

16B Multiple Christian Views on Economics

Introduction

It is commonly suggested that a Biblical economic system should be somehow based on a socialist model, since this addresses the problem of poverty. The nation of Israel, however, as established under God's law, had numerous tradesmen and landowners, plus instruction on how to help the poor.

Wealth and Poverty

In 1984 Inter-Varsity published *Wealth and Poverty-4 Christian Views of Economics*. [1]

The authors took opposing positions:

- William Diehl: guided markets, government oversight of free markets
- Gary North: pure free-market capitalism
- Art Gish: economics based on community, sharing, and simplicity (dubbed by some as "hippie economics")
- John Gladwin: centralist economics (Christian socialism)

Each author interacted with the others' essays to provide an overview of the positive and negative aspects of each. The conclusion was that the Scripture does not provide a complete economic system.

The Rat Race

Peace activist Art Gish described the plight of many American in his 1973 book *Beyond the Rat Race* [2]:

Consumerism easily becomes slavery. We become trapped on a treadmill, buying more, increasing debt, and gaining only dissatisfaction.

- We don't enjoy the world God made.
- We buy things to impress other people.
- We drown in our own trash.
- We spend to look respectable.
- We are driven by current fashions.
- We decorate our homes to look like furniture showrooms.
- We deplete our natural resources.
- We are manipulated into carving more and more things that we neither need nor enjoy.

“We accept shallow materialistic standards as the definition of the good life, gearing our lives for consumption rather than creative living. We live in the poverty of affluence...Because we have limited reality to the sensory and material, we have left unexplored whole areas of experience and reality.” [3]

As an antidote, Gish urged simplicity. We need to simplify our lifestyles, our wants, and our concerns.

Rich Christians

In 1977 seminary professor Ronald Sider published *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* [4], a book which caused significant ripples in the evangelical community.

Sider’s positive contributions included these:

- He pointed out the extreme poverty that exists in parts of the world and the poverty that still exists in this country.
- He reminded Christians that God hears the cries of the poor (Ps. 35:10, Prov. 19:17, Ps. 140:12).
- He reminded Christians of our Biblical responsibility to the poor (Mt. 25:34-36, Lk. 14:12-14).
- He decried the materialism that gobbles up our culture.

Global corporations own the global communications networks whose programs and advertising create a global lust for ever more consumption. Global materialism creates growing markets and expanding profits. Tragically, this same materialism destroys social relationships and the creation. [5]

- Sider encouraged believers to work with Christian agencies which work in impoverished areas. He suggested the concept of a “graduated tithe”: Begin by giving 10% of one’s income to God’s work/charity. As income increases over time, make an effort to give more.
- He argued for a simpler lifestyle. (“The rich must live more simply so the poor may simply live.”)

Sider’s failures included these:

- He suggested that we hear God’s voice when we listen to the poor.
- He argued for increased taxation, suggesting that the government is overcoming poverty.
- He wrote favorably of socialist regimes (Allende’s Chile, Venezuela,...) and employed terminology from Marxist literature.
- He suggested that Americans who purchased food or clothing beyond what was necessary prevented the poor from owning those items.
- He preferred government intervention to personal charity (which is a Biblical command.)

Personal charity is too arbitrary and haphazard. It depends on the whim and feelings of the well off. Many needy people fail to meet those who can help. Proper institutional change (e.g., a minimum wage) on the other hand automatically benefits everyone. [6]

In 1985 theologian David Chilton published a response to Sider's book, which he titled *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators*. [7] Chilton acknowledged Sider's concern for the poor and pinpointing of poverty issues in our land, but took issue with his ignoring of Biblical principles to reduce poverty in favor of statist, interventionist policies.

Sider calls for a national (state) food policy, foreign aid, a guaranteed national income, international taxation, "land reform" (i.e., expropriation of lands from the rich), bureaucratically determined "just prices," national health care, population control, and the right of developing nations to nationalize foreign holdings-all of which involve theft of one sort or another. In Sider's Robin Hood Theology, loving my poor neighbor means robbing my rich neighbor. [8]

State-provided welfare causes dependence on the state, and is surely slavery. It is used by greedy politicians to buy votes and to create a class that is beholden to the rulers. Where we become used to benefits, we lose our reliance upon God, neighbors, family, and self, and we increasingly are unable to act responsibly. [9]

We may not mechanically assume that the poor man's cause is right...The issue in justice is not Which one is the underdog? But Which one is right? And the standard of justice is not relative wealth or poverty, but the abiding law of God. [10]

Vernon Grounds writes-

If, instructed by God's Word, I am to incarnate God's attitude, then I ought to care actively and sacrificially about those fellow – humans who, victimized by poverty, are subsisting at a sub-human level. Sub-human? Yes, a level I would not tolerate for my family or myself, a level which prevents God's image bearers from living with decency and dignity. [11]

Poverty Issues

Ray Sutton suggests the following as a "Theology of Poverty": [12]

1. The poor, like all people, should be viewed in relation to the Kingdom of God.
2. The poor are used as a symbol of faith, absolutely dependent on God.
3. The poor in the OT worked (by gleaning the fields).
4. The poor symbolize salvation. Jesus became poor for our sake, so that He could redeem us and "glean" the earth.

The NT principle is that individual have greatest responsibility to those closest to them, particularly family, when it comes to needs.

This principle, which Catholic thinkers call "subsidiarity," argues that governmental institutions are subsidiary, or secondary, to more immediate groups in finding solutions to problems. Thus

social welfare is better handled by families first and then by local charitable institutions rather than by governments. [13]

More widespread needs may require wide-scale economic development projects.

One way is through neighborhood economic development. The creation of enterprises designed for broad ownership by low-income people could provide ongoing nonsubsidized financial benefits, as well as a greater sense of control over their lives...Extending opportunities for ownership to the poor creates economic and social benefits for them, and allows the poor to become active economic participants, not just recipients of welfare. [14]

In *The Problem of Pain* [15] C.S. Lewis discovered a seeming paradox: We are told in the Beatitudes in Luke, “Blessed are the poor,” yet we are simultaneously commanded to help the poor (which could end their poverty and their blessing). Solution: We need to see the bigger picture. The poor are blessed because God takes special note of them and because they avoid the traps of material riches. They are totally dependent upon God. To render charity is to relieve suffering and to emulate Christ. This in no way works against God’s plans. Ideally, mourning, suffering, persecution, and poverty are temporary conditions that can be relived, at least in part, by any believer who sees the need.

Neither Capitalism nor Socialism

Theologian Craig Blomberg takes a position critical of both extremes in his article “Neither Capitalism nor Socialism.” [16]

Neither economic system (capitalism or socialism) existed in Biblical times.

Economic texts in the Bible are divided between protection of private property and responsibility for helping the poor.

On the one hand, private property is enshrined as a fundamental good and a right for the children of Israel as they prepare to occupy the Promised Land (Num. 26:52–56). Numerous laws guard against theft of possessions, implying that there is private ownership of them (Exod. 20:15; 22:1–15). It is particularly important not to move the boundary markers that identify where one person’s property begins and another’s ends (Deut. 19:14; 27:17). It is egregious for the wealthy to dispossess the poor of their land, as famously related with Ahab’s acquisition by force of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–16). It is possible to be both wealthy and godly, as with Abraham and the other patriarchs—Job, David, Solomon, and Esther—to name but the most prominent. In the New Testament, God “richly provides” to those of us who are generous and eager to share with others “everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17).

At the same time, the righteous rich prove to be few enough in number that Jesus observes that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:26 pars.). All the examples of godly rich people in both testaments involve those who generously give a substantial portion of their assets away, especially to help the poor...

All this naturally leads to a third reason for seeking an alternative to both capitalism and socialism: neither system necessarily helps the plight of the involuntarily poor, disabled, widow or orphan, or numerous other vulnerable and marginalized people, but helping them is a mandate that is central to all biblical ethics... [17]

Neither system adequately addresses the depth of human depravity.

Biblical ethics is centered in community rather than individualism.

[I]f one broadens one's sweep of the biblical material to everything in Scripture that bears on economic matters, five key themes emerge... The five themes are that material possessions are inherently good, that they can lead to temptations to pursue great evils, that a main way of promoting the former and guarding against the latter is to give large amounts of unneeded possessions away, that there is such a thing as having "too little"—so that as long as some people have too little, there is also such a thing as others having "too much"—and that spiritual and economic matters are inextricably intertwined. Both capitalism and socialism would agree that material possessions are good, which is why capitalists try to acquire as much wealth as possible and socialists want to ensure that all people have at least some. The rhetoric of both capitalists and socialists makes it clear that they also agree on the potential for great evil, because capitalists accuse socialists of wanting to steal and redistribute their money unjustly while socialists accuse capitalists of exploiting the masses to line their own coffers. Capitalists have normally promoted generous, voluntary philanthropy among the wealthiest in their midst and socialists have striven to legislate it, so both agree on the third point as well. Socialists have the edge on the fourth point, that because some have too little others have too much, while capitalists, at least of Adam Smith's kind, have the edge in recognizing that a providential God helps rather than hinders economic justice. The final tally, then, leaves us with each system usually acknowledging four of the five biblical themes. [18]

Makers and Takers

Jerry Bowyer has studied the economic conditions in Israel at the time of Jesus' ministry and makes these conclusions: [19]

- Galilee was relatively poor compared to Judea.
- Judea's riches were often gained in ways that exploited others: Tax collectors worked for the Romans and pocketed large sums (Zacchaeus).
- Moneychangers at the temple exchanged national currency for temple currency (Originally so that distant travelers could buy sacrificial animals in Jerusalem) and made huge profits on the exchange.
- Pharisees obtained (probably foreclosed on) widows' houses.
- The debt remission policy hadn't been practiced for hundreds of years.
- Some rich landowners exploited their laborers.

Among the sins that Jesus pointed out, He condemned those who gained riches unjustly and mistreated the poor.

Economics and Ethics

Coleson and Pierard note that Christians of the 18th and 19th Century viewed Biblical ethics as far above economic profit. Granville Sharp was instrumental in launching the British Abolition movement, advanced in Parliament by William Wilberforce. Slavery was outlawed in 1772, the slave trade was abolished in 1807, and plantation slaves were freed in 1804. [20]

The question of profit did come up, but the abolitionists insisted that "a Christian country should be glad to give up profits which are made out of human shame and misery." This is capitalism with a conscience; making money is legitimate, but when profit making and God's Law are in conflict, as they may be in the short run, choose the right, "For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world but lose his soul." (Mark 8:36). [21]

Economic advancement

Chris Page writes:

Helping to reduce poverty is a very practical demonstration of God's love, and creating sustainable businesses, which include increased agricultural productivity, are the way forward...I believe one of the things God really wants is to see an emerging generation of Christians start and run businesses where they will serve God and their customers first, and will operate their businesses with attitudes of hard work (doing it unto the Lord), integrity, and having faith for what could be. [22]

Wayne Grudem adds:

I believe the only long-term solution to world poverty is business. That is because businesses produce goods, and businesses produce jobs. And businesses continue producing goods year after year, and continue providing jobs and paying wages year after year. Therefore, if we are ever going to see long-term solutions to world poverty, I believe it will come through starting and maintaining productive, profitable businesses. [23]

According to Peter Drucker [24] and Clayton Christianson [25] the key to economic growth in a country or region is innovation- developing an idea or device, turning it into a product, and introducing it into the market. The result should be new sales, profits, jobs, spinoff products, and economic growth. Technology, rightly applied, meeting culture's needs, can work against poverty.

Under the theory of free trade, all nations benefit by increased specialization in their areas of natural competitive advantage...One might expect an emerging nation to improve its standard of living by more effective provision of agricultural products, handicrafts, and available raw materials...(However), regardless of natural wealth, a poor or emerging country can raise its standard of living through high-tech industry. [26]

Conclusions

Richard Chewning suggested that an economic system may be more or less compatible with Biblical principles and God's plans for human flourishing. A system which is more compatible would include these factors: [27]

- It allows an expression of full humanity created in God's image.
- It permits a wide range of choice in human occupations.
- It does not focus entirely on production of material goods, but allows individuals freedom to produce "spiritual" goods and services if they wish.
- It promotes development of the earth's resources for human benefit.
- It allows and protects private ownership of resources.
- It allows or encourages people to take a break from work, ideally one day in seven.
- It allows one to employ others in production of goods and services and to gain profit from such work.
- It allows better work to receive greater reward.
- It values hard work, diligence, and excellent products.
- It allows for the opportunity to give to the needs of others.
- It should allow for and promote a common basis for morality.

David Jones summarizes Biblical economics in two principles:

A Christian approach to economics...is one that allows for and upholds the connection between labor and production, work and creation, risk and reward, and actions and consequences...

An economic system that resonates with God's divine design, then, will encourage and foster mankind's task of exercising godly dominion (but not sinful domination) over the created order...

The task of believers is to evaluate any given economic system through a biblical lens in order to evaluate its faithfulness to Scripture. As Christians engage in this task, seeking to display the economic principles revealed by God, we must remember that God does not just instruct mankind to do things; rather, He creates man to do what He tells him to do. When we act in accord with creational design in any realm of life, including economics, we can expect things will go well; however, if we act contrary to God's design for life under the sun, we should assume that things will go poorly. [28]

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