

Review of The Long Tail by Chris Anderson

I recently finished this book that has been one of the top selling business books over the past few years. The book describes how the web has changed the way we think about and do business.

Here are some of the major ideas in *The Long Tail* and implications for business and stewardship in general:

First, a definition of what is meant by a long tail. Retailers have historically had to rely on selling only products that can reach a substantial market— hits. This is because every product has a cost to store and market in a traditional bricks and mortar retailer.

Thanks to the web and the ability to digitally store information, retailers— such as Ebay, Amazon, Netflix and Apple— can afford to market an almost inexhaustible supply of products. This has created a long tail demand for goods and services.

Anderson makes three main observations:

1. The tail of available variety is far longer than we realize.
2. It is now within reach economically.
3. All those niches, when aggregated, can make up a significant market.

Anderson found that over 20% of sales and profits from online retailers came from products that were not accessible in an offline retail store. The book details many examples mainly from music, videos and books of how markets have been created to serve the variety of niches and tastes that we all share.

What I found particularly interesting about this book was the discussion at the end of the book about economic theory. Anderson gives this as a definition of economics: *the social science of choice under scarcity*. A scarcity mentality has driven economic theory throughout history. If you do a search for peak oil on google, you can find a modern day example of this. This has led to many doomsday scenarios that almost never seem to come to pass.

Exploding world population growth was supposed to lead to massive starvation around the world. But what has happened? Starvation is on the decline and humans have become more effective in methods of food production and distribution thanks to ingenuity. What Anderson argues for in *The Long Tail* is that the economics of abundance is often ignored or neglected. He quotes George Gilder, “For most of human history, most people have believed that economics is essentially a zero-sum game— that scarcity will ultimately prevail over abundance...Yet abundance is the driving force of all economic growth and change.”

I believe this fits with a biblical worldview. The story of God is one of putting man in an abundantly resourced Garden of Eden. Adam is given a command, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth,”- *Genesis* 1:28. From this command, mankind has developed the earth and productivity has increased over time.

The story of God ends with a fully developed City— the New Jerusalem— coming down from heaven— *Revelation* 21:2-3. God says that this city will be inhabited by Himself and will represent the best of human development without the sinful effects of the Fall. The biblical story moves from a pristine garden of abundance to a fully developed city of abundance. Progress and ingenuity are God-ordained gifts. Although, it was not the goal of Anderson to make the case for biblical progression, the truths that he presents are in line with God’s revelation. Human ingenuity is always an underestimated factor when looking at economic forces. We don’t know what we don’t know. But we have an uncanny ability to solve pressing problems and improve standards of living over time.

