

## Turn Neither to the Right Nor to the Left: A Thinking Christian's Guide to Politics and Public Policy

**D. Eric Schansberg**

Greenville, South Carolina: Alertness Books, 2003 (447 pages)

In this integrative work, D. Eric Schansberg attempts to construct a Christian social philosophy by synthesizing libertarian economic thinking and evangelical biblical ethics. Schansberg's project is founded on two distinct pillars. The first is that the Bible is authoritative, and the second is that governmental attempts to implement good policies are extraordinarily costly.

Speaking as an economist in the context of public policy, Schansberg challenges Christians to think clearly about the following three issues. First, players in the political arena typically describe only "half the picture." Proponents of a policy advertise the benefits of a policy while opponents are vocal about the costs. Second, both sides are usually biased in their appraisals of the policy in question. The third point is the book's main thesis:

The benefits of pursuing government activism are rather obvious while the costs are relatively subtle. Thus, my job is typically to make those costs more visible. In addition to the Biblical problems with many types of government activism, after recognizing many of its practical costs, readers will often find government solutions less attractive and in many cases, prohibitively so" (3).

Working from these premises, Schansberg offers answers to three sets of broader questions:

First, how should Christians respond when acted upon by government? And how should their response differ if the government is legally prohibiting a righteous behavior, if it taxes righteous behavior? Second, when should Christians seek government policy as a means to an end? In particular, when should we use the government to prohibit or tax sinful behavior? Third, to what extent do the above answers depend on the type of sinful behavior (e.g., murder, gluttony, and practicing a false religion) or the type of righteous behavior (e.g., charity and being a good steward of the environment) (9)?

In order to answer the prescribed questions, Schansberg separates the book into three major sections. Starting with an introduction, the first section addresses, "Why Christians Shouldn't Legislate Morality." Here he examines the biblical evidence concerning the Christian use of government to pursue "social morality" goals. A long section, "Why and How Christians Should Legislate Justice," addresses a biblical case for using government to promote "economic justice" in certain settings and with justice properly defined in terms of both means and ends—in particular to identify ethical and practical ways to help the poor. In this section, the author seeks to emulate Christ but warns against choices of particular methods. Schansberg endorses government as a means to defend human rights (141). The final section consists of two chapters on

abortion and a conclusion. In this final argument, Schansberg urges Christians to consider government as an appropriate means to just ends but also to remember that our political pursuits are at odds with promoting personal, corporate, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual freedom (305).

Within the introduction, two chapters are dedicated to Christian thinking about government and one chapter to “pursuing godly goals with godly methods” (9); the rest of the section teases out these ideas. Starting with a broad view of the Old Testament, Schansberg begins his case for a limited government with the fact that the nation of Israel had limited governmental oversight. In regard to the New Testament, he observes: “It also displays a surprising lack of interest in political issues.” Schansberg points out that the history of the relationship between Christianity and government is a checkered one. He rightly notes that both the religious right and religious left are governmentalist in that they both pursue government solutions—though their goals are considerably different (24).

Section 2 addresses the notion that Christians should be concerned with legislating justice in lieu of legislating morality. Stating up front that we worship a God of justice and righteousness, Schansberg supports this claim with a lengthy mix of biblical citations and narratives. His argument that Christians should promote government as a means of justice rather than morality proceeds from the fact that Christ verbally defended the rights of others (139). In addition, he argues that it is easier to motivate people to pursue justice than morality; justice provides an opportunity for Christians “to be *for* something.” Addressing “felt needs” is more effective than restricting consensual activity, and legislating justice is a “far greater pursuit” than legislating morality (140).

At this point Schansberg uses his training as an economist to delineate a series of distinctions between “poverty and true poverty,” “poverty and income inequality,” and so forth. He lays out a defense of competition and the free market (149), and addresses a host of issues including mandated benefits (182), labor legislation (185), tax code equity and efficiency (186), education (190), welfare (200), and the role of civil society (206). In the final chapter of the section, he gives some prescriptions for helping the poor, including a call for Christians to be more active in evangelism ministry and to be more charitable with time and resources (237).

Section 3 is dedicated almost exclusively to the issue of abortion. Succinctly put, Schansberg holds that abortion is a sin but, “Unless abortion implies direct costs imposed against another person, the political philosophy and practice developed in this book would classify the sin as legislating morality and thus not properly the subject of Christian efforts to legislate” (265). He then launches into a series of questions debating whether abortion is equivalent to murder, and whether life begins at birth or breath (267). All in all, Schansberg argues that we should look to the law for support but that the real answer to stopping abortions is to focus on ministering to individuals one-on-one with compassion, counseling, and increased efforts to adopt (273). Schansberg stands strong on his position that abortion is a sin but raises serious objections to political methods of curtailment.

A substantial flaw in the book is the lack of philosophical and theological categories. Schansberg amasses an impressive array of biblical quotations, but, without the requisite theological and exegetical groundwork, the specific uses to which such passages are put can be called into question. The success of any such major synthetic effort will depend on whether the two pieces of the synthesis can be held together. Where Schansberg argues that limited government is compatible with Christian theology, he is most convincing. Where he overreaches this claim to imply that a Christian worldview requires a stringent classical liberal stand, he is less so.

On the whole, Schansberg should be praised for his ambitious attempt to synthesize a Christian worldview with a political philosophy of freedom. His effort is a salutary reminder that Christians should think critically about the relationship of their faith to their politics and should not identify the gospel with any party's platform.

—Jamé Boldt  
*Acton Institute*

## Reforming the Morality of Usury: A Study of Differences That Separated the Protestant Reformers

**David W. Jones**

Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004 (178 pages)

In the contemporary world, meetings of the Federal Reserve command widespread media attention beyond regular business outlets as the public awaits changes in interest rate policy. People immediately assess the impact of these announcements on, not only their stock and bond portfolios and retirement accounts but also on auto loans, home mortgages and refinancings, home equity loans, and student loans, among other financial instruments. With the phenomenon of interest rates receiving so much attention and implicit acceptance, it is hard to fathom that the very notion of charging interest, the price mechanism for taking account of the time value of money, was once an object of almost universal moral scorn. David W. Jones's succinctly written primer, *Reforming the Morality of Usury*, surveys the various attitudes of Protestant Reformers in effecting this moral transition from widespread social condemnation of the charging of interest for loans to the almost ubiquitous modern embrace of the practice.

Jones, an assistant professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, begins his survey by noting, "Although in modern times the term 'usury' is used to denote 'the practice of charging, taking, or contracting to receive *excessive* or *illegal* rates of interest for money on loan,' prior to and at the time of the Reformation, the term 'usury' was used to refer to the charging of *any* interest for money on loan" (3). Until the sixteenth century, Jones explains, the practice of usury was condemned. This condemnation stemmed from three sources: (1) the "Scriptural Pillar" of prohibitions of usury in the Hebrew Scriptures (18); (2) the "Philosophical Pillar" of Greco-Roman contempt for the practice of usury that drew