

Property, Ethics, and God

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John R. Schneider (2005) encourages Christians to engage in consumer capitalism by extravagantly consuming. Schneider's position is in sharp contrast to church tradition. He justifies his position using selected texts from the Bible. In this article, I argue that a systematic examination of the entire Bible for passages dealing with property, ethics, and God does not support Schneider's views. Furthermore, I argue that Schneider's views require a strong notion of private property that gives me the right to use my property in any way I want. In contrast, I argue that the Bible contains a weak notion of private property and a strong notion of stewardship. This article does not directly deal with Schneider's 2007 article in the *Journal of Markets and Morality*; however, it does imply that an embrace of capitalism, as Schneider's collective writings define it, can be taken too far.

Introduction

Capitalism, by definition, entails private ownership of the means of production. Socialism entails government ownership of the means of production. In Marx's critique of capitalism, he portrays private ownership of capital (the physical tools used for production) as the root of all evil. According to Marx, once this root is cut, and a time of healing has occurred, all men will become perfectly moral. They will develop a "herd consciousness" under which each person will think of what is best for the entire herd instead of what is best for him- or herself. Furthermore, when this happens there will be no need for government, laws, and police, and there will be perfect freedom—every man and woman can do exactly what they want to do every day, but each person will decide to do what is best for society

because they are now perfectly ethical (Marx 1932; Marx and Engels 1848).¹ The relationship between ethics and private property (especially of capital) is one of the biggest questions shaping our modern world. Indeed, China today is struggling with how far to go toward private property (Browne 2005).

This article will examine what the Bible says about the relationship among private property, ethics, and how we relate to God. It provides some operational definitions of property, wealth, and ethics and discusses how these definitions relate to several major biblical themes that run through the entire Bible. It will also summarize what John Schneider (2005) says about the relationship between Christianity and consumer capitalism. Schneider (2005) is singled out of a large literature for two reasons; first, he provides an excellent survey of that literature and, second, his own views are in stark contrast to that literature. Schneider provides biblical support for his own views, and extensive biblical support also can be found for the views against which he is reacting. Schneider and those he criticizes are picking different biblical passages to support their views. What is needed, and what is provided by this article, is a systematic survey of what the entire Bible says about the relationship among property, ethics, and how we relate to God. This article provides a biblical response to Schneider and examines biblical passages that are tangential to the Schneider vs. the Church disagreement.

Definitions

Entire books could be written on the definitions of property, wealth, and ethics. Here, I will provide some operational definitions that will allow us to proceed without getting too bogged down in details. Something is considered your property if you own it and if society (or the government) recognizes your ownership. To “own” something means to control it; this control includes the right to use it, to exclude others from using it, and to sell it. Usually society recognizes property by way of its legal code and legal documentation system (e.g., see Jer. 32:6–16).

A person’s wealth is the value of one’s property. In order to get a comparable measure for wealth, the value of all property must be expressed in terms of a common denominator. By using a common denominator, it is possible to add the values of very different types of property in order to get a single measure of the value of one’s entire property. In modern societies, this common denominator is usually money, but it has been other things in history. For example, rice was used as the common denominator when Mao Zedong redistributed the wealth of the landlord class to the peasantry between 1949 and 1952 (Hinton 1966). Notice that it is possible to own things that do not contribute to your wealth because they are not worth anything. The primary focus of this article is property and the

owning of it; however, the article also contains implications for wealth because one's wealth is the value of one's property.

Because this is an article dealing with what the Bible says, I am going to let Jesus define what is ethical. Jesus said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 22:39). When asked "who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), Jesus replied by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable implies that your neighbor is whoever you come in contact with, even if that person is an enemy. (Read Luke 10:25–37 while realizing that Samaritans and Jews hated each other.) Thus, we should love everyone we meet, including our enemies, as much as we love ourselves. Ethics is needed specifically because we are fallen and do not naturally love as we ought to.

Many secular ethical theories are incomplete shadows of Jesus' definition of ethics.² Consider the following examples. Representing utilitarianism, Francis Hutcheson said that "the right thing to do is that which is likely to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" (Thompson 2003, 67). John Rawls (1958, 1971) proposed two principles for creating a just society: (1) each person should be allowed the maximum amount of liberty that is compatible with everyone else's having the maximum amount of liberty, and (2) inequalities should be allowed only if it is reasonable to believe that the inequalities will be most beneficial to the least well-off. The first of these principles takes precedence over the second and the first requires that everyone's liberty be considered equally. Immanuel Kant's (1927a and b) categorical imperative requires two things: (1) that I only make choices that I could change into universal laws for everyone and (2) that I treat people as ends and never as means. Changing choices into universal law would result in everyone's welfare being given equal weight. In contrast to these secular ethical theories, Jesus' view requires that I go beyond just treating everyone the same—Jesus requires that I actually *love* everyone I meet as I love myself.

Jesus' view of ethics is in direct opposition to the views of philosophers, such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ayn Rand, who argue that I have a moral obligation to develop myself to the highest extent possible. Machiavelli (1940) believed that states prosper when their leaders are powerful and are willing to do anything it takes to maintain stability. Lying, stealing, and cheating to get and maintain power is fine according to Machiavelli. Machiavelli would be horrified by Jesus' teaching that people should "turn the other cheek" (Luke 6:29) and by his allowing himself to be crucified. Nietzsche would agree with Machiavelli. Nietzsche bitterly rejected the teachings and goals of Christianity (Nietzsche 1888, 624–26). Nietzsche (1892) advocated the goals of superiority, control, and power. Ayn Rand valued power and individuality. She adamantly

opposed any system that suppressed the individual, like communism (Leightner 2005). Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Rand would advocate crushing the enemy, not loving the enemy as required by Jesus.

I am making a distinction between Jesus' teachings on ethics and his teachings on religion. Jesus did not label parts of his teaching as ethics and part as religious; however, we can add these labels by comparing what Jesus said to what is typically viewed as ethics and by noting that religions require that we be more than just ethical. Jesus' command that I should love everyone I meet as much as I love myself is ethics because (as shown above) it is very similar to the dominant strand of ethical thought. Jesus elevated that ethical standard into a religious standard when he left off the "as you love yourself" and changed the rule to "you should love one another as I (Jesus) loved you, and I loved you enough to die for you" (John 15:12–14; Leightner 2004). Jesus' command that we love each other so much that we are willing to sacrifice ourselves goes way beyond any secular view of ethics—it takes us into the realm of religion.

When I use the term *religion*, I am referring to major systems of thought that call us to become more than just ethical, that call us to a higher purpose that transpires our individuality, and that offers people meaning and purpose. This definition fits the major world religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. (However, when I refer to God, I mean specifically the God of the Bible.) It is a commonly accepted fact that all religions contain very similar moral codes—they teach that stealing, lying, killing, and adultery are wrong. However, religions call us to be more than just moral (Leightner 2005 and 2003). Hinduism requires that we break through the illusion of separateness. Buddhism requires that we obtain correct knowledge and end our desires. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity require worship, obedience, and trust in a God. Yes, religions require that we be moral, but they also insist that we go beyond mere morality. Jesus' view of morality requires that I love others the same as I love myself; the religion that Jesus established requires love that is so strong that I am willing to sacrifice myself if necessary (Leightner 2003 and 2005). Religions also tend to demand our preeminent devotion. Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37).

If religions demand our preeminent devotion, then focusing on the accumulation of property can crowd out religion or, worse, become a substitute for true religion. Scrooge, in the classic Charles Dickens story, had no time for anything other than the accumulation of property. Although Scrooge is an extreme example, many others have constructed their lives around the accumulation of property. When this happens, property has become their god at whose alter they worship. Although property (symbolized as money) is not the root of all kinds of evil, the

love of property is the root of all kinds of evil (see 1 Tim. 6:10). This is not only true in Christianity but also in other religions. Consider Buddhism. Buddha had to forsake all of his property and his family before he could even seek enlightenment. Furthermore, property promotes attachment in Buddhism and attachment is what must be eliminated. The Buddhist monks, who are separated from any personal property, are much closer to enlightenment than the laity who are surrounded by their property.

The accumulation of property can be a substitute for religion, and, as such, property competes with religion for our devotion. In contrast, the giving of property to a religion is often viewed as a sacred act (as well as being an act of faith). The Buddhist layperson starts his or her day off with a sacred moment when he or she feeds the begging monks. The wise men worshiped the newborn Jesus by presenting him with part of their valuable property (Matt. 2:11). A woman worshiped Jesus by pouring her very expensive perfume on his head. Furthermore, Jesus accepted this act of worship even when it was argued that many poor people could have been helped with the proceeds from selling the perfume (Matt. 26:6–13). In the early church, many people donated their property (or the proceeds from selling their property) to the church, which allowed those with needs to take what they needed (Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–37). When Ananias and Sapphira lied about how much they were giving to the church, it was viewed as sacrilegious, and God struck them dead (Acts 5:1–10). The giving of property to God is sacred; do not profane the sacred by mixing it with immorality (in this case a lie).

If God (and ethics) controls how we accumulate, use, and relate to property, then there is no inherent conflict between owning property and being a Christian. However, if property supplants God as the reason for living, as the object of our worship, or as our primary focus, then property and Christianity are antithetical. Although this section of the article has provided the skeleton that holds up the Christian view of property, ethics, and religion, the Bible adds to this skeleton flesh that is sometimes surprising.

Highlights of the Literature from Saint Augustine to John Schneider

John Schneider (2005) begins his survey of the Christian literature on capitalism, wealth, and property by explaining that, prior to Pope Leo XIII's (1891) encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, an increasing number of Christian theologians were embracing state socialism. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical denounced state socialism

as contrary to nature, the dignity of the individual, and the goodness of property. This pope believed that Christianity could overcome the weakness of capitalism and redeem it. More recently, as Gay (1991) shows, there appears to be increasing numbers of Christian intellectuals who believe that our best hope for helping this world's poor is through capitalism. However, there are also a large number of Christian leaders who have major concerns about capitalism, and this concern is deeply rooted in the history of Christian thought.

Saint Augustine (354–430) argued that we should value finite goods because of their usefulness as instruments in promoting God's goals, but that we should not enjoy them. Saint Augustine's distinction between using and enjoying goods has generated much debate (see Mathewes 2004). Schneider (2005) interprets Saint Augustine's distinction as advocating temperance. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), citing Aristotle, advocated moderation as the core of all virtue. If we embrace immoderation, then we are no better than the beasts (Aquinas 1998, 427). Schneider (2005, 2–3) says,

In Christian history, one is hard pressed to find any major theologian who takes issue with the general counsel of temperance and moderation, so understood in terms of true "need." Right or wrong, this understanding of the Christian economic life creates nearly insuperable difficulties for Christians who wish to accept capitalism for its utility and take part in its culture (Gordon 1989). For with capitalism, the economic culture has changed in ways that make it almost completely incompatible with this historic mandate of temperance.... Its very nature as a working economic system is to be a veritable *culture* of acquisition and enjoyment of innumerable goods beyond the pale of "necessity"... The culture of consumer capitalism is just (among other things) a culture of passions for excess and extravagance of the sort that Christianity has typically condemned.

Schneider's explicitly stated goal is to "forge a new theology and ethics for *affirming* these passions and habits" (3). Schneider admits that he stands in direct opposition to temperance and moderation, and thus, in direct opposition to Christian tradition.

Before explaining his new theology of giving in to the excessive and extravagant passions of capitalism, Schneider (2005) tackles the moral issue of engaging in excessive consumption while in the midst of grave poverty. Augustine (1834, 42) equated excess consumption to stealing and murdering when there are others in need. Aquinas (1988, 363) said that the rich have an obligation to help and, if the rich do not help, then the poor are entitled to take what they need. In essence, when faced with dire need and no one will help, then all property is "common

property.” Gonzalez (1990) shows the pervasiveness of Christian moral outrage when the rich enjoy extravagant consumption while others suffer great need. Schneider points out that these issues are compounded by globalization. We can now sit in our huge houses, eating excessive amounts of food while watching people starve by way of TV. Disturbed by the stark differences between the rich and the poor in our world, Arthur Simon (2003) and Ronald Sider (1997) advocate living more simply so that others can simply live.

Schneider, wanting to encourage extravagant capitalist consumption, compares Simon and Sider to Judas. Several days before he was crucified, Jesus was eating in Bethany. During the meal, a woman poured pure nard on Jesus’ head. The nard was worth approximately a year’s wages, and Judas objected that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor (Mark 14:3–9). Jesus tells Judas (Simon and Sider) that he accepts this generous act of extravagance and to leave the woman alone. On the basis of this one event in the life of Christ, Schneider (2005, 5) argues that Simon and Sider’s live-more-simply-so-that-others-can-live view is a “denunciation of the life of Christ.” Schneider (2007) also points out that Jesus did not live as simply as he could have lived—in comparison to John the Baptist, Jesus’ critics called him “a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, and a friend of publicans and sinners” (Luke 7:31–35). Furthermore, at the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus created an overabundance of extremely excellent wine (John 2:1–10).

However, in contrast to Schneider’s view, please consider that Jesus was God. He started in heaven without any pain and willingly gave up heaven to become a man. He was born into a relatively poor family.³ He lived a life of relative poverty and probably only owned what he could carry with him—no land, houses, or businesses (Luke 9:57–58). Jesus did live more simply so that others could simply live. The true denunciation of the life of Christ occurs when Schneider, by citing one incident in Jesus’ life, somehow argues that Jesus’ life supports Schneider’s advocacy of a life of excessive capitalist consumption.⁴ Jesus was not a self indulgent capitalist mass consumer—he was the son of God who sacrificed his pain-free existence in heaven, to come to earth to live a relatively difficult life and to die a horrible death so that you and I may live. Furthermore, Philippians 2:5–8, tells us to be like our God, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

Schneider continues his attack on Simon's and Sider's live simply view by noting that both of these authors argue that we may celebrate and have fun on special occasions. Schneider argues that occasionally relaxing their rules make Simon and Sider hypocrites and creates a moral impasse when trying to figure out when it is and when it is not right to have fun. One could counter that if Schneider ever reduces his own consumption, so that he could help the poor (which Schneider admits, at the end of his essay, is a good idea) or even save money for the future of his children, then Schneider is being a hypocrite. The truth is that God calls some of us to extremes—Job, after being tested, was called to the life of a rich man (Job 42:10–13) versus the rich young ruler who was called to sell everything he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow Jesus (Luke 18:18–22). If God does not call us to one of these extremes, then we are faced with the very real struggle of figuring out where we should be in the middle. This struggle has plagued many Christians. For example, Soren Kierkegaard believed that he had to give up the love of his life, Regina Olsen, for Christ. Later, he realized that God had not required that sacrifice, but it was too late—Regina had already married someone else.

Having attacked the Church's historical endorsement of temperance, moderation, and simple living so that others may live, Schneider (2005) argues that the Bible supports extravagant capitalistic consumption. He argues that in Genesis, God is an extravagant creator—making the world more complex and intricate than it had to be. Furthermore, God proclaimed this extravagant creation to be “good.” Moreover, God created men and women in God's image and placed them in a garden where conspicuous consumption was possible and free. Schneider (2005, 9) says, “If there is any single place in sacred Scripture where we have the divine vision of human existence as it should be, it is in this narrative of Eden. . . . It is a vision of unashamed material extravagance put in the existential form of delight.” Schneider goes on to say that after the final judgment, the world will be remade into a place of extravagant delight (Isa. 65:17–25; 66:22–23; Mic. 4:3–4; Zech. 3:10; Rev. 20–21).

Schneider then argues that the children of the Exodus were called to live in the promised land—a land of great bounty—as a redemptive sign to others. When living in this bounty, it was extremely important that they *remember* God and from where they came (Deut. 8). Memory leads to gratitude and humility.

At the end of his essay, Schneider reintroduces the problem of enjoying excessive consumption in a world of starving people. His solution to this problem is that I should do what I am called to do.⁵ He notes that even Jesus had a constrained calling to just the Jewish nation—he did not try in his short life to reach the entire world. Likewise, neither should I attempt to feed the world

from my supper table. I agree with this final point of Schneiders’—that finding and following our calling is absolutely key to a Christian’s life. However, I believe that God more often calls his children to sacrifice, than he does to lavish, extravagant, capitalist consumption. I base this view on Scripture that emphasizes sacrifice, such as Matthew 16:24–25; Luke 9:23–24, 14:26–27; and Philippians 2:5–8 and on Scripture that promises us persecution such as Luke 21:12–17 and John 15:18–21. Furthermore, “callings” are usually for a life’s work and do not provide specific clarity on whether I should indulge in excessive consumption and eat another piece of pie. In addition to our specific callings, we can find guidance in the Bible for general living.

A Contribution to the Debate Between the Church and Schneider

The debate between Schneider and church tradition is fundamentally a debate about whether the Bible supports my owning private property or God’s owning all property.⁶ If my property is mine, to do with as I wish, then I have a right to conspicuously consume it if I want. However, if God actually owns everything and I am merely his steward who has been instructed to tend to the poor, then I dare not feast while others starve. The problem with God’s owning all property (and his not actively protecting it at the moment) is that selfish (fallen) people do not have an incentive to maintain it or improve it; instead they have an incentive to overuse it as quickly as possible before someone else overuses it, and it is ruined. These are the problems typically attributed to communal property and perhaps God allows man to have the illusion of actually owning property in order to reduce these problems. If God is the owner and I am his steward, then I need to be concerned about the day that God will return and ask me to make an accounting of my stewardship (Ezek. 16; Matt. 24:45–51 and 25:14–30; Luke 20:9–16; see also Deut. 8:18). I will argue that, although the Bible supports a greatly constrained notion of private property, in the final analysis, God is the ultimate owner who has made me his steward and commanded me to tend to the poor. He will return someday and discover what I have done with that stewardship.

The eighth of the Ten Commandments, “thou shalt not steal,” logically implies private property of some sort (Ex. 20:15). Stealing is taking someone else’s property. The tenth commandment also implies property—“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor’s

(Ex. 20:17 KJV). Furthermore, the curse placed on those who remove their neighbor's landmark, presupposes private property (Deut. 22:17).

However, the Old Testament law greatly constrains private property. Recall that we defined property as owning something where owning includes the right to use, to exclude others from using, and to sell. The Old Testament law constrains all of these rights.

We are forbidden to use our wealth to make false gods. Thus, the Israelites committed an abomination when they donated their gold jewelry to Aaron so he could make a golden calf (Ex. 32). We cannot use all that we accumulate in any way we want—we must set aside a tithe and the firstfruits of our labor and present these to God (Ex. 23: 19 and Lev. 27:30–33). Such a presentation shows that we are placing God over ourselves and over our possessions. It is interesting to note that the presenter consumed much of his tithe, he just did it where and how God dictated (Deut. 14:22–29 and 12:6–7).⁷

Perhaps the greatest constraint on using our property as we see fit is the prohibition from working on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8–11). On the Sabbath, I am forbidden to use my capital to produce. Furthermore, the land is to be given a year long Sabbath once every seven years (Ex. 23:10–11 and Lev. 25:3–5). I cannot plow, plant, or reap from the land I own for one year out of every seven. Although I may own the land, I do not have the right to work it to death—I must periodically let it rest. Likewise, my owning an ox does not give me the right to muzzle him while he is treading out the corn (Deut. 25:4). I must let the ox eat while he works; owning the ox does not give me the right to starve the ox.

According to modern thinking, if I own something, then I have the right to do whatever I want with that thing. I can enshrine it, I can abuse it, I can destroy it. Under the Old Testament law, private property does not entail those rights. Furthermore, according to modern thinking, I can exclude other people from using what I own. Again such a right is strongly curtailed in Old Testament law.

According to Old Testament law, I cannot harvest the corners of my field, and I cannot strip my fields clean. The part of my crop that is left in the field is to be free for the taking by the poor and the stranger (Lev. 19:9–10 and 23:22). This is why Ruth could glean in Boaz's fields (Ruth 2:3). Furthermore, if you own olive trees or grape vines, then you are to harvest the fruit one time per year. Any fruit that ripens after your one harvest is to be left for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut. 24:19–21). Anybody, not just the poor, can go into a neighbor's field and eat his fill. He just cannot take any extra out (Deut. 23:24–25). Clearly Old Testament law directly contradicts the notion that if I own something, then I can exclude others from enjoying the fruits of what I own. Furthermore, these Old Testament laws create a more egalitarian society

by diminishing the advantages of owning private property and reducing the disadvantages of not owning property.

Many ethical quandaries are rooted in alternative perspectives. For example, if I am concerned about the employment of textile workers in my nation, then I will prohibit the importation of textiles. In contrast, if I am concerned about the welfare of all people in the world, then I will embrace free trade and not restrict the importation of textiles. If I am worried about the standard of living for the people currently living on the earth right now, then I will emphasize production over the control of pollution. In contrast, if I am worried about both the current and future populations of the earth, then my concern over pollution increases. Who you consider and over what time frame can make differences in ethical solutions.

Modern Western thinking focuses on the individual and a time period no greater than his or her lifespan. In contrast, Old Testament law focused on the family line, with an infinite time horizon. Thus, if a man dies without producing an heir, his brother is ordered to have sex with the widow to try to impregnate her so she can produce an heir. He must do this even if so doing reduces the inheritance of his own children (Deut. 25:5–10, see also the story of Tamar in Gen. 38). This Old Testament concern for the entire family line is evident in the prohibition from selling property forever (Lev. 25:23). A person had the right to sell his land, but he could redeem it any time he was willing and able, and it automatically (no matter what) reverted back to him in the year of Jubilee which occurred every fifty years (Lev. 25:8–55). Of course the price of the land would fall the closer you were to the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:15–16). However, you cannot sell the inheritance of your children forever, except for houses in walled cities (Lev. 25:30). The importance of keeping property within the family line is illustrated in the story of the daughters of Zelophedad (Num. 27:1–11 and 36:1–12; see also Ezek. 46:16–18).

Thus, Old Testament law contradicts our current notion of owning property by restricting how much we use our property, by allowing others to enjoy the fruits of our property, and by forbidding the permanent selling of our land and houses. These restrictions create a society where everyone is treated more equally (regardless of wealth) both now and in perpetuity.⁸

Not only does the Old Testament contradict our typical notion of what owning property means, it also argues that everything that we own is from God. If we forget his ultimate rights to us and what we view as ours, then we will be judged (Deut. 8:18; 1 Chron. 29:14; and Ezek. 16:4–21). The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar was warned against being proud and was encouraged to show mercy to the poor (Dan. 4:1–27). A year after the warning, Nebuchadnezzar said,

“Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30 NAS). Immediately, Nebuchadnezzar lost both his kingdom and his sanity for seven years. At the end of the seven years, Nebuchadnezzar realized that everything he owned came from God (see also Jer. 27:1–17).

As with Nebuchadnezzar, Tyrus and its king did not give God credit for Tyrus’ beauty, trade, and wisdom. God said that the king of Tyrus was wiser than Daniel and that by his wisdom he had increased his riches. These riches made Tyrus proud (Ezek. 27–28:6). God then compares the king of Tyrus (and thus the city of Tyrus) to Satan and the foretold fall of Tyrus to Satan’s being thrown out of heaven (Ezek. 28:11–19). Likewise, Isaiah compared Babylon to Satan (Isa. 14:4–23). Ezekiel 31 compares Pharaoh and Egypt to the most beautiful tree in the garden of God (Eden)—a tree who became proud of its beauty and was cast down to hell. Nations that trust in their riches, that are proud of their riches, and that do not give God credit for their riches are as evil as Satan. Furthermore, they will share Satan’s fate. “Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath; but the whole land will be devoured by the fire of his jealousy” (Zeph. 1:18).⁹

The New Testament makes our role as God’s stewards even more explicit than the Old Testament did (see Matt. 24:45–51 and Luke 20:9–16). Even our bodies are not our own. “What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19). As stewards, we must give an accounting of what we have done with God’s gifts. This accounting should not scare us into inaction—instead we should boldly invest and expand what God has put under our management (Matt. 25:14–30).

As stewards of God’s property, we are instructed to do several things. We are instructed to remember that everything we get is from God (Deut. 8:18 and Ezek. 16). We are to earn God a return on his property (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 20:9–16). We are to serve God before ourselves, in the spirit of a servant (Luke 17:7–10). We are not to complain about the generosity of God (Matt. 20:1–15). We should spread the gospel (Mark 16:15) and watch for Christ’s second coming (Luke 12:37). We should forgive other Christians their debts against us (Matt. 18:23–35). We should give God’s household “their portion of meat in due season” (Luke 12:42–43). We should not beat God’s servants and eat and drink and get drunk (Luke 12:45–46). We are not to “waste our substance in riotous living” like the prodigal son (Luke 15:13) or waste¹⁰ what we have been put in charge of like the unjust steward (Luke 16:1; Jackson and Leightner 2007). Note: these last three biblical passages are prohibitions against “extravagant capitalist con-

sumption.” We are to be generous with the poor, the widow, and the oppressed (Isa. 1:17; 58:6–10; Ezek. 18:7–9; Matt. 25:31–46).

Taken as a whole, the Bible contains a greatly constrained notion of private property versus an extremely strong statement of our role as stewards. Schneider’s (2005) advocacy of extravagant consumption is hard to swallow when viewed from the perspective of a steward in a world of great need, especially a steward given a charge to help meet that need.

Additional Biblical Insights into Property, Ethics, and God

Schneider (2005) advocates extravagant capitalist consumption, and the rich can consume more extravagantly than the poor. In contrast to Schneider’s view, the Bible contains many warnings for the rich. Jesus clearly saw a potential conflict between property and a healthy relationship with God. “No man 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” (Matt. 6:24 NAS). In Jesus’ parable about invitations to God’s banquet, some people turned down the invitation due to their acquisition of new property (land and oxen) and due to a recent marriage (Luke 14:16–24). Jesus said, “Whosoever he be that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). Luke 12:33–34 says, “Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not ... for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (see also Matt. 6:19–21). In the parables that compare heaven to a treasure and to a pearl of great value, the finders gladly sell everything in order to obtain heaven (Matt. 13:44–46).

In the parable of the sower, the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches are the thorns that choke out the word of God in some lives (Matt. 13:22). That passage raises the important question of “how are riches deceitful?” The parable of the rich fool provides the answer: Riches are deceptive because they give a false sense of security (Luke 12:16–21). The church of Laodicea, condemned in Revelations 3:14–22 for being lukewarm, was deceived by its earthly riches. God threatens to spit Laodicea out of his mouth because “thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). First Timothy 6:17 tells rich people not to “trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God.” Furthermore, Christians are not to respect people based on their earthly riches (James 2:1–9). First Timothy 6:9–11 (NIV) says: “People who want to get

rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all of this.” James says:

Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasures together for the last days. Behold, the hire of the laborers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just. (James 5:1–6)

In spite of this passage, James must recognize that some rich may have gotten their riches in an ethical fashion because he mentions rich, but righteous, Job five verses later.

There are many warnings against the rich in the Old Testament prophets. One of them is Ezekiel 34:20–21: “Therefore thus saith the Lord God unto them; Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat cattle and between the lean cattle. Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad.”

Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven (Luke 18:25). However, with God, even this is possible. Job is an example. God bragged to Satan about how righteous Job was. Satan claimed that Job was only righteous because God had paid Job extremely well. Satan claimed that Job would curse God if God took away all of Job’s possessions (Job 1:8–11). Satan was wrong (Job 2:3). True righteousness does not depend on what we own.¹¹ Naked came we out of our mothers’ wombs and naked will we return, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, “blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 2:21).

In chapter 31, Job takes a strong legal Hebrew oath that he is righteous and part of this oath deals with how he has handled his property. Specifically, he claims that he has not despised the cause of his manservant or maidservant (v. 13), he has not withheld the poor from their desires (v. 16), he has shared his food with the fatherless (v. 17), and given clothing to those who needed it (v. 19). Job was extravagant in his generosity in contrast to being extravagant in his consumption.¹² The Old Testament prophets associate righteousness with such

generosity (Isa. 1:17; 58:6–10; Ezek. 18:7–9). Jesus agreed that the righteous will be those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give lodging to the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison (Matt. 25:31–46).¹³ The Good Samaritan did not provide the minimum needed assistance; instead, he gave extravagantly and without limit (Luke 10:33–35).

James 1:27 says, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” James also says, “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled’; and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:15–17 NAS).

Just as riches often cause a false sense of security, poverty can cause an un-Christian feeling of desperation and insecurity (Matt. 6:25–34; Luke 12:22–32). Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear for clothing?” ... 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 added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself (Matt. 6:31–34 NAS).

It is significant that Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer to pray for our daily bread, not tomorrow’s bread, or next year’s bread (Matt. 6:11). When God directly fed the children of Israel in the wilderness, he only gave them enough manna for one day at a time, except for Fridays during which they got enough for the Sabbath also (Ex. 16:12–31).

Although Jesus teaches us not to worry about earthly provisions, laboring is still necessary. Paul, reacting to some busybodies who were not working, says “if any would not work, neither should they eat” (2 Thess. 3:10–12; see also 1 Thess. 4:11–12). The Old Testament law not only required resting on the Sabbath, it also required working the other six days (Ex. 20:9). The Old Testament law also required that people honor their parents. Jesus condemned those who gave their money to the temple so they could escape helping their parents (Mark 7:9–13). Paul says, “If any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8).

Whereas men often put great emphasis on the accumulation of property, on obtaining honor, on having victory over enemies, on living a long life, [and on extravagant consumption],¹⁴ God was pleased when Solomon asked for wisdom instead of those things (2 Chron. 1:7–12). Indeed, Old Testament law forbade kings from accumulating wives and/or money (Deut. 17:17). The breaking of that commandment got both Solomon and Hezekiah into trouble (1 Kings 11:1–13;

Isa. 39:2–6; and 2 Chron. 32:27–31). Proverbs repeatedly argues that obtaining wisdom and understanding is much better than obtaining wealth (Prov. 3:13–24; 8:10–11; and 16:16). Proverbs also emphasizes giving to the poor. According to Proverbs 19:17, those who give to the poor are actually lending to God, and God repays his debts. In contrast, whoever stops “his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard” (Prov. 21:13). The portrait of a virtuous wife given in Proverbs 31:10–31 is of a hard worker who trades, buys property, and gives to the poor and needy.

Several Old Testament stories show that there is a time to refuse the offer of property and/or money as payment. These are times when the potential recipients’ ethics need to be beyond question and accepting payment might raise questions. Thus, when Abraham rescues the people and property of the King of Sodom from the King of Elam, the King of Sodom offers Abraham all the rescued property. Abraham, in the name of God, declines the offer (Gen. 14). Elisha refused payment for healing Naaman, the great Syrian general, of leprosy (2 Kings 5). When Elisha’s servant took payment behind Elisha’s back, he was cursed with Naaman’s leprosy. The wicked Haman convinced King Ahasuerus to order a great slaughter of the Jews. When King Ahasuerus’s wife, Esther, revealed that she was a Jew, the king turned against Haman. The king then sent out a message to all the land saying that the Jews could defend themselves and kill all their enemies, taking their property as spoils (Est. 8:11). However, the Jews refused to take the property (Est. 9:15–16). In all these cases, accepting payment could raise ethical questions. In all these cases, refusing payment reduced the refuser’s ability to enjoy extravagant consumption.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul supported himself during his ministry instead of accepting donations for his living expenses because he wanted to be a moral example to the church (2 Thess. 3:8–12; 1 Cor. 9:1–18; 2 Cor. 11:7–12:18; and Acts 20:33–34). Furthermore, Paul’s not taking pay clearly distinguished him from others who professed to be Christian leaders but who actually were just greedy for riches and good food (Phil. 3:17–19; 2 Peter 2:1–3; Jude; Titus 1:11; and Rom. 16:17–18). Jesus drove those buying and selling out of the temple, calling them thieves, so that the temple could become a house of prayer, as God intended (Luke 19:45–46; see also John 2:14–16).

The Old Testament contains several stories of powerful people who stole the property of others, resulting in dire consequences. When Naboth refused to sell his vineyard to King Ahab, Jezebel (Ahab’s wife) had Naboth killed (1 Kings 21). After the murder, Jezebel told Ahab to go take possession of the vineyard, which he happily did, but for which he was condemned by God. In another example, King David had Uriah murdered so he could steal Uriah’s wife (2 Sam. 11–12).

In Ezekiel 34:17–22, God condemns the fat cattle who take advantage of their power and wealth to take what is best and then to ruin what is left over (see also Micah 2:1–3 and 3:1–4).

In contrast to taking property, Jonathan gave his property to David (1 Sam. 18:4). This was a pure act of love because David and Jonathan were rivals for the future throne. In this story, love is more important than position, honor, and wealth. Jesus judged the relative worth of a gift by the amount of sacrifice involved, not by its market value. Thus, the widow who donated two pennies (mites) to the temple gave more than the rich, who had given a lot of money (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). The widow of Zarephath gave to Elijah what she thought would be the last of her meal and oil. However, God multiplied that meal and oil so that it lasted as long as it was needed (1 Kings 17:10–16). Likewise, Jesus takes the five barley loaves and two small fish of a poor boy and multiplies them so that they feed five thousand (John 6:5–13).

Old Testament law prohibited usury between Hebrews (Ex. 22:25 and Lev. 25:35–37), prohibited the taking of gifts or bribes (Ex. 23:8), and prohibited returning escaped servants (Deut. 23:15–16). Furthermore, Old Testament law required the use of just weights (Deut. 25:13–15); returning your brother's sheep, ox, or donkey to him that had gotten lost (Deut. 22:1–4); paying workers on the day that they work (Lev. 19:13); and having one law for everyone, even the stranger (Lev. 24:22). “Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty” (Lev. 19:15). You shall love your neighbor, and even strangers, as yourself (Lev. 19:18, 34).

Jesus not only repeated this last Old Testament command (Matt. 22:39), he went beyond it when he commanded us to love each other so much that we are willing to die for each other (John 15:12–13; Leightner 2004). Do these commands imply that I should sell all my property and give the proceeds to the poor? I will argue that a biblical answer to this question is a qualified no.

Jesus directly asked only one person whom he met to sell everything and to give all the proceeds to the poor (Luke 18:18–27). Furthermore, that one person was clearly someone who valued his wealth more than his God. Jesus was quite satisfied when rich Zacchaeus promised to donate only half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back anyone he had cheated fourfold (Luke 19:2–9). God required that rich Boaz allow the poor to come into his fields and take what his reapers dropped and missed. God did not require that Boaz, or generous Job, sell all his property and give everything away. The Bible, considered in its entirety, portrays a God who requires that we be extravagantly generous; He does not require us to be extravagant in our capitalist consumption (a la Schneider).

The Old Testament strongly encouraged people to help the poor; however, it did not portray poverty as a blessing. In contrast, Jesus did: “Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.... But woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! For ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6:20–25). Do I dare add, “Woe is you who enjoy extravagant capitalist consumption now, for ...”

Conclusion

I have argued against Schneider’s view that God wants us to engage in extravagant capitalist consumption. According to the Bible (when taken as a whole), we are God’s stewards who have been given a charge to help the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. We are not the owners of private property (as the Western world defines property) with which we can do anything we want, including extravagantly consuming it. This article has not directly dealt with Schneider’s 2007 article in the *Journal of Markets and Morality*: however, this article does imply that an embrace of capitalism, as Schneider’s collective writings define capitalism, can be taken too far.

Notes

1. An entire survey article could be written about how Christianity has interacted with Marxism. For two examples of this literature see Haden (1987) and Mills (1998).
2. This paragraph, and the one after it, surveys only the most influential secular ethical theories. There is an additional vast literature dealing with the application of specific ethical viewpoints to Christian issues. For one example, see Hollinger (2001).
3. We know this because his parents offered a pair of turtledoves when Jesus was first presented to the temple, which was a poor person’s offering, see Luke 2:24.
4. Furthermore, the one incident that Schneider cites was actually Jesus’ accepting extravagant *worship*, not engaging in extravagant *consumption*. Jesus did not go buy nard and pour it on himself (which would have made it an act of extravagant consumption); all Jesus did was accept an act of extravagant worship. He did not even ask for the worship.
5. For a survey of the literature on individual callings see Schuurman (2004).

6. Schneider (2005) either consciously or subconsciously seems to recognize this because he talks about extravagant *capitalist* consumption. “Capitalism” requires *private* property. Other scholars have struggled with this debate between stewardship of God’s property versus private property. For example, see Katanacho (2005).
7. Schneider (2005) could interpret this consumption of the tithe as supporting his notion of consumer capitalism; however, it can also be interpreted as contrary to accumulation capitalism.
8. It could be argued that the restriction on selling your land forever was unethical to the extent that the original distribution of land between families was not equal. However, any inequality in the initial distribution of land is minor in comparison to the inequality that results from the increasing concentration of land in fewer and fewer hands as the rich purchase the land of the poor during hard times.
9. Scheider (2005) correctly emphasizes “remembering” that everything we own is from God. Remembering leads to humility, gratitude, and generosity.
10. Bock (1996) notes that the Greek word used for the unjust steward’s “squandering” or “wasting” in Luke 16:1 is the same word applied to the prodigal son in Luke 15:13. The fact that these two parables are right next to each other, provides evidence that this parallelism was intentional. The unjust steward, like the prodigal son, squandered God’s property in order to enjoy extravagant capitalist consumption—“riotous” living.
11. Nor can we judge a person’s righteousness by observing how prosperous they are. Job is righteous (Job 1:8; 2:3; and 42:7) but he suffers greatly (Job 1:13–22; 7:4–16; 16:8–20; 19:17–22). In contrast, the wicked often prosper (Job 21:7–15). When God establishes his kingdom on earth, unfairness will be eliminated and justice will rule. Specifically, people will enjoy the entire fruits of their own labor. Isaiah 65:21–23 says, “They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat. . . . They shall not labor in vain.” Under God’s rule, property will be distributed fairly; that is, according to one’s own labor (see also Jeremiah 22:13 and Micah 4:4).
12. It is possible to argue (based on Job 1:18) that Job’s children were probably extravagant in their consumption, but not Job.
13. However, the ends do not always justify the means. When Satan tempted Jesus, he offered Jesus the entire world if Jesus would just bow down to Satan (Luke 4:5–8). Surely Jesus realized how much personal suffering he could avoid and how much suffering of others he could eliminate if he controlled the world instead of Satan. In spite of these considerations, Jesus refused.

14. The phrase in brackets is my addition to the biblical text. I added it to make an overt connection to Schneider's argument.

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Note: All citations to Scripture are taken from the King James translation of the Holy Bible, unless noted as NAS for the New American Standard version of the Bible, or NIV for the New International Version.

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