offer hope. Tearing down institutions without careful thought can destroy decades and centuries of this kind of work.

Of course, those who destroy institutions usually claim they are destroying things to build a new paradise—a more just society, etc. With few exceptions, they are lying to others, themselves, and God. They simply are not up to the hard, careful, and long-suffering work of redeeming institutions until Christ returns.

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[2] Ironically and tragically, Rousseau would write in his educational philosophy, *Emile*, "He who cannot fulfill the duties of a father has no right to become one." If only he would have lived consistently. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Alan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 49. See also Paul Johnson's chapter on Rousseau in *Intellectuals*.