

## Christian Obligations: “The Poor You Will Always Have with You”

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This article argues that a biblically framed approach to wealth and poverty is much more complex than simple answers from the Left or the Right often state them. Neither a “I fight poverty; I work” mentality, nor a “soak the rich” attitude does justice to Scripture or to the complexity of economic life. Rather than moving simply from specific Bible texts to prescriptive rules for contemporary economic life, we need to turn to basic Christian teaching about humanity, about the image of God, as ways into the complexity of economic life.

The title of this essay, taken from Matthew 26:11 (par. Mark 14:7; John 12:8), may be the best-known and most frequently quoted words of our Lord Jesus Christ on the subject of poverty. The only possible rival is the familiar passage from the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor (in spirit)” (Luke 6:20; Matt. 5:3). What may not be as well known is that, in the case of the passage used for our title, Jesus is referring back to a verse from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy: “There will always be poor people in the land” (Deut. 15:11).<sup>1</sup> The context within which this observation occurs is revealing; it helps explain the Sabbath year when debts are to be canceled and forgiven. After seven years, Israelites are commanded to forgive the debts of fellow Israelites. The passage includes a comment that suggests the Sabbath-year provision should be extraordinary and not often required: “However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God” (Deut. 15:4–5a). It is in this context that we are told “there will always be poor in the land.”

This remarkable juxtaposition of ideas in the passages cited from Deuteronomy—“there *should* be no poor among you” but “there always *will* be”—is invaluable for avoiding a potentially serious misapplication of the words of Jesus captured in our title. To apply our Lord’s words primarily as a preemptive warning against utopian schemes that seek to eradicate all poverty misses their main point but is not an illegitimate secondary inference. The emphasis here is secondary because whenever that lesser point becomes so overpowering that a mood of resignation follows, and we give up our concern for the poor altogether (after all, we cannot do anything to *cure* poverty; it will always be with us), we sinfully distort Jesus’ words. What is intended by his observation about the poor always being there is that their presence gives *us* untold opportunity as well as ongoing obligation to aid the needy. The Deuteronomy reference makes this clear. What is the conclusion to the observation that there will always be poor people in the land? “Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deut. 15:11b). Even if this were the only reference in Scripture to our obligation for the poor it would be enough to challenge our sinful evasions of responsibility for the poor living in our midst. Of course, there is much more in Scripture<sup>2</sup> to bolster this point, and it should be granted without dispute: There is a solemn moral obligation for those who claim to be God’s people, who claim to have been redeemed from bondage, to demonstrate compassionate generosity to the poor. In other words, the body of Christ has an indisputable responsibility toward the poor.

How this moral obligation translates into concrete strategy and action, however, is a different matter. To acknowledge responsibility does not yet prescribe for us exactly what action the Bible requires of us. It is not clear from this basic principle even who the poor are nor to what extent the church has an obligation to serve them. Furthermore, there are complex hermeneutical issues involved in translating Old and New Testament instruction about care for the poor. Consider, for example, the difficulty of applying the Levitical Sabbath and Jubilee legislation—prescribed in an agrarian situation for a closed community of fellow believers—to the modern, urban, pluralistic, industrial world. There are advocates for the poor who have made this latter leap rather easily and very directly.<sup>3</sup> In such cases, the Sabbath and Jubilee legislation of Old Testament Israel, for example, can become the moral imperative for some strategy of radical wealth redistribution by governments. This interpretive move, I suggest, is much too simple and ignores a key principle of the Sabbath legislation itself.

The debt cancellation and return of land to the family that had inherited it was not a matter of redistributing wealth per se but a restoration of *opportunity to create wealth*. This is clear from the stipulation that the value of the land to be bought and sold was not its intrinsic worth as real estate but the number of harvests available from it until the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:14–17). Crops and harvests do not just happen; they require work and husbandry. Seed must be sown, weeds pulled, fields harvested, and grain threshed and milled. In the process of restoration, obligations are also placed on those who are needy. When people get new opportunities, they must work hard to make the most of them. Hence, the instruction of the apostle Paul follows a similar pattern: “If anyone will not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Alternatively, “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” (Prov. 10:4).

This suggests that while poor people have a “right” to *opportunities* that will enable them to escape poverty, and a right of claim (property) to the fruits of their labors (confirmed by the commandment “thou shalt not steal”), this does not translate into a *right* to the fruit of another’s labor. The wealthy are called to share of their abundance but this is in Scripture a matter of voluntary charity. The Bible does not simply call for redistribution from the wealthy to the poor as its answer to the problem of poverty. Rather, it places responsibilities and obligations on all of us, including the poor themselves. This article is devoted to considering these obligations and the broad biblical warrant on which the obligations are based.

## **Obligations for Biblical Interpretation: The Constrained Versus the Unconstrained Vision**

As suggested above, we make a mistake if we take our biblical point of departure on the question of poverty with those scriptural passages that deal explicitly with poverty and its relief. Stated differently, if we are to come to terms with poverty, we must not begin with poverty itself. This is true for two good reasons. First, *poverty* is necessarily a relative and not an absolute term. As one of the Oxford English Dictionary definitions states:<sup>4</sup> Poverty is a “relative lack of money or material possessions” (emphasis added).

Not only is a “poor” North American rather wealthy in comparison with the average Kenyan or Tibetan, but poverty cannot be restricted to the material realm alone. To use a trivial example, there are plenty of people with well-endowed bank accounts and stock portfolios who are nonetheless poor singers and golfers. More significantly, it is perfectly appropriate to say of a rich man

who is obviously a poor (unfaithful) husband, a *poor* (indifferent) father, and a poor (inhospitable) neighbor, that he is therefore a poor person. Similarly, it is all too often the tragic case that someone can be materially very rich and spiritually destitute.

We see such spiritual poverty in Jesus' parable (Luke 12) about the rich man who built bigger and bigger barns to store his increased harvest and told himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry." God called him a "fool" and took his soul that night. Jesus then concludes: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, irrespective of our material wealth we can be rich or poor toward God. Of course, the same applies to our relationships with other people. There are sad cases of incredibly wealthy people (like billionaire Howard Hughes) whose one glaring impoverishment is that of meaningful and satisfying human fellowship. So, poverty is not restricted to material want. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter celebrating the centennial of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* observes that the church's "preferential option for the poor is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society—not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well."<sup>6</sup>

There is also a second reason for not attempting to address questions of poverty by beginning with those scriptural passages that deal explicitly with poverty and its relief. We should not begin a discussion about poverty with the fact of poverty itself because poverty, however defined, presupposes wealth (however defined). Having nothing at all is the ordinary and primitive state of a human being. We come into the world with nothing, outside of what our parents provide us. What is in need of explanation are the conditions under which societies and individuals in them prosper and flourish. Logically, therefore, trying to understand wealth should be our prior concern. As political economist Thomas Sowell, has argued with persuasive brilliance,<sup>7</sup> it makes all the difference what question is asked first. Is it, What causes poverty? or is it, What are the conditions under which the creation of wealth is possible? In the case of the former the presumption is that wealth and prosperity is the normal state of humanity and that it is the brutal, awful reality of poverty that requires explanation and solution. The cause of poverty is then often sought in some form of evil human intentionality: racism, greed, and so forth. Sowell refers to this presumption as an unconstrained vision of humanity where "there are no intractable reasons for social evils and therefore no reason why they cannot be solved, with sufficient moral commitment."<sup>8</sup> Here human possibilities are

unlimited, and the presence of persistent problems such as war, crime, and poverty cry out for explanation and solution.

By contrast, what Sowell refers to as the constrained vision sees the "limitations and passions of man himself" as the fundamental problem that is intractable. What evokes surprise and wonder is the possibility, under certain conditions, of minimizing social problems such as war and poverty. Sometimes these conditions seem counterintuitive. For example, a strong military defense is probably the best way to advance peace and discourage war. That is why the art of statesmanship involves careful attention to the wisdom of the past. Technocratic solutions are often inadequate in conflict situations because they fail to take into account the human factor. Instead of solutions, those who hold a constrained vision of the world recognize that all attempted fixes have their own costs, though they are often unintended and even unacknowledged.

Let me provide some examples beginning with a somewhat bizarre link between cocaine and asparagus. According to a news report of a few years ago on the plight of West Michigan asparagus growers, the complaint from farmers themselves focused on the war on drugs. One eighty-seven-year-old farmer contended that "a U.S. government plan aimed at cutting cocaine production in Peru encourages farmers there to make asparagus the new cash crop. That's hurting farmers here, who face a glut of asparagus and falling prices."<sup>9</sup> Stopping the production of cocaine in Peru hurts asparagus farmers in Michigan. Who would have thought it?

On a less curiously interesting but perhaps more important plane, we could point to any number of well-intentioned government laws that in the long run produce effects contrary to those intended. Many government interventions into the marketplace that are intended to promote greater fairness and equality often produce such contrary results. Minimum-wage laws, intended as a benefit to the poorest, may lead to reduction or elimination of entry-level jobs as employers seek more skilled laborers at the higher rates.<sup>10</sup> It is, of course, theoretically possible to set the minimum wage at twenty-five dollars per hour. However, when there are no jobs available at all, the real minimum wage is *zero*. Price controls (on gasoline, housing rentals) are ostensibly passed to protect motorists and tenants from greedy oil companies and landlords. However, when the profitability of housing shrinks, fewer new units are built, and landlords are less inclined to invest in existing units. The result is less and less housing for the neediest with nice controlled rents for the fortunate who already have their housing. Price controls on gasoline inhibit exploration with the result that growing scarcity pushes up production costs. When controls are lifted, incentives to explore reappear and actual costs may go down as they did

under President Reagan in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> A final example is provided by Thomas Sowell that demonstrates the difference between a solution and a trade-off. “When a baby was killed in a tragic airplane crash in 1989 by being ripped out of its mother’s arms ... a political solution was proposed by having a federal law requiring babies to be strapped into their own seats on airplanes.” The problem with this solution was that the extra expense would divert some of the air traffic to ground traffic; that is, automobiles, which are more deadly than airplanes. Sowell cites economists projections that over ten years “there would be an estimated saving of one baby’s life in airplane crashes, a loss of nine lives in alternative ground transportation, and an additional cost of \$3 billion.” Sowell comments, “few people would regard this as a reasonable trade-off.”<sup>12</sup>

The point here is not to argue for or against specific policies but to remind us that intended cures for social ills may have unintended consequences. These may even be worse than the disease they seek to eliminate. At the very least, we must acknowledge that any proposal to fix one problem will have its costs. In addition, when we ignore the persistent reality of human sin and imperfection and try to solve more than can reasonably be solved, we add risks and costs, including the potential loss of human liberty. Therefore, it seems wise to conclude with Sowell that it is impossible to achieve cure-alls for every social woe: “All that is possible is a prudent trade-off.”<sup>13</sup> Now let us apply this analysis to the question of wealth and poverty. Simply stated, Sowell’s two visions—the unconstrained and the constrained—yield two different questions: The former leads us to, What is the cause of poverty? and the latter to, What are the conditions under which wealth and prosperity are created? For our purposes in this article: Which of these two visions resonates best with a biblical view of humanity?

Note that our basic obligation to the poor is hardly affected by which of these two visions we choose to embrace.<sup>14</sup> Although Christians may differ on how to help the poor, they do not have the luxury of ignoring them. The poor *are* always with us, but they *should not be* because, as Christians, we are commanded by our Lord to the best of our ability to help the poor escape from poverty.

Now to our question: Which of the two social visions (constrained or unconstrained) resonates best with a biblical view of humanity? The precise phrasing of this question is carefully and deliberately chosen. Sometimes treatises on important social and economic issues written from a religious perspective immodestly suggest that the author’s expressed view is *the* biblical understanding of the matter and that those who disagree have un-Christian views. Christian visionaries on both the political Left (Christian socialists) and the

political Right (Christian capitalists) have often been guilty of such overstatement. In my opinion, this is a serious mistake. To ask whether socialism or capitalism is *the* biblical economic system is the wrong kind of question to ask in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, *the* biblical view of economics, wealth and poverty, understood as a comprehensive, theoretical interpretation, always eludes us because the Bible is not a book about economics. Of course, there are teachings of Scripture that directly impact the work of a Christian who is thinking about economics, and we will be tracking some of them later in this article. The Bible is not about economics but about God and his will, his ways—God's relationship to the creation, including, and even particularly, his covenant relationship to humanity—God's plans for human and cosmic history as revealed in Jesus Christ the Redeemer. To adduce specific economic models such as redistributive socialism, democratic capitalism, or communitarianism directly from specific biblical texts does violence to the particular texts and to the purpose of the Bible as a whole. Though it is possible to take this in a simplistic way, it is nevertheless true that the Bible is about salvation. This salvation is about human persons and not about the redemption of institutions or systems. To address the two visions that Sowell posits—unconstrained and constrained—we need to ask about the biblical view of humanity that comports with or is consistent with a particular social vision. I shall attempt that indirectly rather than directly, moving from biblical text to economic application.

Setting aside, therefore, any direct, straight-line application of specific biblical models to the present, we will consider some key biblical doctrines and their indirect application to questions of wealth and poverty in a modern, industrial, and pluralistic society. Where do we begin? Which Christian doctrine is the basis for dealing with economics, wealth, and power? My proposal, which should be no surprise given the comments above, is that anthropology, the Christian doctrine of humanity, is where our discussion should start.<sup>16</sup>

## Obligations of Image Bearers

Why should we start with anthropology? Why do I contend that the fundamental theological issue in dealing with wealth and poverty is anthropology, the nature of man?<sup>17</sup> In good measure it is because the nature of economic life itself requires it. Economics involves exchange between two parties who must be capable of assessing value to that which they seek to exchange. Only human beings create wealth and can be said to be rich or poor; poverty and wealth are values created by humans. If forest animals survive the conflagration of an

enormous forest fire but end up starving because their habitat and food source is destroyed, we would not say that they are poor. What they share with human beings of course is the painful reality of hunger, but animals cannot *think* of themselves as poor in the same way that humans can. Only humans are capable of such *self-conscious* valuing because only humans are made in the image of God. The Creation account in the first chapter of Genesis tells us that after God made all the animals he did something distinctive:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26–27).

The Creator then anoints them with this blessing and mandate: "And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:28).

Let us now then consider the two aspects of the image of God suggested by this passage from Genesis, first the notion of human dominion over and stewardship of creation, and, second the importance of human social fellowship.

The Judeo-Christian notion of human dominion over creation has met with fierce opposition in our environmentally conscious age.<sup>18</sup> We need not deny the fact nor excessively apologize for those who have despoiled creation to satisfy their greed.<sup>19</sup> Such attitude and action is clearly a contradiction of explicit biblical teaching. Not only is the "dominion blessing" of Genesis 1 complemented by the strong stewardship mandate of Genesis 2:15 ("The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it"), but the numerous laws of the Pentateuch underscore the fact that responsible stewardship is a human obligation. The value of land and even of fruit-bearing trees is in their crops; land must regularly lie fallow to prevent overfarming; even nesting birds are to be protected from the harvester's scythe. These and similar laws all point to the importance of stewardship so that future generations of Israelites will also be able to enjoy the blessings of tree and field.

Here, however, we come to the crux of the issue as it applies to wealth and poverty. In their passion for the environment, some activists give the impression that stewardship means leaving nature in its pristine condition untouched and unaffected by human hands.<sup>20</sup> When in 1991 an environmental action group prepared a "Statement by Religious Leaders at the Summit on Environ-



ment," they spoke of activity in which people "relentlessly oppress the earth and violate the integrity of creation" as a sin, where "sin" was defined as refusing "to act in the image of God."<sup>21</sup> What this meant became clear when the statement insisted "We must maintain [the environment] as we received it."<sup>22</sup> The portrait of humanity that emerges here is not a dynamic one of "dominion over" nature for the sake of human welfare but rather a static and utopian one of "peace and harmony with" nature. As a variety of clerical voices told a congressional committee overseeing the Endangered Species Act:

Every species is sacred. That we take as a matter of faith.... We are invited, we are called, to work as God's partner in tending God's exquisite garden.... Humans, along with countless other species, belong to the land, to the habitat, to the web of life, to God.... Instead of earthkeeping we ... oppress the land, water, and air and endanger all the other creatures who look to us for compassion and justice.<sup>23</sup>

What emerges here is a view that humanity is the scourge of the earth, the despoiler of natural order and harmony. The problem is man. However, this problematic humanity—a point with which all Christians who believe in the reality of sin could heartily agree—is not cast in biblical language of original sin, atonement, and forgiveness but in terms of an eco-crisis that has a religious character all its own.<sup>24</sup> It is not only liberal, new-age type clerics who are singing this song. Evangelicals such as Calvin De Witt can speak in similar tones: "What is this eco-crisis? It is the crisis of one peculiar and special species having amplified its presence to such an extent that it has become a major geological force. The human presence in God's creation has reached geologically significant proportions."<sup>25</sup>

Let us leave to the side here the inherent contradictions in this approach<sup>26</sup> and concentrate on the anthropological issues as they relate to wealth and poverty.

The reduction of the good biblical notion of stewardship to maintaining creation in the pristine character of government-controlled nature preserves cannot be right. Brief reflection on the very idea of stewardship should make it clear that it involves responsible *use*. When our Lord used stewardship as a point of comparison in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), he did not praise the man who hid his talent in the ground rather than using it to increase his master's wealth but condemned him as "wicked and slothful," took from him the one talent he had and cast him into outer darkness. Even indifferent use or safe use is preferable to no-use according to our Lord.<sup>27</sup> It often seems to escape spokespersons for the environmental movement that the only way

out of poverty is creative and improved human utilization of nature's resources.<sup>28</sup> Wealth does not rain down from heaven; it is produced by the application of human creativity and industry to earth's resources.

The poor who live in the temperate or cold regions of the Northern Hemisphere need to stay warm. This is accomplished in our day by the heat that comes from oil and gas or electricity. Oil and gas need to be drilled for and transported, often in and across ecologically sensitive regions such as the Alaskan tundra. Electricity is harnessed energy that requires hydroelectric dams or coal or gas burning or nuclear power plants. If we grant that there are environmental risks in these activities, we also need to consider that the alternative method of staying warm would be for every small social unit to burn its own wood or coal for heat. As we consider such a scenario, particularly in densely populated urban areas, is it not obvious that contemporary sources of heat energy are ecologically much more friendly than those of the past? This, of course, contradicts conventional environmental wisdom. Or, take another example: the power crisis in the state of California. Are Californians better off if the passion for environmental purity leaves them in the cold and dark because they lack the nuclear and other power plants needed to meet normal energy demands?<sup>29</sup> Would we all be better off if the Silicon Valley experienced blackouts for a long time, if not forever? It may be difficult to bring up a sympathetic tear for those who live in Beverly Hills and regularly shop on Rodeo Drive, but what about the poor children in Oakland or West Los Angeles? Not only do extremist environmental policies often end up particularly harming the poor, they sometimes negate our human calling to utilize the resources entrusted to us by the Creator to better the condition of all God's children. We need the liberty to make use of the world's resources in the most productive way possible to benefit everyone.

Two things should be apparent from reflection such as this: First, when we consider prudential trade-offs, it is not an unreasonable argument to say that our modern, technological world is in fact more responsible in its environmental stewardship than its primitive alternatives—a possibility that will seem counterintuitive to many contemporary environmentalists.

Second, stewardship is a matter of wise *use* of creation rather than passively leaving it in a pristine condition. To be an image bearer of God involves us in creative, stewardly use of the resources endowed by the Creator in his creation.

This conclusion is important for us as we address the issue of wealth and poverty. We who are commanded by our Lord to be compassionate to the poor must consider the trade-off costs to the poor that result from excessive envi-

ronmental restriction on the earth's resources. We cannot help the poor escape material *poverty without using creation's riches*. That is our calling as Christians; our human ability as image bearers. Then, too, we must also regard the poor as image bearers of God and advocate policies and strategies that enable them to join other image bearers in being responsive, responsible, productive members of society. At its most basic, the poor need to have property of their own, property for which they can be responsible and productive stewards. Strategies that merely redistribute the wealth produced by others and create levels of dependency violate the image of God in people. The poor need to be encouraged and, if necessary, assisted to become active image bearers. That, I suggest, is the key anthropological parameter for any social policy that wishes to be consistent with scriptural teaching.

### **Obligations of the Wealthy: Charity**

There is a second element to the biblical idea of the image of God—we are social or communal creatures. Being created in the image of God means affirming the complementary partnership of male and female. According to the Genesis accounts, Adam was not created to be alone. "It is not good," the Lord God said, "that Adam should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). In the words of poet John Donne, "No man is an island." What needs to be noted in Genesis 1 is that the divine blessing to "be fruitful and multiply ... fill the earth and subdue it ... and have dominion" is given not to one person, not to Adam the man, but to "them"—male and female. To be human is to be created for communion, communion with God and communion with fellow image bearers. The biblical notion of "neighbor" is important in this respect. In our Lord's summary, the whole Torah, and even the prophets, comes down to these two commands: "Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–40).

It is not necessary to pile on scriptural passages to prove that Christians ought to love their neighbor, particularly those who are weak and vulnerable.<sup>30</sup> The concern about the poor permeates the Old Testament Levitical code. Harvesters are not to pick the fields clean but leave enough for the poor to glean. Numerous laws command Israelites to deal hospitably, compassionately, and generously with widows, orphans, strangers, and sojourners. The New Testament church immediately began a relief program for the poor that was so large that the apostles established a new diaconal office to meet the needs of all the poor (Acts 6). The apostle James defines "pure and faultless religion" in terms of "looking after widows and orphans in their distress" (James 1:27). The conclusion of the apostle Paul in his great chapter on love

sums up the matter nicely: “The greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). For reasons that will become apparent, I personally retain a fondness for the King James Version: “The greatest of these is charity.”

It is not our loss of facility in Elizabethan English that has led to a virtual disappearance of the word *charity* in our time, at least as a positive notion. Charity is now oftentimes seen as something demeaning, a patronizing gesture that incubates a double sin: It creates proud and arrogant givers along with humiliated, resentful receivers. Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch gave voice to a new concern a century ago when he contrasted charity with justice. While granting that there will always be room for charitable giving, Rauschenbusch goes on to point to its inadequacy.

The fault in our modern charity is that love is made to do the work of justice, an upside-down arrangement that makes even the simple precepts of Jesus appear unwise and impracticable. Such masses of poverty as our great cities possess have not been created by private fault or misfortune but by social injustice, and therefore of course private charity cannot cope with it, but social justice must put a stop to its production.<sup>31</sup>

Adds Rauschenbusch, “Charity can never be more than supplementary to justice.”<sup>32</sup> Rauschenbusch correctly points to the necessarily personal character of charity (“it is best administered by personal friends and neighbors”) and laments the rise of less-personal philanthropic *organizations* to do the work of charity. “Modern charity divorces the gift and the giver. The giver does not know the receiver and the receiver does not know the giver.” His analysis and solution, however, proposes an even more impersonal agent and approach. According to Rauschenbusch, “This prostitution of religion itself is brought about by the alliance of Christianity and wealth. Religion should do away with riches.” Finally, “Public justice and then private charity, that is the only true order.”<sup>33</sup>

There are a number of reasons to disagree with Rauschenbusch on the relationship between justice and charity. Foremost is his clear presupposition that all accumulation of wealth is sinful and counter to the material interests of the poor. “It is,” he says, “not possible to get great wealth except by offending against justice.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, as in other versions of the unconstrained vision, Rauschenbusch’s analysis considers prosperity to be the natural condition of humanity and poverty to be the result of systemic or structural flaws that are correctable. In such a view, charity must be subordinated to social justice, understood as redistribution of goods with greater and ultimate total equality as the goal. A preferential option for the poor is then understood in terms of

class conflict between the poor and rich. Furthermore, what used to be regarded as the legitimate fruit of one's own labors now becomes a right for all who exist regardless of their labor. The twenty-fifth article of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) offers this description of a universal benefit-right:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

This long list of rights confuses *opportunity* with inherent *benefit rights*. In a free and lawful (just) society, one could say that poor people have a right to the *opportunity* to escape poverty. That is not the same as an automatic, guaranteed right to the fruit of another person's labor. The only way to provide such rights is to surrender all material goods into the hands of a benevolent redistributor and only the state has the coercive, confiscatory power to accomplish that. All things considered, is this way preferable to the tradition of voluntary charity? I doubt it.

While social justice in its contemporary sense<sup>35</sup> is often framed as compassion for the poor, it is in fact abstract and impersonal, both conceptually and in its application and administration. It is quite possible for those in power to tinker with systems and structures and never come into personal contact with poor people much less to see their full humanity and take their expressed concerns seriously. In addition, the resources taken from the wealthy and redistributed to the poor are taken by coercion; they are not given through generosity but are involuntary. It is not necessary to agree with theonomist Rousas John Rushdoony that all statist redistribution schemes are "theft"<sup>36</sup> in order to see that coerced giving and acceptance of same is not a community-building process. Voluntary giving in love and gracious acceptance builds community. Thus, there is a normative value to private charity. It is precisely here that we express and experience a loving human solidarity with fellow image bearers. John Paul II, in explaining the notion of solidarity recalls previous papal expressions in a similar vein such as Leo XIII's notion of "friendship" in *Rerum Novarum*, Pius XI's term "social charity," and Paul VI's reference to a "civilization of love."<sup>37</sup> John Paul II's own definition of "preferential option for the poor" is: "a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity."<sup>38</sup> This means, of course, that the order of justice and love is the reverse of Rauschenbusch's. "Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in

whom the Church sees Christ himself,” writes John Paul, “is made concrete in the promotion of justice. Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help in order to survive, not an annoyance or a burden, but an opportunity for showing kindness and a chance for greater enrichment.” Love is before justice and is its ground.

Thus, loving solidarity in a common humanity as fellow image bearers of God—a commitment to enhance the ability of others to be fully functioning, productive, stewardly image bearers—is the basis for and the consequence of charity. Stated differently, when both the giver and the receiver act *in love* they mutually enhance each other’s humanity. Gracious acceptance as well as gracious donation is a gift. Appropriate thanksgiving that blesses the giver in return is not easy but, *through grace*, it is possible. As Hans Urs von Balthasar noted in a wonderful meditation on giving and receiving, “Now it is a fact that that which is truly Christian only comes in view when it is ‘accepted.’ ‘Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you.’”<sup>39</sup> Is gracious acceptance with an acknowledgement of need and dependence not at the heart of our Lord’s first beatitude: “Blessed are the poor (in spirit)”<sup>40</sup>? This, so it seems to me, is the spirit of the early church’s *voluntary* fellowship described in Acts 2:44–47 (RSV):

And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

Charity must be seen in a broader sociological perspective than merely as a matter of individual generosity because charity is voluntary and potentially more personal than government welfare. Giving and receiving charity builds bonds of community that cannot be created by, nor incorporated into, the state. Such voluntary association leads to the creation of networks of protective structures and institutions (what is now usually called civil society) that shield individuals from state encroachment on human liberty and the bonds of community. Contrary to the conventional view, which holds that charity is the strategy of a selfish and individualistic culture unwilling to pay its fair share of taxes to the federal government, it is in fact totalitarian regimes that cannot abide voluntary associations and active charity. According to that prescient nineteenth-century French observer of American mores, Alexis de Tocqueville, the American experiment is misrepresented when it is described as “individu-

alistic"; it is in fact properly characterized as a form of "associationalism."<sup>41</sup> In Tocqueville's words:

Despotism, which in its nature is fearful, sees the most certain guarantee of its own duration in the isolation of men, and it ordinarily puts all its care into isolating them. There is no vice of the human heart that agrees with it as much as selfishness: A despot readily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other.<sup>42</sup>

What is at stake here is the matter of liberty itself. In general, many people today arrogate unto themselves the moral high road by selling centralized government policies as compassionate, communitarian alternatives to radical and selfish individualism. Hence, "it takes a village" to raise a child, not a family, with "the village" often a nonthreatening, rhetorical sleight-of-hand to refer to the federal government. Here, too, the communitarian character of Scripture's social concern in Israel and the early church is occasionally appealed to as a ground for the "village" argument. In response, it must be stressed that the communal character of both Israel's and the church's responsibility for the poor is rooted in a religiously framed covenant and not a secular civil society. Secularizing tendencies in the face of equality do not create voluntary associations and a strong civil society. Tocqueville saw that threat to liberty in the very democratizing process underway in America itself in the 1830s. Conditions of equality tend to foster individualism with the result that despotic centralizing state power begins to threaten local liberty. The founding vision of America, so Tocqueville believed, was rooted in a vision that exalted decentralizing government power. "Local liberties, then, which induce a great number of citizens to value the affection of their kindred and their neighbors, bring men constantly into contact, despite the instincts which separate them, and force them to help one another."<sup>43</sup> The good word I have put in for charity in this section of the article is thus inseparably linked with a commitment to the responsible use of human liberty. Giving and receiving charity creates bonds of community. This the coercive arm of the state cannot do.

Before we move into the next section and consider the roles of state, church, and civil society, we need to ask: Upon whom does the obligation of charity fall? Who are the wealthy? The biblical answer is deceptively simple because it radically challenges all our evasions and excuses. We are all obligated to assist whomever we can whenever we can. Our Lord's comments comparing rich people who gave abundantly to the temple treasury with the poor widow who gave only a mite (Luke 21:1-4)<sup>44</sup> should put to rest all efforts to divide

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the responsibilities of charity along artificial lines of class and level of possessions. Generosity of spirit and of hand is expected of all those who in Christ have been given much.

## Obligations of Church, State, and Civil Society

There is, however, another dimension and consequence of our understanding that the image of God in humans means they are communal, social beings in fellowship with all other image bearers—human beings form associations and institutions. Because it is generally granted by most Christian believers that the gospel does require us to show compassion to the poor and needy, the debate is usually about *which* institutions have *what* responsibility for implementing compassion. Here, too, the Bible does not specify these matters in any detail, but we can point to certain teachings of the church in its history that accord well with biblical principle as well as indicate which strategies and policies are problematic from a biblical perspective.

Catholic social teaching from Leo XIII through John Paul II addresses the who-what question by means of the principle of *subsidiarity*. *Rerum Novarum* led the way here by underscoring the right of workers (and other citizens) to form “associations” that are free to govern themselves.<sup>45</sup> The point here was that it was a dangerous mistake to vest all social authority in the state and then to regard associational rights as *derived from the state*. John Paul follows Leo XIII in declaring instead that there exists a “natural human right to form associations,” a natural right “which therefore precedes his or her incorporation into political society.”<sup>46</sup> He then defines subsidiarity as follows: “A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activities with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.”<sup>47</sup> The Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper described practically the same social ontology by the term *sphere sovereignty*:

In a Calvinistic sense we understand hereby, that the family, the business, science, art, and so forth, are all social spheres which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a higher authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the state does.<sup>48</sup>



The emphasis on free associations pushes the center of gravity of our discussion away from the state as the primary instrument of relief to smaller and local social units such as the family, neighborhoods, churches, and voluntary philanthropic associations. In this twenty-first century *anno domini*, it seems that American social-policy reflection is coming around to a viewpoint very similar to the social teaching summarized above. It is now fair to say that a consensus is developing toward the position that public policy with respect to helping the needy should focus on strengthening so-called civil society; that is, the nongovernmental institutions of society.<sup>49</sup> Whatever *political* judgment we wish to make about the specifics in this redirection of public policy on welfare, there can be no question that it resonates well with biblical teaching about the dignity, worth, and social character of God's image bearers. At the same time, when it comes to biblical teaching, we have more direct, concrete teaching from Scripture about marriage, sexuality, family, and labor than we do about the specifics of public policy in an industrial society. The existence of computers does not change the moral expectation that husbands and wives will be faithful to each other and bring up children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4, RSV).

Before concluding this section of the article, I offer a brief word about the specific tasks of the church and state respectively. The first task of the church is to be the church. The Christian church according to the New Testament has a specific task: Proclaim the good news, disciple the nations (Matt. 28:18–20). It is important here to make a distinction between the gathered official church (whether defined by the Petrine office or, as in the Protestant tradition, by key marks, such as preaching and sacraments, as well as the offices of pastor and elder) and the dispersed members (laity) of the church. The latter have vocations as varied as life itself. In answering the call of God, a church member may become a plumber, a schoolteacher, a farmer, or even a politician. The official church, gathered around the offices and marks of the church, is not in the plumbing or farming business. To the point here, the church is not in the business of politics. It is appropriate for the official church to speak the truth of God's word to civil authorities; it is not the church's role to become a major player on the political stage by running its own slate of candidates for political office. The church must jealously guard her independence from the state. By existing as alternative structure, a structure with significant spiritual authority, the church provides institutional counterweight to the state. Occasionally having despotic rulers stand waiting in the snow for an audience with the bishop is a salutary check on state power. The church's sword is that of Ephesians 6, "the sword of the Spirit," and not that of the emperor or an imperial army.

When the church is fulfilling its true mission—calling sinners to repentance and to new life in Christ and then nurturing them in the faith—it *indirectly* addresses the issue of poverty by helping to change human hearts and habits.<sup>50</sup> Poverty is in part a cultural and personal matter. When the Spirit through the gospel restores a person's sense of being an image bearer of God because he shares the new and abundant life graciously given by God thanks to Christ's atoning work, we are well on the road to bringing such a person to a productive, satisfying life. The first thing the church needs to do with respect to poverty is not to make apodictic pronouncements about specific governmental policies and strategies to help the poor but to do its own proper task—be used of God to save souls.

The church has one more task flowing out of its distinctive mission—diaconal assistance. As we noted earlier in this article, diaconal aid has been a hallmark of the Christian church's ministry from the time of the New Testament. Diaconal ministry is by the nature of the case *ad hoc* and not systemic. That is its virtue—the goal is to help eliminate the need by changing the hearts, circumstances, and life-patterns of needy people. Genuine emergencies of course do happen, both personal and communal; people lose jobs and coastal states are hit with devastating hurricanes.

At times like these, the church—both the official church through its diaconal structures and the members through relief organizations such as the Red Cross and International Aid—cannot close its eyes, hearts, and wallets to those in need. Emergency, *ad hoc* relief is essential when disaster strikes.

However, it is fair to ask whether churches and voluntary associations alone can meet people's needs, especially when disaster strikes. These groups have a limited ability to mobilize aid and relief personnel. In many instances, only the state is able to do so. Ron Sider, for example, contends that “civil society by itself cannot conquer poverty.”<sup>51</sup> He may be correct, though his estimate of what it would cost for each religious congregation to take over “federal government spending on just the four most basic programs for the poor, [that] every one of [them] ... would have to raise another two hundred eighty-nine thousand dollars \$289,000 per year to assist the needy,” overlooks two important factors. The first is efficiency; local religious-based charities could deliver services much more effectively. The second is that the entire load would not fall on religious congregations alone—Sider underestimates the creativity of Americans in forming new associations to meet community needs. Nonetheless, let us grant that for those who do fall between the cracks government should supply a minimal safety net. That still leaves us with an important question about the government's own contribution to poverty in America.

For the purposes of argument, permit me a simple exercise in mathematical speculation. Let us say that at present the government takes an average of 30 percent of each person’s income (the actual figure is probably higher). If we take into consideration that religiously devout people also tithe and give another 10 percent to religious and charitable causes, the amount of giving for such a person adds up to 40 percent of total income. By any standard that appears confiscatory. Now, what would happen if government followed the biblical pattern and put a tithing-level lid on all income tax—everybody is taxed at 10 percent of total income? That would release another 20 percent of the total income in the United States back to taxpayers. Of that significant amount, it is highly likely that some would go to worthy charitable causes. My point here with this simplistic illustration is to raise the possibility that governments may be contributing to poverty by their high levels of taxation which, in wonderful circularity, are then justified because programs are needed for the poor. If this is correct, we have a self-perpetuating and self-justifying strategy that has as a natural consequence of maintaining or even increasing levels of poverty.

My point in this section has been this: Current public policy initiatives that are moving in the direction of providing space and resources for nongovernmental institutions, for mediating structures or civil society, to become the focal point of care for the poor, resonate well with the biblical understanding of human beings as image bearers of God. They promote the dignity and worth of individual persons as responsible and productive citizens and highlight the social, communal dimension of our humanity. It is interesting that in addition to squaring with biblical insight, the obvious need for the recent redirection of welfare policy also confirms a prophecy made by Alexis de Tocqueville more than one hundred years ago in his “Memoir on Pauperism”: “I am deeply convinced that any permanent, regular, administrative system whose aim will be to provide for the needs of the poor, will breed more miseries that it can cure” and “will deprave the population that it wants to help and comfort.”<sup>52</sup>

That brings us to a final obligation, the obligations of the poor themselves.

## **Obligations of the Poor? Yes!**

The question heading this section may strike the reader as odd, perhaps even perverse. Is this not just one more attempt by the privileged and comfortable to blame the victims of poverty for their own condition and thereby evade the biblical injunction to show compassion and generosity to the poor? We may not eliminate that possibility *a priori*, but we also cannot avoid the question.

Throughout this article we have emphasized the biblical reality that *every* human being bears the divine image and that sin is the universal human condition. These truths apply to the poor as well and have implications for their responsibility for their poverty. To be an image bearer is to be a responsive and responsible person.

At the same time, of course, we may not deny that much poverty does bear the signs of oppression, and, under those circumstances, the poor are genuinely victims. However, as the numerous warnings in Proverbs bear testimony, human factors such as laziness and profligacy also play a part and involve habits and actions for which the poor do have some measure of responsibility. A parallel here is with the Christian doctrine of original sin. This doctrine affirms that all people are by nature sinners. “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). This undeniable fact does not, however, absolve the sinner from the guilt for specific acts of sin. In other words, even sinners are accountable for their sins. Similarly, the blame for poverty needs to be shared by many, including the poor themselves.

Assuming a noncatastrophic situation in which work is available and the poor we are speaking of are not disabled to the point of being unemployable, the poor have some responsibility for getting out of poverty. There are at least three things that a healthy, able-bodied adult poor person can do that would significantly lower rates of poverty in America: stay in school, get a job and keep it, get married and stay married.<sup>53</sup> These are demanding tasks, especially for those who grow up in dysfunctional homes and communities. Difficult, but not impossibly heroic. The three criteria suggested are linked together in terms of biblical morality and sociological wisdom. Education provides both the discipline and the skills that are needed in the workplace; families provide the context within which such discipline is nurtured; and, in the case of married people, the reason for work in order to provide for one’s own. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* describes the mutuality this way:

Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that man is called to. These two spheres of values—one linked to work and the other consequent on the family nature of human life—must be properly united and must properly permeate each other. In a way, work is a condition for making it possible to found a family, since the family requires the means of subsistence which man normally gains through work. Work and industriousness also influence the whole process of education in the family, for the very reason that everyone “becomes a human being” through, among other things, work, and becoming a human being is precisely the main purpose of the whole process of education. Obviously

two aspects of work in a sense come into play here: the one making family life and its upkeep possible and the other making possible the achievement of the purposes of the family, especially education.... These are linked to one another and are mutually complementary....<sup>54</sup>

The key here would appear to be a functional family life in which nurture of moral character and habits of work are formed. At a number of levels, difficult and demanding as it is, we must honor the image of God in poor people and give them the full dignity of responsible stewardship. Yes, the poor do have some obligations with respect to their own poverty, and public policy should be framed with that goal in mind. We must strive to give those who start out with significant disadvantages the opportunities to achieve their God-given potential as his image-bearers.

Finally, the universality of sin is also an important consideration for policy addressed to the problem of poverty. It is incumbent on Christians not to isolate one group or class as sinners and exempt the sin in others. One way that has been done is to consider the industrious and wealthy as virtuous and the poor as indolent and lazy. Poverty is then simply attributed to qualities in poor persons. This is an unacceptable interpretation of poverty. The Bible makes it clear that there *is* exploitation of the poor resulting in great wealth for some at the expense of others. Typical are the charges of Amos against the powerful wealthy of his day (Amos 5:11, 12): "You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain...." "You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the court." Similarly the apostle James (5:1-6) says:

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your teeth like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look, The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

The other mistake made here is to demonize all people of wealth and romantically bestow privileged virtue on the poor simply because they are poor. This ascription of spiritual blessing to the poor has characterized various revolutionary forms of Christianity from Thomas Muntzer to twentieth-century liberation theologies.<sup>55</sup> This, too, violates the teaching of Scripture that *all* are

sinners—the poor included. In addition to Scripture, the experience of history teaches us the same thing. Abraham Kuyper was aware of this more than a hundred years ago. Commenting on the frequent failure of magistrates to defend the cause of the weak and poor and to use their power against them, he noted: “This was not because the stronger class was more evil at heart than the weaker, for no sooner did a man from the lower class rise to the top than he in his turn took part just as harshly—yes, even more harshly—in the wicked oppression of those who were members of his own former class.”<sup>56</sup> We who have survived the twentieth century know all too well: Revolutions destroy their own stepchildren; when the oppressed throw off the yoke of their bondage they become bondsmen themselves.

## Conclusion

What I have tried to demonstrate is that a biblically framed approach to wealth and poverty is much more complex than simple answers from the Left or the Right often state them. Neither a “I fight poverty; I work” mentality, nor a “soak the rich” attitude does justice to Scripture or to the complexity of economic life. Rather than moving simply from specific Bible texts to prescriptive rules for contemporary economic life, we need to turn to basic Christian teaching about humanity, about the image of God, as ways into the complexity of economic life. I attempted to do that by drawing conclusions about respect for the individual responsibility of each image bearer and the obligations of human solidarity, thanks to the social dimension of the image. What emerges is a vision of human beings that celebrates the capacity we have to generate wealth through a stewardly use of creation’s resources as well as the humanity-enhancing ability to give aid in love and receive it in grace. The Psalmist asked God: “What is man that you are mindful of him?” Part of the answer is that we humans are “crowned with glory and honor,” the glory and honor of being “a little less than God” (Ps. 8). “The glory of God,” wrote Church Father Irenaeus, “is man alive.” That all men and women might have the glorious opportunity to be fully alive as God’s image bearers; that is our Christian hope and prayer for the poor as well.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture texts are cited from the *New International Version*.
2. Here is a partial list: Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; Luke 4:18; 14:13; Acts 9:36; Galatians 2:10; James 2.
3. For example, Ronald Sider in the first edition of his *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977) and Jim Wallis in *Faith Works* (New York: Random House, 2000), 296–300.
4. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "poverty."
5. For a wonderful and instructive meditation on this verse, see Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, trans. J. Hendrick De Vries (1925; rpt., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 32–37.
6. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 57.
7. See especially, Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 1987).
8. *Ibid.*, 31.
9. Reported by Garrison Wells, *The Grand Rapids Press*, May 6, 2001, A1.
10. Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 126–28.
11. *Ibid.*, 75–77.
12. *Ibid.*, 136.
13. *Ibid.*
14. There is of course a profound effect on the *consequences* for the poor themselves.
15. This point is rightly recognized by editor Franky Schaeffer in his introduction to *Is Capitalism Christian?* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985). According to Schaeffer, the preferable question is "has any one economic system proven more amenable to Christian values" (p. xvi).
16. This is also where John Paul II takes his point of departure in his encyclicals on social justice and economics.
17. It is noteworthy that Johannes Messner begins his magisterial Catholic work *Social Ethics: Natural Law in the Western World*, trans. J. J. Doherty, rev. ed. (St. Louis and London: B. Herder, 1965) by rooting moral philosophy in "the nature of man."

18. The classic statement blaming the Judeo-Christian tradition and the notion of dominion as the primary cause of environmental degradation is Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–7. White's essay has been reprinted many times and is available in countless anthologies dealing with the ecological crisis.
19. In my judgment, Christian biologist and environmentalist Calvin De Witt overstates the issue when he contends that "many who call on his [Jesus'] name abuse, neglect, and do not give a care about creation.... Honoring the Creator in word, they destroy God's works in deed." (Calvin De Witt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998]).
20. For a critical description of this bias see Martin W. Lewis, "Primal Purity and Natural Balance" in *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).
21. Cited by Allan Fitzsimmons, "Ecological Confusion among the Clergy," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 205.
22. *Ibid.*, 206.
23. *Ibid.*, 207. The first quote comes from Rabbi David Saperstein of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment; the second from United Methodist minister Rev. Peter Moore-Kochlacs.
24. Another statement by an ecumenical (Jews, Catholics, Protestants) group of religious leaders, *The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship* offers a more balanced position on the relationship between human needs and capacities on the one hand, and care of the environment, on the other. This declaration is available online at [www.stewards.net](http://www.stewards.net).
25. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation*, 17.
26. It is incoherent to indict human agency for interfering with nature while at the same time calling for additional (and coercive) government intervention to solve the problems allegedly caused by such interference.
27. The point of Jesus' comparison is of course not economics or the environment but stewardship of the gift of the kingdom of God. My point here is that the meaning of stewardship in general means active usage.
28. That this observation is not an exaggeration becomes apparent in Martin W. Lewis's book *Green Delusions*. According to Lewis, "Eco-radicals concur in one central proposition: that human society, as it is now constituted, is utterly unsustainable and must be reconstructed according to an entirely different socioeconomic logic," 2. Lewis is convinced that what he calls "eco-extremism" is based



on fallacies and "that the policies advocated by their proponents would, if enacted, result in unequivocal ecological catastrophe," 2.

29. The last nuclear power plant went on line in California in May 1986. For a sober look at California's energy crisis and the key role of environmentalism in the crisis, see William Tucker, "California Unplugged: Environmentalists Dreamed of Soft Power; The State Woke up in the Dark," *The American Spectator* 34, no. 3 (April 2001): 30–37.
30. For a recent and reasonably balanced overview of biblical teaching concerning the poor see Stephen Mott and Ronald J. Sider, "Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm," in *Toward a Just and Caring Society*, ed. David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 15–45. This entire collection of essays is a helpful introduction to contemporary evangelical discussions of wealth, poverty, and welfare. For specific passages, in addition to those cited in note 2, see: Luke 14:12–14, 18:22; John 13:29; Romans 12:13, 15:25–29; 2 Corinthians 8, 9:15.
31. Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 228.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 229. For a quite different appraisal of the charitable organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1992).
34. Ibid., 212.
35. The contemporary fashion of defining social justice is in terms of egalitarian outcomes that is quite different from classic usage where social justice referred to the just ordering of social units; that is, the just relationship between the family and the state. See J. Messner, *Social Ethics*, 314–25.
36. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, N.J.: The Craig Press, 1968), 452–58.
37. *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 10.
38. Ibid., sec. 11.
39. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (1995; rpt., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 13.
40. This needs to be emphasized because this passage has often been called in as a defense of certain forms of "communism." That it indeed was voluntary is clear from the Ananias and Sapphira story in Acts 5 where husband and wife lie about the portion of a voluntary gift offered to the apostles.

41. This insight has recently been rediscovered by Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
42. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, pt. 2, chap. 4, 485.
43. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 510–11.
44. “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living she had” (RSV). The poor, too, are expected to be giving and generous in their stewardship.
45. *Rerum Novarum*, secs. 49–59.
46. *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 7.
47. *Ibid.*, sec. 48.
48. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 97. The semantic difference between Kuyper and John Paul has to do with the term *higher authority*, which Kuyper avoids. Yet, this difference is superficial because both acknowledge the “higher” power of the state in its task of administering justice while insisting that in terms of rights and priorities families and other non-state associations have first claim. As Richard John Neuhaus observes, “The state is subsidiary to the society in service, as it is also derived from the society in its moral legitimacy.” (*Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* [New York: Doubleday, 1992]), 243.
49. See the essays in *Toward a Just and Caring Society*; ed. David Gushee; also, the marked change of Ronald Sider’s views in *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). In Sider’s view, “A greatly increased emphasis on the crucial role of civil society must be at the heart of any successful program to combat poverty.” He does add: “It would, however, be utterly wrong to suppose that civil society by itself can conquer poverty,” 87.
50. As has been eloquently argued by Glenn Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
51. See note 49 above.
52. Cited in the preface to *Gaining Ground: New Approaches to Poverty and Dependency*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1985).

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53. I am indebted for these three points to the volume cited in the preceding note.
54. *Laborem Exercens* §10; found in Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, *Proclaiming Justice and Peace: Papal Documents from Rerum Novarum Through Centesimus Annus*, revised and expanded edition (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 366.
55. For a helpful overview of a tendency that has generated a mountain of publication, see essays in *The Preferential Option for the Poor*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus, Encounter Series #8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).
56. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. and trans. James Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 33.