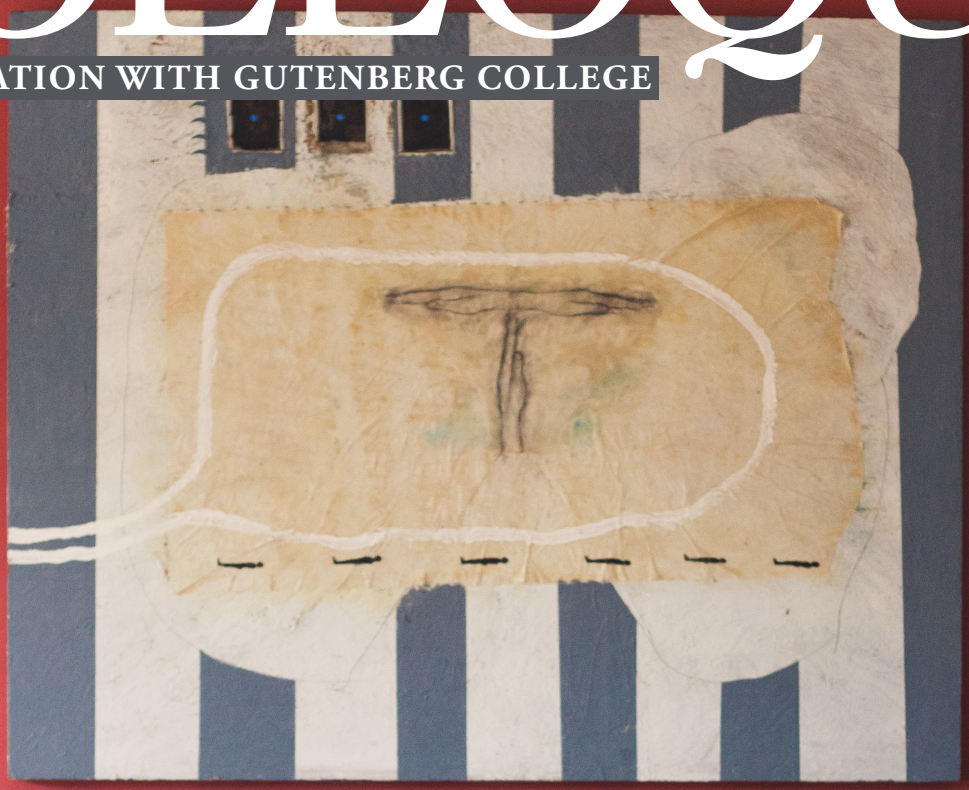
COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



2 Matthew and Macroeconomics
–Chris Swanson

6 *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*
–A Review by Charley Dewberry

7 He Is Out of His Mind
–Eliot Grasso



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COLLOQUY
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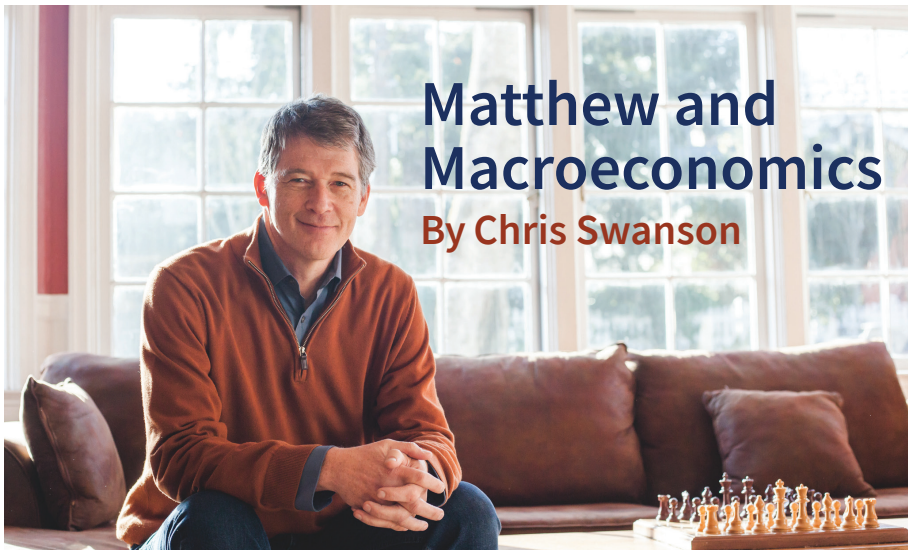
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Matthew and Macroeconomics

By Chris Swanson

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivers some hard and unsettling teaching about economic life. Matthew records in chapter 6, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth." Then later Jesus lays it all on the line, "You cannot serve God and wealth (mammon)." We have all heard many sermons about these words of exhortation. This teaching is difficult because it is convicting and yet utterly impossible to follow.

In this last year, I have also been reading about wealth from a completely opposite direction, through the history of economics. Economics studies capitalism, socialism, markets, the federal reserve, and things like that. How can that have anything to do with Jesus's teaching? And yet, I think that Jesus's words are intimately tied to economics. I have come to believe that the incredible success of our modern economy has caused a commensurate destruction of our spiritual condition. Although Jesus's commands in Matthew address us as individuals, our social and economic systems have created an enormous impediment to hope, faith, and love.

Macroeconomics

My interest in macroeconomics is not to argue for or against economic theories, nor to criticize or laud various economic policies. It is to explore the nature of our current economic system with an eye to understanding how it affects us spiritually. My exploration is that of a generalist reading and discussing a number of books with students at Gutenberg College. One that has been particularly interesting is *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi. Polanyi compares the various economies of the premodern world to the kind of economy we have today and claims there has been a complete transformation, not only in economics but in society itself.

Polanyi's main point is that prior to the industrial revolution, most economies were based on various forms of hierarchy and cooperation. The Greek city state, medieval feudalism, and primitive tribal groups all had a set of hierarchical roles within the social system. But at the same time, they all worked together to supply the economic needs of the group. For example, a medieval estate had a lord at the top of the hierarchy, followed by lesser nobles, clergy, knights, and peasants. Each had an important role within the system that was necessary for the estate to succeed economically. Now, this system was no panacea. There was tension, rigidity, taboos, and abuse of privileges, but for the most part people accepted their stations. Each class depended heavily on the others, and the hierarchy was enshrined in custom and religion.

The hierarchical structures determined far more than simply economic relationships; they impacted all aspects of life: law, morality, spirituality, marriage, and authority. The rules and customs differed widely between cultures, but within a particular tribe or group they provided a strong sense of cohesion and belonging. Economic factors, surprisingly, were subsidiary to the social, political, and religious structures. They provided each person with a way to contribute economic benefit to the whole group but did not compete with the group. The wealth of the individual was intimately tied to the wealth of the

group as a whole. There was little opportunity to change class or seek economic advancement individually. There was some competition, but more often than not, individuals competed for honor or status, not wealth.

An interesting example of how economic functions were subservient to social needs can be seen in ancient Egyptian trade. Egypt traded widely for an incredibly diverse collection of goods. But the traders were functionaries of the state, not independent merchants as they are today. Nearly all trade was international, between Egypt and other peoples. Trade within Egypt was very limited. Further, once the goods came to Egypt, they were distributed in accordance with complex social and religious rules. They were not available to the highest bidder. You could not be an entrepreneurial farmer and get a bigger slice. Social and religious factors determined how economic benefits were distributed.

All this changed in the West during the two-hundred-year period from 1650-1850. A revolutionary shift in economics occurred. Technological innovations in food production and manufacturing created a rise in population and a rising supply of comparatively inexpensive goods. Concomitant with these technological modes of production was the growth of a market.

A market, according to Polanyi, is much more than a simple trading center. A market requires a complex network of free agents buying and selling in order for those agents to be able to produce their products. For example, a factory needs a supply of money, raw materials, a variety of machines, a supply of energy, sufficient space, and labor. In a true market, all of these inputs are available for purchase, preferably from multiple competitive sources. Only when enough interrelated goods and services are freely available do you have a market.

This shift to a market economy resulted in an enormous rise in wealth. New goods and services became available at much lower prices. People at all levels enjoyed greater economic stability. The improvements in general living conditions drove both private individuals and states to adopt practices that helped the market develop and flourish. There were, of course, abuses in the market and subsequent counter reactions. In the mid-1800s, communism advocated a communal, non-competitive economic system to relieve the impersonal hardships of the market. But even communist countries have now adopted regulated markets to achieve efficient production and wealth to compete on the world stage. The debate today is not whether we should have markets but how regulated they should be in order to limit gross inequality.

The economic transformation resulted in a market structure driven by efficiency. The most efficient laws, methods, and processes inevitably won out. The benefits of the market outweighed the sufferings resulting from the inexorable drive toward efficiency.

The transformation, however, was not purely economic. Efficiency upended the traditions and social structures as well. Traditions were not well suited to the market because they were inefficient and restricted the free exchange of land and the free movement of labor and materials. The social and hierarchical relations that provided for the social and economic well-being of the society eroded over time. The cooperation of the group was given over to competition and the independence of the individual.

A plethora of examples chronicles the impact on society from the economic transformation. Politics is one such example. During the 1800s, almost every European country overthrew its hierarchical and feudal monarchies in favor of democracy. Democracy is the most efficient governmental organization because it produces economic freedoms and growth. The general population will always value market success over loyalty to persons or parties. Aristocracy is simply not efficient.

How our economic system spread beyond the West is another example. Globalization is a consequence of a market because cheaper resources and larger markets are more efficient. Thus, our economic system absorbed all local hierarchical societies within itself.

Urbanization and modes of work were transformed because efficient technology and market forces reduced the need for farm labor and increased the need for manufacturing and white-collar work. Thus, workers moved from farms to factories and office jobs. A robust and inescapable media landscape came into being because new, efficient adver-

(continued on page 4)

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Matthew and Macroeconomics

continued from page 3

tising methods enhanced sales. Land—a critical input to successful production—became a commodity, and families were not able to keep land over generations and establish a sense of belonging. Cities became full of unrooted strangers.

Most importantly, human beings themselves were required to adapt to the market, not the other way around. Companies, seeking the best labor for the cheapest price, "bought and sold labor" on the market and put people into slots that best fit the company's mode of economic activity; positions and careers were arranged to maximize productivity. Human beings became free agents competing with others for predefined positions that met personal goals. We adapted ourselves to the market; the market did not adapt to us. The most recent example of this adaptation is the workforce changes that are starting to percolate through society with the advent of AI. The efficiency of AI requires that we must fit our work and habits to it, not the other way around.

In addition to all the consequences noted above, our economic system imposes a new set of values. Older economic systems placed the needs of the group or tribe first. That gave rise to social values of courage, honor, loyalty to community, sacrifice, compassion, sexual purity, self-control, and especially family. These values helped the group function internally and protect itself from outside threats. If a young man had sex with the daughter of a man he lived near, the consequences were severe, so chastity was emphasized. That situation is entirely different from a modern hookup in a bar where social consequences are minimal. The impersonal and disconnected nature of our economic system pushes us toward freedom and fewer consequences. We are forced into the role of a competitive free agent, and the values that sustain that role are focused on individual pursuit of one's needs and desires. For example, one of the most respected economic roles is now the entrepreneur because it generates wealth. In the past, the entrepreneur was at best tolerated and at worst despised.

Matthew

I began by talking about the impact of this great transformation on our spiritual lives, and I want to return to that now. Our culture's economic system has had a deep and irreversible impact on hope, faith, and love. Let's look again at Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6.

> *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*
>
> *The eye is the lamp of the body; so then, if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. So if the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*
>
> *No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.* (Matthew 6:19-24, NASB)

Hope

We find that Jesus is speaking directly to the issue of hope. He wants us to put our hope in the promise of the life to come, the treasures in heaven.

To the extent that our treasures are on earth and our eye is aimed earthward, we are hoping for satisfaction or security from this world. Jesus is calling us to hope in and serve the light. The issue was the same in the Old Testament when the Israelites turned their eye toward the darkness of false gods. In his time, Jesus was confronting the false god of wealth. In our time, the false god is the security of our modern economic system. Our world offers so much more comfort and security than it could in Jesus's time. We have modern conveniences; ways to entertain ourselves; undreamt-of luxuries; instantaneous communication; easy transportation over vast distances; medical technology; vast, easily available food options; and security through retirement funds, insurance, and government services. Why wouldn't we put our hope in these things? If our culture has created these incredible benefits through our modern economic system, how can hope in God compete?

Faith

Jesus is not only concerned with where we put our hope but also our faith. He is calling us to trust God for the things we need here on earth.

> *For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the sky, that they do not sow, nor reap, nor gather crops into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more important than they? And which of you by worrying can add a single day to his life's span? And why are you worried about clothing? Notice how the lilies of the field grow; they do not labor nor do they spin thread for cloth, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, "What are we to eat?" or "What are we to drink?" or "What are we to wear for clothing?" For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you.*
>
> *So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.* (Matthew 6:25-34, NASB)

Here Jesus is asking his listeners to trust God for their needs. He says the Gentiles eagerly seek food and clothing, but those who trust God need not do so. In our times, food and clothing are easy to come by. We don't need to trust God for them. Instead we seek better cars, nicer houses, comfortable jobs, and many other sources of security and comfort. The Israelites of the Exodus had to live in the desert not knowing if the next day the manna would arrive. Such a life of trust, where daily needs are uncertain, is unfathomable to most of us in our culture of plenty. Jesus reminds His listeners that life is more than food and clothing. Living a good life is seeking His kingdom and His righteousness.

Nothing is new about people trusting the world instead of God for their needs. It began in the garden and continues unabated. But perhaps what is new is the level to which God appears to us to be superfluous to our well-being. It is certainly true that everyone faces difficulties, and in those sufferings, we are called to trust Him. Those sufferings can be severe, but few of us face a daily or annual struggle for survival. Untimely death is a rarity. How many parents have lost one, let alone a half dozen infants? Death and the possibility of death was certainly much more present prior to the modern economic revolution. Awareness of mortality and frailty forces people to face the ultimate decision of trusting God.

Love

Lastly, our culture discourages love. Love is directed toward another person. We care for that person, their needs, their suffering, but most importantly, their faith in God. To love is to encourage and model a life of seeking righteousness. But everything in the underlying structure of our culture drives us toward individual and impersonal modes of living. Our economic relations are all impersonal. Sales clerks and online companies may have good customer service (or not!), but they rarely have relationships with their customers. Customers are inputs in the corporate plan. Marriage and children are the most fundamental relationships through which we can love, but they are declining. One of the many reasons for the decline is that marriage and children are not a good "return on investment." We hear people say that if my spouse is not satisfying my needs, then I should move on. The design of cities and neighborhoods is also isolating. People live in individual units separated by yards, walls, and customs that keep them apart. Nearly everyone I see during my day is a stranger. The more we are isolated, the less opportunities we have to love.

Young people are told to prioritize finding their own path by fitting into an increasingly technological and impersonal workforce. Love and community are seen as a bonus, albeit an important one. However, in seeking out their path, they are facing an epidemic of loneliness and lack of meaning. According to a Trellis Strategies survey of around 44,000 college students, nearly sixty percent of students reported feeling lonely, while only fifteen percent said they never did (https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Research-Brief_TS-FEB26_Loneliness.pdf). Loneliness and lack of meaning are symptoms of a society where opportunities to love and be loved are breaking down. Care for others is far more satisfying to our souls than striving to succeed in our impersonal techno-economy.

In Conclusion

My intention is not to cast aspersions on any person, organization, or group. I am not criticizing any profession or form of participation in our social or economic systems. I participate the same as everyone else; it is inescapable. My sympathies lie entirely in the other direction. I lament alongside everyone having to live in a world that is strangling our spiritual awareness. If C. S. Lewis were writing today, his demon, Screwtape, would be cackling with glee over the growth of our modern economic and social systems. He would exult in the fact that God is no longer needed and that love is hard to come by. He would gloat over people who adopt the false hope offered by the incredible delights offered in the world.

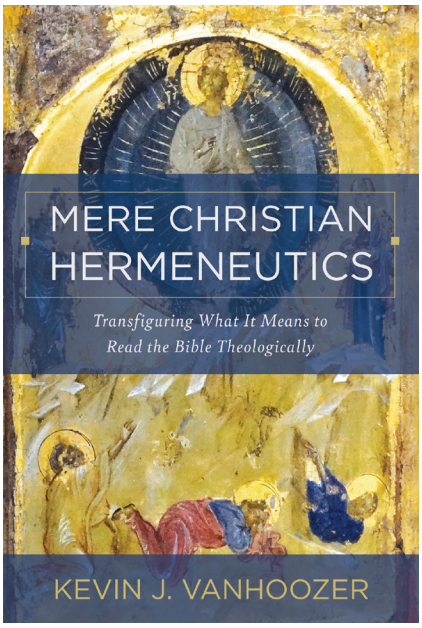
Nor am I calling for some sort of political or economic change. I have no illusions there; no political or economic reform can cure us of our spiritual condition. A communist-type system of "mass cooperation" turns inevitably into a system of mass tyranny. It is pointless to try to abolish capitalism and markets in favor of some more "communal" model of the past like medieval manors or utopian Christian communes. At some level, we must admit that God is in charge of the direction of history and of our social system, and only He can redeem it. Thus we cannot go back. We must find a way forward and live in the world we find ourselves.

If we find ourselves, our friends, or our family ensnared by the promises of this world, we should not be surprised. But we should pray. We can cry out to God that His kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We can be patient, living expectantly in the hope of the resurrection and not giving up. We can become aware of the nature and strength of the pull of the world and share our struggles of faith with others. We can work to uncover the lies of our economic and social systems, systems that promise so much but deliver despair and death. In short, we can follow Jesus's command in Matthew 6, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness."

Chris Swanson is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College. He holds a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Oregon.



Welcome Freshmen!
John Davis, Catalina Miller, Abbie Lonnon, Anh Roemen, and Henry Poetzl



Mere Christian Hermeneutics By Kevin Vanhoozer

A Review By Charley Dewberry

In his book, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What it Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (2024), Kevin Vanhoozer lays out principles for reading the Bible as Scripture everywhere, at all times, and by all Christians. According to Vanhoozer, if we follow his principles, we will read Scripture well, rightly, and faithfully. Vanhoozer brings forth the issue of Christians not being able to agree upon the teachings of Scripture and then presents his solution. In the same way that C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* sought to lay out the agreed-upon principles of Christianity, Vanhoozer's project is to lay out the universal way that all Christians should approach the interpretation of the Bible. This is an admirable goal, especially after the Reformation when many different groups read the Bible differently and have developed their own reading culture.

Vanhoozer laments that the Bible has recently lost its authoritative place in shaping civilization. He also laments that most Christians are unable to read the Bible accurately. As he sees it, Christians have lost the ability to discern whether a particular idea or practice is warranted by Scripture or to define what a literal interpretation means. I agree with Vanhoozer's claim that these are serious issues.

His plea is a call to recenter the study of the Bible as the core discipline in Christian theology—a return to a theological approach to reading the Scripture for all Christians in all times. His goals for biblical interpretation are these:

1) Read the Bible with a focus on the meaning that God intended.

2) Take the Bible seriously as the authority of one's life.

In Vanhoozer's view, however, "mere Christian hermeneutics" is not a subset of general hermeneutics but rather its own category. I think this is misguided. First, for the purposes of interpretation, Vanhoozer sees the author of the Bible to be God, whose language is timeless and universal for all Christians. However, in general hermeneutics, the author is a *human author* in a culture and time. Therefore, the process of interpretation will be significantly different in the two cases. I believe that for the purposes of interpretation, the author one needs to interpret is the human author, and the Bible as a whole is coherent because of God's plan for history. (It is beyond my purposes here to defend this belief, but I will provide and explore an example making my case below.)

Second, in general hermeneutics, the reader, after ascertaining a text's meaning, can interact with the meaning in a variety of ways. Vanhoozer wants all Christians to read the Bible as authoritative and true for the believer's life. I acknowledge that authoritative reading of the text should be the case for Christians, but I disagree that interpretation of the Bible does not fit within general hermeneutics. Consider the following example.

Walter Kaiser, a Reformed Theologian, came to McKenzie Study Center (the forerunner of Gutenberg College) in the 1980s and told the following story: When he was a graduate student at Brandeis University, a Jewish University, he took a class on the theology of St. Paul from a rabbi. Kaiser said that the rabbi's presentation was the clearest and most accurate interpretation of Paul's theology that he had ever heard. Near the end of the course, a Jewish student asked, "You have given us a very clear theology, but do you believe it?" The rabbi, responded, "*##! No!"

Both the rabbi and Walter Kaiser were interpreting the human author, the apostle Paul, through general hermeneutical principles, and they arrived at the same meaning. Where they differed was in the *significance* of the text. In general hermeneutics theory, the significance to the reader can vary greatly. In this case, the rabbi saw Paul's text as just an irrelevant human document, while Kaiser saw it as the authoritative word of God. I believe that Walter Kaiser was interpreting the text as God intended, and he was accepting its authoritative significance as a Christian ought to; this all falls within general hermeneutics theory.

Vanhoozer's mere Christian hermeneutics creates a whole new category of hermeneutics, which is unnecessary and leads to an erroneous process of interpretation. His claim that the author of the Bible is God and that we need to interpret His language as universal and timeless leads to a very different interpretive process. As a result, we will disagree significantly on the meaning of the text. I agree with Vanhoozer that the Bible should be read authoritatively as true, but where he sees this as outside of the general theory of hermeneutics, I see the significance of reading the Bible authoritatively as residing in the general theory.

Vanhoozer is concerned about the decline in the skill of interpreting and that, over time, the changing reasons for reading the Bible have led to a decline in biblical authority in Christianity and culture. I agree with his analysis of the problem; however, we see the solution to the issues very differently. I believe that viewing God as the one author of the whole Bible rather than seeing the various texts of the Bible as written by God-inspired *human* authors leads to a different interpretive process, which, in turn, leads to a spurious meaning of the text.

Charley Dewberry is the dean and a tutor at Gutenberg College and a practicing scientist and stream ecologist. He holds a BS in the arts, an MS in stream ecology, and a PhD in philosophy.



He Is Out of His Mind

By Eliot Grasso

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind [ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη]." (Mark 3:21, ESV)

He came to serve, not to be served.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

Trying to bring sense to a senseless people.
Resurrecting Lazarus, though he die again.
Feeding the 5,000, though they hunger again.
Silencing the Pharisees, though they murmur again.
Leaving the ninety-nine to find the one.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

Lose your life, and you will find it.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

Galaxies of stars
Earth and sea
The newborn's tiny hand

Making all this.
Letting us break it.
Breaking Himself.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

Fear not man—he can only kill your body.
Pray for those who persecute you.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

Forgiving the sinner, though he sin again.
Relinquishing His glory, though it radiate again.
Dying, though He live again.

Kierkegaard reminds—
He is more concerned with you than you are.

Though we distort His good image.
Though we mar His artful work.

Waking us up.
Drawing us from on high.
Calling us sons.
Sharing His kingdom.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

Doing the same thing over and over
Expecting different results—
Insanity, some say.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη—He is out of His mind.

And reminds again—
For He was love.

Love is out of His mind.
ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. (John 11:48, ESV)

ἐξέστημεν—We are out of our minds.

War
Slavery
Genocide

Reducing life to chemistry and physics.
ἐξέστημεν—We are out of our minds.

Dostoevsky comments—
They have examined the parts and missed the whole.

Methamphetamines
Propaganda
Polytheism
ἐξέστημεν—We are out of our minds.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

But…
If your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.
If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matthew 6:23)

And comments again—
Their blindness is worthy of wonder.

Man is a blank slate.
You have your truth, and I have mine.
Comfort over reality.
Me first.
ἐξέστημεν—We are out of our minds.

δόξα τῷ θεῷ—Glory to God.
He is out of His mind.

Eliot Grasso is the vice president and a tutor at Gutenberg College. He holds an M.A. in ethnomusicology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Oregon.



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