

POVERTY AND AID TO THE POOR: A DIALOGUE

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I am thankful to the editor for giving me an opportunity to dialogue with the paper titled “Poverty and Aid to the Poor: Scripture, Kuyper’s Sphere Sovereignty and Entitlement Spending” by Dr. Lawrence J. Belcher. A chance to dialogue on this paper seemed like a great opportunity having recently completed a reading group with students where we discussed *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty* edited by Anne Bradley and Arthur Lindsley (2015) in addition to my plans to spend time this summer in a developing country.

I found this article to have areas of strength and agreement, areas where more development was needed, and areas of weakness and omission. This response will follow this outline.

AREAS OF STRENGTH AND AGREEMENT

I found that Dr. Belcher made a strong case for work and personal responsibility as the main avenue for getting out of poverty. I certainly agree with this and find that people long for “earned success” and not “learned helplessness” (BROOKS, 2012). Dr. Belcher also highlights the centrality of the family to fighting poverty, above and beyond the Church or any other institution, and I couldn’t agree more. I Timothy 5:8 states “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (ESV) Finally, I also agree that the primary role of the state is that of a referee and not a provider.

The point about the poor suffering from “defective time preferences” was an interesting and important point. Earlier work by the political scientist Edward Banfield complements the work by Ronald Nash (1986) whom Dr. Belcher quotes. Banfield writes that the lower classes (those with high time preferences) have no sense of the future. A lower class individual considers his “bodily needs (especially for sex)...take precedence over everything else—certainly over any work routine” (1974). Further, future oriented [lower time preference] cultures teach “the individual that he would be cheating

himself if he allowed gratification of his impulses (for example, sex or violence) to interfere with his provision for the future” (Banfield, 1974). Further, those with high time preferences have “no attachment to community, neighbors, or friends” (Banfield, 1974). I was happy to see this point brought up by Dr. Belcher.

AREAS IN NEED OF MORE DEVELOPMENT

The discussion on gleaning laws was informative. The modern day applications of the gleaning laws would have made the paper better. Vernon Smith, Nobel Laureate in economics, recently gave an interesting example about gleaning during a keynote talk at the APEE conference (Smith, 2016). He spoke of a poor man selling newspapers at an intersection at a price above retail price. The man refused to take extra money, and refused to take money if you did not take the newspaper. Instead of panhandling, the man was selling a product priced above retail in an age of digital media where few people read newspapers. Other examples might include hiring someone to do a job that you could easily accomplish at low cost (e.g. mowing the lawn at one’s home). Missionaries were expected to hire people to work in their home even if they did not need the help (Bradley and Lindsley, 2015). Some of the business examples provided by Dr. Belcher could also fit the idea of gleaning.

How would the ideas of Kuyper’s Sphere Sovereignty work in countries where there are small Christian populations? Are his ideas only valid where there is a sizable Christian population or are his ideas applicable where Christians might constitute a small percentage of the population? Where Christians are a small percentage of the population, and hence unable to help in large numbers, it might be natural for citizens of that country to seek the state to assist the poor, the destitute and the unfortunate. A complementary argument that I want to raise here is that Christians are primarily told to help their brethren (James 2:15-16, Matthew 25:40) and anything outside this sphere to non-believers or those

outside the Church should be rare (Mark 7:28). Hence in a country with few Christians, the state plays a role beyond that of a referee.

WEAKNESS / OMISSION

The author fails to take into account an important part of poverty alleviation in the Bible which includes leasing, loans and servitude (see Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15) (Marinov, 2013). If an Israelite family fell on economic hard times, they could lease out their property at a price that was determined by how many harvests could theoretically be obtained prior to the Jubilee year. Another option was to get loans, and the debtor was obligated to work and pay off the debt. If they could not pay back the debt, this debt would be forgiven in the sabbatical year. In the worst case scenario, an individual could also sell themselves temporarily to voluntary servitude for a certain number of years. In the latter two instances (debt and voluntary servitude) one was required to work. Further, in all three cases (leasing property, debt and voluntary servitude), there was no case for handouts unless it was provided voluntarily. If we were to apply these principles, we can imagine an avenue being available for business owners to hire perceived high-risk individuals such as ex-felons and drug offenders. These high-risk individuals could temporarily sell themselves to the business owner and the money raised could be held in a trust fund that is disbursable after the time of service. Of course the business owner would be expected to provide food and shelter during this time. This would allow those who

are currently considered risky hires to obtain work and increase their marketable skills. (The thirteenth amendment to the U.S. constitution prohibits involuntary servitude, but not voluntary servitude. While voluntary servitude is legally permissible, I wonder if society today will be tolerant of this arrangement.)

Finally, who exactly are the poor and how do those considered poor in the U.S. compare with the biblical definition? James 2:15 and Exodus 22:26, 27 define the poor as one who has no food, clothing or one cloak. From this definition we can see that those who are in poverty in the U.S. are not really biblically poor. In fact, as Dr. Belcher points out, those in poverty in the U.S. are quite well off, and as others have stated, the poor have a much better lifestyle than royalty in the past (Rahn, 2014). (The definition of poverty is very much a political tool to keep the poverty industrial complex busy.) Deuteronomy 15:4 suggests that eliminating biblical poverty is achievable if the Lord blesses the land. If there is hardly any biblical level of poverty in the U.S., then much of the discussion on poverty alleviation is not fruitful in developed countries as poverty is just a relative measure. All of this off course leads to a broader discussion on factors that are important for prosperity in countries.

CONCLUSION

While much of what has been said here has been said by others in one form or another, I hope my comments adds to the current dialogue.

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