

# BITCOIN OF BETHLEHEM

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Isaiah 55:1-13

The college I attended, Westminster College, had, and still has, a very good business department. Very strong in Accounting, Economics, Business Administration, Finance, you name it. None of which I took advantage of when I was in school. I didn't take a single business class. I was over in the Political Science department and secondarily the Religion department learning about God and people and policy. So it is a bit ironic that I get to lead these days a nearly four million non-profit enterprise not ever having a business class – a fact that is now making a lot of you very nervous. Suffice it say I rely a lot upon good people and a good God.

So one of the things I did not learn in college was about monetary policy and currency markets. When I pick up the Wall Street Journal or the business section of the newspaper and read about the strength of the dollar or the yen or the euro I know a little bit of what they are talking about but not very much. Some currencies allow you to buy more, some currencies allow you to buy less and how and why that is I don't really know. All I know is that when the barista at Starbucks tells me that my Grande coffee costs \$2.41, I hope I have \$2.41 in my pocket or on my phone to give her. It still comes down to that – I got something you want, and you got something I want and thus the exchange. Quid pro quo. “Something for something.”

And now we have an entirely new currency arriving onto the scene – bitcoin: a peer-to-peer, digital, cryptocurrency that is unlike any other currency the world has ever known. No one quite knows who came up with it or who, if anyone, is managing it. And no one is quite sure what is going to become

of it. You can't touch it. It exists only embedded in your software. The picture on your bulletin is just a symbolic representation. But it could be the future currency of trade. And Lord knows what that is going to mean.

Now the truth is the currencies by which we conduct our lives are not only the ones you learn about in the business department or that you have in your wallet. There is more that makes the world go round than just the dollar, yen and euro. We trade in all sorts of currencies, don't we? Quid pro quo in all kinds of terms. You scratch my back, I'll scratch your back. You do me a favor, I'll do you a favor. You lend me your leaf blower, I'll lend you my power drill. You buy dinner this time, I'll buy dinner next time. I'll trade you my horse for yours. Give and take, tit for tat, let's make a deal. Quid pro quo. Something for something. It's the way the world goes round. Some play the game more shrewdly than others. Some play the game more fairly than others. Some take advantage of others. All this sexual harassment news stems from what? People thinking that sexuality is currency, right? Something I can trade for ... or purchase or worse ... steal. People become commodities or objects. We objectify the spirit and the soul. And speaking of objects we begin the holiday season with a day called Black Friday – the day when people stand in line to get the latest holiday deal and the red ink on the corporate balance sheet hopefully turns to black. It's just the way the world works. Unless, of course, you're a prophet.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not  
bread, and your labor for that which  
does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

What's this of which the prophet speaks? a new currency? Something for nothing? The good life without a credit card? What's going on here? Keep reading Isaiah and it gets better and better and better. Light in the darkness. Lions laying down with lambs. Children playing over the hole of the asp. Mountains and hills bursting into song. No more thorns or briars. A whole new world. Things don't have to be the way they've always been. Something's on the horizon. A new currency, a new way of doing business.

And then, almost to sum it up, he says these words: You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace.

Really? You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace? What in heaven's name is he talking about? Because on one scale it doesn't always work out that way, right? We can say joy and peace and hope and love like we do with our advent wreath – or on our Christmas cards – but life doesn't always turn out that way. With the kind of currencies we deal with – there's always going to be winners and losers, up and down, good and bad, comfort and pain -- life ain't no bowl of cherries. Some play the game better, some play the game fairly, some play the game to take advantage. But there is this promise still of the prophet – in the new economy you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. How is that life could work that way? How is it that we could get ourselves to this joy and to this peace we hear about all the time at Christmas?

I've shared with you before Rabbi Edward Cohn's answer to how life should work. He puts it this way, “I think that the life cycle is all backward. You should

die first, get it out of the way. Then you live twenty years in an old-age home. You get kicked out when you're too young. You get a gold watch, you go to work. You work forty years until you're young enough to enjoy your retirement. You go to college; you party until you're ready for high school; you go to grade school; you become a little kid; you play. You have no responsibilities. You become a little baby; you go back into the womb; you spend your last months floating; and you finish up as a gleam in somebody's eye.”

Would that it were that way! But life goes the other way ... and still – you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace?

Could this be a change of currency? Is this the thing we wonder about when we get close to Bethlehem? Is this the thing we sing about? Is this the thing we hope for? That somehow the world could operate in a different way, somehow we could find a different experience? That there would be a different currency by which we trade, by which we live? That the world doesn't have to be winners and losers, rich and poor, lucky and unlucky, some on top and some on bottom – and that we would find the real meaning and purpose to our days.

Mark Twain said that the two most important days of your life are the day that you were born and the day when you realized why. And don't you wonder that when the prophet says that we shall go forth in joy and be led back in peace – it has something to do with having figured out the whole reason for why we are here. And don't you wonder that when we get close

“Our deepest hunger is to be loved.  
And our deepest peace is having  
loved another.”

to Bethlehem we get closer and closer to figuring that out – because it’s in Bethlehem that we get to see up close the currency of God. And the currency of God is first to love us. The currency of God is just to love us. The commodity without price. The wine and milk for free. That’s all that baby is ... just God’s love in flesh. God’s love for all. Just a baby and nothing else because that’s all we really want, right? Just to know we’re loved. He doesn’t hold in his hands any dollars, yen or euro. No coupons to Macy’s. Just live and in the flesh. God come down to say I so love the world and that means you. We go forth in joy ... we go forth from Bethlehem ... being loved by God. And then what we learn when the baby becomes a man – is that peace comes when you love back. The joy comes in the being loved – and the peace comes when we ourselves have loved. We go out in joy having been loved, and we are led back in peace having loved. This is the new currency, the bitcoin of Bethlehem.

It’s why Jesus says all those crazy things. If your friend ask for your cloak, give him your coat as well. If she strikes you on the right cheek, offer the left as well. Love your enemy. Forgive 70x7. What does it profit a man to gain all the dollars, yen and euro and lose his soul? If you want to be first you should make sure to be last. If you get asked to walk mile ... walk another one. It’s this new currency. It’s the new way to do business. And no it doesn’t necessarily land you on top. And no it doesn’t always feel good. And no it doesn’t mean you won’t be taken advantage of. And it will be hard and it will sometimes break your heart – but what it will get you is joy and peace. You shall go forth in joy and be led back in peace. Because deep down at the bottom of it all – our deepest hunger is to be loved and our deepest fulfillment is having loved another. Our deepest hunger is to be loved and our deepest fulfillment is having loved another.

I remember years ago reading about a kid who went to the University of Michigan – who played football there. Four time All-American. Mark Messner. And when Mark Messner was winning all his collegiate

awards he would always say that he owed it to his step-father, Del Pretty, who stepped in his life when he was a kid and loved him. Showed up at all his games and guided him through life. And so he reached his dream, got drafted into the NFL by the Los Angeles Rams. And just at that time his step-father was diagnosed with a vicious cancer – and so when Mark is out at training camp trying to make the team and prove himself a starter – he gets the call from home, Dad is real sick. And we need help taking care of him. So away from the team he walked, away from the salary he walked and Mark flew home to Detroit and for weeks loved the man who loved him first. Bathed him, bandaged his wounds, fed him spoon by spoon. Slept by his bed. But what about your shot to play pro football? Oh, it can wait, there’s a new currency now. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.

Maybe you saw the article this week about Harriet Fridkin? When Harriet Fridkin was diagnosed forty years ago with Multiple Sclerosis, she knew she was in for a challenge and when her body was able to do less and less she knew that she would start losing touch with the world. But what she didn’t know was about her friends. What she didn’t know was that her friends were not happy with her losing touch with the world. And so they said they were going to figure out how each of them could take a turn each day to visit her – so that there would not be a day without a friend. She loved them now it was time to love her back. Isn’t that nice, Harriet thought. And it will last a little while until life gets in the way. But that’s OK, a little while is better than nothing. But what she didn’t know was that it wasn’t going to end. What Harriet didn’t know was that Harriet’s Harem (which is what they call themselves) didn’t stop. From the day they started 21 years ago they didn’t stop. Every day they keep dropping by. It’s the new currency. You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace.

We all remember O. Henry’s great story “The Gift of the Magi” about the young impoverished couple –

Della and Jim -- who have no money to buy what they want to give each other. Secretly Della sells her long beautiful hair the day before Christmas to buy a gold chain for Jim’s pocket watch. And at the same time Jim sells his pocket watch to get the money to buy Della expensive and beautiful combs for the hair she’s just had cut and sold. And when they open their gifts to see what they’ve done – they realize they’ve given each other more than what money could buy. The new currency.

You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace.

Wendell Berry put it well when he wrote,  
*So, friends, everyday do something  
That won’t compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who doesn’t deserve it.*

Such are the coins we’re apt to find on our way to Bethlehem. Strange coins. New coins. By grace may we keep them. And by a greater grace, spend them.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.



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