

The State and the Redistribution of Income

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Dr. LaFrance examines secular and biblical perspectives on redistribution of income and shares ten well-thought-out propositions to address the problem. He challenges the reader to think through his or her own attitudes toward dealing with the poor.

*The political problem of mankind is to combine three things:
economic efficiency, social justice, and individual liberty.*

John Maynard Keynes

*Mankind may judge what Heaven thinks of riches
by observing those upon whom it has been pleased to bestow them.*

Jonathan Swift

God must love the poor since He made so many of them.

Unknown

The Problem

Introduction

The issue of income redistribution is a prevalent one throughout the Scriptures, with God calling upon his people to consider the less fortunate among and about them. Any honest reading of the Bible will show that God expects redistribution to take place—the more fortunate transferring their income and wealth to the less fortunate. While the call for private, voluntary transfers is rarely disputed, the use of government to effect public, involuntary transfers of income produces much controversy. Does the Bible expect or even permit the civil authority to play something of a

“Robin Hood” function by taxing income of the more fortunate and transferring it to the less fortunate in order to achieve some notion of distributive justice?

This paper will address this rather narrow question and will seek to avoid consideration of the realities of modern day redistribution programs.

Poverty and Inequality

When the question of distributive justice is considered, often two issues are raised—poverty and inequality. For some, distributive justice has to do with meeting the basic physical needs of the poor; ensuring that every member (or every deserving member) of the community has been provided (or has been

provided the means to acquire) the basic sustenance of life. To be sure, there is much debate about the nature and level of such sustenance—an issue that will not be explored in this paper. The concern of justice, from this point of view, is to merely meet the socially-determined basic needs of human beings.

Others would argue that an equally important issue is not just that some people live in poverty, however defined, but that there exists great economic inequality between the members of society. This inequality, unless it is addressed, breeds political and social inequality, class division, and envy as well as future economic inequality and precludes the achievement of meaningful community and solidarity in society. Distributive justice in this context has to do with reducing the degree of inequality in the distribution of income (and perhaps wealth) irrespective of the standards of living of the members of society. It may also involve measures to reduce class divisions and to promote greater equality in the distribution of power and decision making. From this perspective, inequality, beyond a point, serves no useful social purpose.

While this debate is interesting and important, it will not be pursued. In my opinion, when the Bible addresses

redistribution, in most cases the overwhelming concern is for meeting the physical needs of individuals, not reducing inequality. That is not to say that a biblical case can't be made for promoting greater economic equality,¹ but I believe the preponderance of relevant Scripture indicates a concern for poverty, not inequality.²

Income Distribution: Causal Factors

Before proceeding further, it seems that a discussion of the major influences on the distribution of income might prove helpful in assessing the arguments for and against state-directed redistribution. Various causal factors commonly cited will now be briefly presented.

Native or innate abilities are important and involve mental, physical, and aesthetic talents. Some people are born as Michael Jordan, but most are not. Training, education, and opportunities to advance crucially affect one's income. These are not the same for all, especially the poor and minorities who suffer inadequate living and learning environments and, sadly, frequent discrimination. Work-leisure choices are also basic to income determination. Everything else being the same, those who choose to work and work hard will earn more income than those who choose not to work very hard, if at all.³

Property ownership or wealth is unequally distributed (often due to inheritance), and this gives rise to income inequality. Some people receive interest, dividends, rents, and capital gains but many people do not. Some people have the ability to exert market power, and as a result, they receive more than a competitive return on their resources. Many people have no such power. Some people take risks that pay off for them. Others take risks that do not pay off for them. Most people try to avoid risk altogether. Some people exhibit a stronger propensity to save and accumulate income than others. This involves delaying gratification which some people find difficult to do.

One's place in the life cycle is critical in determining one's income. Younger and older folks typically have less income, *ceteris paribus*, than those in the middle years. In fact, it is possible that a society could have equal lifetime incomes for all of its members, yet the distribution of income at any point in time would be unequal due to differing ages of the individuals involved.

There is not an equal distribution of misfortune in society. Some people will have accidents, get diseases, or suffer some other income-reducing calamity. Some of these people will have insurance to help compensate them and others will not. Thankfully, many people will

be spared such trauma.

Finally, there are miscellaneous factors that cover everything else—luck, chance, “who you know,” lack of information, providence, etc. Depending on one's theological perspective, one might view these in a variety of lights. The fact of the matter is that some people do win the lottery, do have “connections,” and do seem to enjoy blessings from above.

Though one might be able to explain the income distribution with the traditional explanations given above, something seems to be missing. This might be categorized as the effect of life choices. Some decisions may directly or indirectly impact one's ability, and perhaps willingness, to earn income. These choices might involve selection of profession, quality of work, sexual activity, the decision to marry, having children, using drugs or alcohol, gambling, criminal activity, etc. In many cases, the effects of these choices are negative and have long term consequences. They usually affect others' earning potential as well.

The causes of the income distribution, and resultant inequality, will bear on the decision to redistribute income if one must be “deserving” to qualify as a recipient. In such a case, deserving status might be a function of the extent to which the predicament of the individual

in question was determined by variables over which the person had no control. This might be easy to ascertain in some cases, but in many it could prove to be a very complex determination.⁴

Distributive Justice

Since the question of redistribution raises the concept of distributive justice, it seems appropriate at this point to provide a very brief overview of the main points of view on this issue. Rather than emphasize the distinction

between secular and biblical perspectives, the contrast between traditional conservative

and liberal ideas on this subject will be highlighted.⁵

In general terms, conservative notions of distributive justice revolve around three basic ideas—contribution or desert, voluntarism, and freedom. A distribution would be considered just if income were allocated according to the contribution that a person made to its creation. Alternatively, a distribution would be considered just if it is the result of voluntary exchange. More generally, a distribution would be considered just if it is the result of economic freedom. Since competitive free markets tend to reward participants based

on contribution, rely on voluntary exchange, and promote economic freedom, conservatives will often view competitive, free market outcomes as just.⁶

Buchanan refines this basic conservative view by drawing attention to “the distribution of rights and claims prior to or antecedent to the market process itself, rather than on some final distribution of social product.”⁷ In this contractarian view, the issue of distributive justice

revolves around the legitimacy of the prior “rights and claims,” not on the actual distribution.⁸ Interestingly, Buchanan accepts

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redistribution to make the game fair, or in other words, to promote equality of opportunity. More generally, mainstream conservatives will entertain the notion of equality of opportunity while rejecting the idea of equality of result.

Given the distinctiveness of liberal views, no overarching approach can be presented. The three most popular ideas on the liberal side will be considered instead. The first idea embraces “the greatest good for the greatest number” of utilitarianism and argues that distributive justice is achieved when the total sum of each person’s utility is at a

maximum. This view requires an additional assumption about the utility of income (see following section) in order to justify redistribution.

The second viewpoint is more of a critique of capitalism and represents a broad category of concerns and views about the legitimacy of market processes and outcomes and existing property rights. This perspective usually sees market activity as exploitative and markets as failing to live up to their promises, and it considers the market-determined distribution as unjust. One extreme view in this category is the Marxist notion of distributive justice which is summed up in "from each according to ability, to each according to need."

The third view was advanced by Rawls and attempts to control the existing positions of power and privilege. Rawls argues that when people are placed behind a "veil of ignorance" and do not know what the distribution of human and physical capital will be (let alone their own income), they would most likely choose to have greater equality in the distribution of income than currently exists. Rawls assumes the pursuit of self-interest on the part of the participants who act in a risk-averse way to select the best out of the worst possible outcomes. This view accepts inequality as long as it improves

the economic position of the poorest member of society.⁹

In general, liberal views express a concern for both equality of opportunity and equity of result with a bias for greater equality than the market typically generates. The discussion of biblical perspectives on redistribution later in the article will return to this issue. Before examining the Scripture, however, it should prove useful to concisely set forth secular arguments for and against redistribution.

Secular Perspectives *In Support of Redistribution*

Seven arguments or categories of arguments will be presented to justify involuntary income redistribution. Several were previously mentioned with regard to distributive justice. Redistribution to maximize society's utility flowed from the idea of utilitarianism. If it is assumed that the marginal utility of income is the same for everyone and that it diminishes with greater income, then a redistribution from the rich to the poor will increase the sum of the individuals' utilities. This is a classic argument for redistribution which emerged in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

The Rawlsian notion of a risk-averse populace that would choose greater equality behind a veil of ignorance provides a

rationale for redistribution. The belief that the distribution determined by unhampered market forces is illegitimate or unjust due to injustice in property holdings, monopoly power, fraud, or some other illegitimacy or market failure demands that the state rectify the situation by taxing and transferring.

One line of argument directly addresses the poor but without an explicitly normative tone. One might characterize these as quasi-efficient in nature. By helping the poor, society will eventually reap the benefits of the poor's higher productivity due to their ability to invest in their human capital (i.e., enhanced education, training, nutrition, health care, etc.). In a more sober vein, some argue that it is necessary for the more fortunate to provide for the less fortunate in order to lessen the likelihood of social unrest and criminality when those at the bottom compare themselves with the rest of society.¹¹

Another set of arguments focuses on the problems of private charity. First, it is argued that private charity will never be sufficient to meet the needs of the poor, so public charity is necessary. Second, it is alleged that private citizens may wish to help the poor, but the information problems and the complexity of the task make it difficult for them to know what to do. Government, presumably, can more

comprehensively and efficiently deal with the magnitude of the challenge. Third, in a modern and complex culture people lack the time and energy to personally assist the poor. Finally, since charity is probably a public good, it makes sense to have government provide it and require all members of society to pay for it.¹²

Another rationale for redistribution relates to the earlier discussion of inequality. In this line of reasoning, inequality is undesirable since a person's well being is more a function of one's relative standing in the income distribution than one's absolute level of income. Thus, lessening the degree of inequality should enhance the well being of society. (This argument assumes that the gains of the people receiving outweigh the losses of the people contributing.) Furthermore, economic inequality is believed to foster inequality in other realms (e.g., political, legal, social, etc.) which is deemed undesirable.

Arguments in the final category have a more explicitly normative tone to them. One suggests that for some people it is simply impossible to be self-supporting. They may be working or unable to work, but in either case they need assistance and this argument asserts it should be provided. Another contends that society may simply decide to allocate some things equally. It is

done with the vote and legal rights, why not in the economic realm? It is also possible that society may wish to attract talent to tasks that the market does not highly reward (e.g., daycare), and redistribution facilitates this.

Singer argues that if something very bad can be prevented from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, then it should be done. Thus, preventing poverty for some through the sacrifice of some of society's affluence, is a

morally compelling tradeoff for Singer.¹³ Finally, Goodin argues that society has a moral

responsibility to protect those who are "especially vulnerable" to the actions and choices of others. Welfare in this case is necessary to prevent vulnerability. Furthermore, he asserts that a respect for personhood and dignity requires that no one be without the material necessities of life. In this view, such transfers are entitlements, not public charity.¹⁴

Against Redistribution

This section will examine arguments against redistribution. It will address both cash and in-kind transfer programs such as


exist in the United States. Arguments will be classified into three groups: freedom, efficiency, and reality.

The most basic argument against redistribution is that it constitutes a violation of the right to property. People who are opposed to redistribution are prevented from retaining that portion of their income taxed away for purposes of redistribution and disposing of it as they see fit. Some would add that this represents a loss of income without due

compensation.¹⁵ Others argue that such coerced "public charity" is really not charity at all since it was not freely provided by the giver.¹⁶ A

related contention is that such a policy will breed a "statist" outlook and mindset within the society which will jeopardize other rights and freedoms.

The opposition to redistribution on efficiency grounds is simple and assumes that people are rational economic agents who will behave in a predictable way. When income producers are taxed to fund income transfer programs, it is believed that this will lessen the desire to produce income. This undermines the incentive to work, save, and invest. Society will



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experience a loss of productivity. Likewise, as people receive income without having to work or earn it in some fashion, the incentive to work, save, and invest will also be weakened and productivity will suffer. Thus, taking from some to give to others undermines the incentive to earn income on the part of everyone.¹⁷

A final set of objections to redistribution stems from the inherent difficulty in achieving desired results due to the inability to analyze ends, ways, and means. Many believe that the knowledge necessary to effect an efficient and equitable program of redistribution is not available to policymakers and program administrators. Apart from something like a negative income tax, the information required for a modern welfare state is staggering. Problems include measurement of cash income, in-kind income, level of wealth, assessment of need, accuracy of data, prevention of fraud and cheating, among many others. In addition, such policies politicize the economy and undermine its strength.

More importantly, many contend that the programs, though well intentioned, simply do not work.¹⁸ They do not solve the problems they were designed to address. In fact, some argue that such programs only make the problems worse by fostering

dependency; subverting personal responsibility, initiative, and morality; and by undermining families. Furthermore, such programs can breed corruption and create vested interests who care more about their jobs, income, and power than the people they are supposed to be helping. Finally, such efforts tend to drive out private charity and the people who genuinely care about making a difference in the lives of the less fortunate.¹⁹ We now turn to the Bible for insight and guidance.

Biblical Perspectives

In Support of Redistribution

This section will present the view that the Bible supports (or at least does not prohibit) the use of the state to redistribute income. While the overarching theme of the Bible is the fall and redemption of humankind, the concern for justice permeates the pages of Scripture. Due to the extensiveness of the Bible's treatment of justice and economic matters, attention will only be paid to a limited selection of Scripture. After consideration of a few general passages, several of the key economic practices on which supporters of state-imposed redistribution base their position will be considered. This will be followed by some summary observations.

But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of

the afflicted ever perish.
Arise, O Lord, let not man
triumph; let the nations be
judged in your presence
(Psalm 9:18, 19).

This passage indicates the
judgment of nations (not
individuals) for their treatment of
the needy and afflicted. This
suggests that nations are
responsible for their collective
action with regard to the poor.

Endow the king with your
justice, O God, the royal son
with your righteousness. He
will judge your people in
righteousness, your afflicted
ones with justice. The
mountains will bring
prosperity to the people, the
hills the fruit of
righteousness. He will defend
the afflicted among the
people and save the children
of the needy; he will crush
the oppressor (Psalm 72:1-4).

This passage indicates that the
civil authority (the king) is
endowed to defend and save those
in need. The king is to effect
justice for the oppressed.

Does it make you a king
to have more and more
cedar? Did not your
father have food and
drink? He did what was
right and just, so all went
well with him. He
defended the cause of the
poor and needy, and so
all went well. Is that not
what it means to know

me? declares the Lord
(Jeremiah 22:15-16).

This portion is addressed to an
evil king. It is clear that defense
of the poor and needy is a
manifestation of justice and a
cause of blessing to a nation.

Now this was the sin of
your sister Sodom: She
and her daughters were
arrogant, overfed, and
unconcerned; they did not
help the poor and needy
(Ezekiel 16:49).

While most people think of
sexual sin with regard to the
destruction of Sodom, this verse
makes it clear that the destruction
of the city was also due to their
treatment of the poor and needy.
Collective neglect contributed to
the judgment of collective
annihilation.

Everyone must submit
himself to the governing
authorities, for there is no
authority except that
which God has
established. The
authorities that exist have
been established by God.
Consequently, he who
rebels against the
authority is rebelling
against what God has
instituted, and those who
do so will bring judgment
on themselves. For rulers
hold no terror for those
who do right, but for
those who do wrong. Do
you want to be free from

fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Romans 13:1-7).

While the text is clearly most concerned with government's responsibility to enforce the appropriate norms of social behavior, it can be used to justify governmental action to promote good within a society. Thus interpreted, a minimalist view of government is rejected. Public policy to redistribute income would fall within the legitimate province of the state.

The following Scriptures are presented to demonstrate an

institutional response to poverty and inequality. They are an integral part of the redistributionist position.

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow (Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

The Old Testament gleaning laws were a practical response to the impoverished within the community. Food was to be deliberately left behind for those in need. This standard was directed at the individual owners of the means of production.

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the

fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands

(Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

Much like the gleaning laws, the laws on tithing provided for the aliens, the fatherless, and the widows. There appears to be no work requirement as with gleaning. It is not clear how long these stores would last, however.

Two other important Old Testament mechanisms for addressing economic concerns were the sabbatical year and the Year of Jubilee.

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him (Exodus 21:2-3).

For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the

same with your vineyard and your olive grove (Exodus 23:10-11).

Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property. If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other. You are to buy from your countryman on the basis

of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God (Leviticus 25:8-17).

The sabbatical year provided food for the poor as they were permitted to gather whatever grew on the fallow land. Hebrew slaves were to be given their freedom in the sabbatical year. Thus, slavery could last a maximum of only six years. Also, all debts were to be canceled during the sabbatical year. This would prevent those who were in dire straits from being trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty. The intent of all of this was to “level the playing field,” so to speak, and to give those who were losers another chance.

The Year of Jubilee dictated that every 50 years all land was to be returned to its original owners without compensation. This ensured that everyone would eventually have access to the means of production—land.

Inequality would be lessened and, like the sabbatical year, the economic game would start over. According to Sider, the “...concept of jubilee underlines the importance of institutionalized mechanisms and structures that promote justice.”²⁰

Two passages from the New Testament are often cited as promoting equality. One deals with the sharing of the early church (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35), and the other with Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 on giving and receiving. While these passages certainly emphasize equality, both assume a context of voluntarism, however, and thus cannot serve as a paradigm for coercive redistribution.²¹

As indicated in the above discussion, a godly individual is required to provide for the needy, and a biblical case can be made for the redistribution of income by the larger society. It seems appropriate at this point to quote from some sources that support this view. Sider writes: “Biblical principles, however, apply to secular societies as well as the church.”²² Tamari observes, “In Judaism, however, taxation was introduced as a manifestation of the concept of the rights of the community and of less fortunate individuals in the property of all the other individuals.”²³ Finally, Beversluis makes the following interesting argument:

To respond as a Christian to a person whose characteristics (e.g., neediness) establish a claim to that response because of a rule of love is logically the same as to respond as an agent of the state to a person whose characteristics (perhaps neediness again) establish a claim to that response under civil law. Both love and justice are impersonal and personal in the same ways. They differ in that the characteristics that call forth a response and the response called forth differ. But they are not incompatible: a certain type of civil law may be one of the things required by love.²⁴

Against Redistribution

The opponents of involuntary income redistribution rely on both secular and biblical arguments to make their case. This section will explore the views rooted in or related to Scripture. Responses to the ideas in the previous section will be offered as well as additional scriptural perspectives and general arguments.

The most basic refutation of the viewpoint of the previous section is the position that the Old Testament is not relevant to current economic public policy. This argument revolves around three propositions: first, that the

economy of ancient Israel was a primitive agrarian one and irrelevant to present day capitalism; second, that the economy in question was part of a covenant relationship between God and a chosen people, not applicable to other nations and times; and third, that even as a general principle, it can only apply to the body of believers, not to secular authorities. These are interesting and important claims, but it must be recognized that not all opponents of redistribution would embrace them. Theonomists, for example, view the Old Testament in almost “blueprint” terms for current practice; yet they would oppose modern redistribution programs. The issue of whether the Bible is relevant to public policy in a secular society is important. The assumption of this paper is that it is, but in a paradigmatic way rather than as a blueprint.²⁵

An important position usually taken by redistributionists is that God is on the side of the poor. This may also be expressed as the need for a “preferential option for the poor.” Thus, retributive justice is insufficient for the redistributionists, and they desire to replace it with distributive

***Theonomists...would
oppose modern
distribution programs.***

justice and have the state redistribute income. Opponents reject this view as a faulty reading and application of Scripture. The following passage is important in their refutation: "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly" (Leviticus 19:15). God is seen as not on the side of either the poor or the rich but rather on the side of fairness.²⁶ Attention will now be paid to the institutional mechanisms previously cited.

The policies on gleaning were certainly designed to aid the poor. However, Old Testament law did not require their official enforcement. Owners of the land decided who would be permitted to glean on it (see Ruth 2:7-8). Thus, it was more voluntary than coercive. Furthermore, gleaning was arduous labor.²⁷

As far as the third-year tithe was concerned, it represented a portion of the national tithe that was returned to the local towns to be administered by the elders of the community. It was dispensed among local Levites and the needy aliens, orphans, and widows. Clearly it was a decentralized means of helping the deserving and foreshadowed what was to take place in the church. It was in no way a forerunner of a welfare program in a modern centralized state structure.²⁸

The sabbatical year does appear to be a mechanism to address poverty and inequality. With regard to debts, however, Beisner argues that the law required only that God's people not demand payment during the sabbatical year, not that the debt be canceled. This was due to the fact that with the land left fallow, there would be no income with which to service a debt. Thus, the practice has nothing to do with justice or charity, but rather the reality of observing God's law.²⁹

Regarding the Year of Jubilee, two comments can be made. Gwartney observes that the Jubilee is more like our bankruptcy law than current day transfer programs, thus questioning it as a basis for redistribution.³⁰ Beisner argues that when loans were made, the land was given as collateral, and the harvests from the land paid off the debt. Thus, the Year of Jubilee simply placed an outside limit on the maturity of the loan. Loans were negotiated taking all of this into account, and when land was returned to its owners during the Jubilee, it was simply the return of collateral upon the repayment of the loan. It had nothing to do with redistribution or inequality.³¹

It should be noted that in regard to enforcement of these economic laws it appeared to be left up to God since no penalties were indicated. Thus, voluntarism

was generally relied upon with blessings and curses meted out by God for righteous and unrighteous behavior. This was consistent with a theocracy. Permitting a modern state to play the role of God in these matters is a serious violation of Scripture and a potentially dangerous proposition.

Novak argues that a picture of the modern welfare state can be seen in Genesis 47:13-26, where Joseph enslaves the people of Egypt and buys their land during the famine. "Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh" (Genesis 47:19). Novak argues that dependency follows whenever a people look to the state to meet their needs.³²

A powerful warning against the potential tyranny of centralized government is found in 1 Samuel 8. In this famous passage the elders of Israel ask Samuel for a king and Samuel attempts to dissuade them from the idea by reciting the words of the Lord regarding how a king would oppress and exploit them, a prophecy clearly fulfilled in full measure by the reign of Solomon. It is sobering to realize that the people rejected their true King (v. 7), the Lord, and went after an earthly king. In a similar way, people look to government to meet their needs rather than to God.

The importance of work is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. It is obvious that God expects people to work to the best of their ability. Proverbs (10:4, 20:4, 21:25, 24:30-31, 26:14-15) provides a striking picture of the virtue of diligence and the vice of sloth. Paul's famous command in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat," makes it abundantly clear that work is expected for sustenance. Any transfer program that allows able-bodied recipients to eat without working is in violation of God's law.

Nash contends that justice requires a coercive state, acting impersonally, according to law. He further believes that love is voluntary, personal, and goes beyond the law. Thus, unlike Beversluis, Nash concludes that the state cannot love.³³ Hence, charity, as an act of love, can only be undertaken by individuals, not the state. It seems fitting to end this section with a quote from Viner about the early church:

They [the Fathers] also refrained from advocating compulsory almsgiving either by Church rule or civil legislation. They showed no concern about economic inequality except when it involved private riches in excess of what was morally safe for the owners, or where it was a sign of lack of

compassion on the part of the rich for those living in extreme poverty.³⁴

Other Insights

This section will highlight some of the thoughts, insights, and conclusions of a variety of thinkers regarding income distribution and issues pertinent to the creation of wealth from a biblical perspective. It should serve to highlight and complement the discussion of the previous two sections.

Mason and Schaefer offer five marks of a just and righteous society based on an examination of premonarchic Israel. They are: (1) A special concern for those in need as a result of circumstances they could not control, (2) The preservation of the freedom and economic viability of the extended family, (3) An emphasis on the importance of work, (4) The fulfillment of contracts and commitments, and (5) Increasing economic productivity.³⁵

Gwartney spells out some biblical themes that he believes Christians should be able to agree on: (1) God hates those who oppress the poor. (2) God expects us to work, and he despises laziness. (3) Riches are temporal and do not satisfy. (4) The family is God's first line of defense against poverty. (5) When the family needs help, the church should provide it. (6) Able-bodied transfer recipients should be required to work.³⁶

Beverluis advances the following principles to guide economic life: (1) There is no absolute right to resources. Only God has such a right. (2) We are called to be productive. (3) All must have access to basic necessities. (4) All must have an opportunity to earn a living. (5) Concentrations of wealth and power must be limited.³⁷

Tamari's research provides the following interesting insights into economic life. God provides wealth to the more fortunate to provide for the less fortunate. The highest form of charity is helping someone become self-sufficient. "...the Talmud tells us that 'It is better for a man to flay a carcass in the market [regarded as menial labor of the lowest kind] than to be dependent on others.'" Most of the time, Judaism's concern with charity is with its negative connotation for the recipient, rather than transfer payments as a right. And, an important purpose of charity is to become aware of the suffering of others.³⁸

The following is the text of paragraph 62 of the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics of January, 1990, a fitting way to end this section.

The provision of sustenance rights is also an appropriate function of government. Such rights must be carefully defined so that government's involvement will not

encourage irresponsible behaviour and the breakdown of families and communities. In a healthy society, this fulfillment of rights will be provided through a diversity of institutions so that the government's role will be that of last resort.³⁹

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In an ideal world people would participate in the economic game, play in good faith, and reap a reward that is equitable, satisfying, and sufficient. However, we live in a fallen world of sinful human beings and "second-best" outcomes where participation, equity, satisfaction, and sufficiency are much easier theorized than accomplished. State sponsored redistribution has been a fact of life in the West for well over 50 years. The controversy surrounding this issue involves both equity and efficiency concerns. Is it fair to take from some and give to others? What are the consequences of such a policy?

The previous sections have explored the arguments concerning involuntary redistribution from both secular and biblical perspectives. It is obvious that this is a complex and difficult question. Two major tensions seem to surface: first, the

...in a fallen world... participation, equity, satisfaction, and sufficiency are much easier theorized than accomplished.

tension between distribution according to desert or contribution versus distribution according to need; and second, how is it possible to help someone without creating an incentive structure which ends up hurting them and the broader society in the long run?

The conclusion and policy implications will now be presented in the form of ten propositions. Number one is a subjective judgment based on the previous discussion.⁴⁰

(1) Limited involuntary redistribution is appropriate. The compelling reasons are sustenance rights, Rawlsian risk-aversion, correction of injustice, the quasi-efficiency arguments, and the insufficiency of private charity.

(2) Involuntary redistribution should only be undertaken to meet basic needs. Efforts to promote equality lack sufficient biblical support and are misguided.

(3) Work should be required of all able-bodied recipients. Work should be defined to include training, education, and caring for children if circumstances warrant.

- (4) Income support must be presented as a privilege rather than a right. Having pride in working and making one's contribution to society must be publicly affirmed.
- (5) All programs should minimize their inherent disincentives as much as possible.
- (6) All programs for the able-bodied should be temporary in nature. They must promote self-sufficiency, not income support, as a way of life.
- (7) Responsible behavior should be encouraged and expected. Those who refuse to get the help they need or refuse to change should eventually lose their support.
- (8) Programs should protect and strengthen the family. Appropriate incentives should encourage two-parent homes and legitimacy.
- (9) Programs should be regularly evaluated to make sure that the recipients are the major beneficiaries, not the policymakers or the program administrators. All transfers to the non-poor (individuals or corporations) should be terminated unless a case can be made that such transfers significantly benefit the poor.
- (10) Public policies should be put into place that strengthen families, religious communities, and other agencies that minister to the less fortunate. The state should investigate and consider ways of involving the private

sector so that state responsibilities will be lessened.

It is important to realize that there are other ways of assisting the poor besides income policies. A vibrant, growing economy producing ever-expanding employment opportunities remains the best hope for those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. Continued efforts at promoting equal opportunity through strong and innovative educational policies, and earnest antidiscrimination efforts are also essential. Low inflation and low interest rates are also a very real benefit to the poor. Vigorous crime enforcement and infrastructure enhancement in poor neighborhoods contributes to their economic viability and encourages residents to seek legal employment. Innovative policies like enterprise zones for the inner city should also be encouraged.

While the subject of this paper has been income redistribution, it should be made clear that what many, if not most, less fortunate people really need is not money, but real compassion. Olasky points out that compassion used to mean "suffering together with another" but now it merely suggests feeling badly about someone's situation.⁴¹ What many struggling human beings require is someone to come alongside them to encourage them, help them, love them, and hold them accountable.

Such ministry allows the more fortunate to see God in the face of the less fortunate, and this experience will change both the donor and the recipient. This is what used to happen before the advent of public charity.

Now compassion is defined as a transfer program where public monies are channeled to needy people. This is not real compassion. Tragically, it seems, most people, Christian and non-Christian alike, want little to do with poor people. There may be a professed love for them in the abstract, but rarely in the concrete. Income redistribution is a convenient way of assuaging our guilt over having done nothing to minister to the "least of these." In the words of Morse:

We want the poor to be taken care of, without inconveniencing ourselves. We want to believe that we satisfy the biblical requirements of charity, without ever leaving the comfort of our living rooms. We do not want to see the face of the poor. We resist being transformed.⁴²

All too often, redistribution seems to be the public policy equivalent of wearing a colored ribbon on our lapel (though a bit more expensive). Surely, as Matthew 25:31-46 suggests, we will be held accountable. And as those "to whom much has been

given," we should be troubled.

ENDNOTES

¹The real objective in Scripture seems to be *koinonia* or community. The direction of causality is critical in this regard. Does equality cause community, or does community lead to equality? The latter seems more compelling, but there may be a symbiotic relationship between them.

²Daly argues for limited inequality through a guaranteed income and a 100 percent marginal tax rate at a predetermined income level to produce the desired ratio of high to low income. He invokes Scripture and the idea of "enoughness" to support his argument. Karelis observes (p. 122) that the rise of economic egalitarianism followed the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. Prior to the nineteenth century, cries for equality in the West were limited to religious and political equality. Only until wealth was produced on a massive scale was there concern for significant material inequality.

³It should be indicated that much unemployment and leisure is involuntary. This relates to the opportunities to advance previously mentioned. This factor deals with actual choices.

⁴For example, assume one is raised in an abusive home by alcoholic parents. Assume the child in question becomes an alcoholic as an adult in an attempt to escape the pain of his or her youth. Assume further that this person has difficulty keeping a job. Is this person classified as deserving or undeserving? The general problem involves the victimization of people at one point in time who later end up vocationally dysfunctional. Their later status may appear to be undeserving but is that a just and compassionate rendering of the situation? How can we be sure? This is merely a manifestation of the more general question regarding the true nature of individual responsibility—an issue with which our culture is painfully wrestling.

⁵Interested readers should see Kuenne on this topic.

⁶It should be noted that the conservatives in question are the nineteenth century free-market conservatives who accepted meaning for the notion of social justice. Some current conservatives believe social justice to be a vacuous concept.

⁷Buchanan, p. 123.

⁸The legitimacy of prior rights and claims is a tendentious issue over which conservatives, liberals, and radicals engage in endless debate.

⁹Bronfenbrenner, p. 39.

¹⁰Taken to its logical conclusion, this reasoning suggests that perfect equality would be the desirable outcome.

¹¹Goodin, p. 164.

¹²Public goods are those goods that once produced, no one can be kept from enjoying. In this case, if everyone derives benefit from seeing the poor helped, the act of charity of one person will benefit the entire community. The problem revolves around the fact that no member of the public can be excluded from enjoying (being glad for) the benefits of the charitable acts of others, so people will have an incentive to wait and hope someone else will be charitable so they won't have to be. This results in a less than efficient level of charity. See Halteman, pp. 131-132.

¹³Singer, p. 136. This seems to suggest that the more affluent a society, the more redistribution is justified.

¹⁴Goodin, p. 153, 167.

¹⁵Gwartney, p. 9. This argument, though cited as "secular," is obviously rooted in Exodus 20:15, "You shall not steal." However, since taxation is a biblically acceptable practice, the following question presents itself: When, if ever, is taxation theft?

¹⁶Interestingly, this secular argument also has biblical precedent in 2 Corinthians 9:7 and Philemon v. 14.

¹⁷A curious response to this would be that income earners would work longer and harder as a result of the taxation in order to maintain their desired standard of living. The question is, of course, an empirical one.

¹⁸A very influential work in this regard was *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) by Charles Murray.

¹⁹See Roberts' interesting examination of public charity crowding out private.

²⁰Sider, p. 81.

²¹One might construe these efforts as a form of social insurance to guard against hard times and less of an effort to redistribute to the poor per se.

²²Sider, p. 193.

²³Tamari, p. 211.

²⁴Bernbaum, ed, p. 30.

²⁵See Mason and Schaefer, pp. 47-50. Also, Mason states the paradigmatic position well:

"...God encoded, within the numerous legal and extra-legal provisions designed to govern ancient Israel, ethical emphases which form a normative foundation which the remainder of the Bible develops. It is these ethical urgings, along with the fuller understanding and greater refinement provided by the totality of the Bible and informed by commentary from Jewish and Christian faith communities over the centuries, which are to be held up before all nations today as a measuring rod for discerning what are just and righteous institutions and dealings." Mason, p. 12.

²⁶See *The Religion & Society Report*, pp. 4-5.

²⁷See Bandow, p. 91 and Chilton, pp. 56-57.

²⁸See Chilton, pp. 54-56.

²⁹Beisner, pp. 58-62.

³⁰Gwartney, p. 19.

³¹Beisner, pp. 62-65.

³²Novak, p. 38.

³³Bernbaum, p. 15.

³⁴Viner, p. 17.

³⁵Mason and Schaefer, pp. 54-55.

³⁶Gwartney, pp. 10-13.

³⁷Bernbaum, p. 33.

³⁸Tamari, pp. 242, 247, 248, 255.

³⁹Oxford Declaration, p. 18.

⁴⁰Propositions 2-10 go beyond the narrow focus of this paper—should government redistribute income? They are presented since they reflect much of the previous discussion and are important for a wise and biblical approach to income redistribution.

⁴¹Olasky, p. 197.

⁴²Morse, p. 9.

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