

Biblical Principles & Public Policy: The Practice

The concept behind this book is exceptionally interesting. In a previous volume in the series the issue of the relation between Biblical faith and economics was explored from a theological and ethical viewpoint. Here the emphasis is quite different. Professor Chewning has assembled a cast of twelve Evangelicals, mostly economists, a number of them distinguished scholars in their own fields, and set them the challenge to explore, from within a Christian framework, specific U.S. policy areas where they have particular expertise. The really interesting question is whether they have anything distinctive to say which arises directly from their Christian profession. Or is it the case that while Christians can contribute to the moral platitudes that guide policy thinking, Christian faith has no particular bite when it comes to the detail of policy, because the technical issues are more important than the ethical ones?

The scene is set in a masterly chapter by Carl Henry in which he addresses the question of how Biblical faith can be made relevant to economic issues, having lamented the lack of expertise that American evangelicals have shown in this area in the recent past. The method he advocates is that of deriving principles from the Biblical material: "Biblical principles are . . . a verbal particularization of God's will." There is a proper warning that hermeneutics cannot be avoided, that our principles are likely to be at best provisional (because derivative), and that application of the principles to society should not be equated with "bringing in the Kingdom of God." All this is well taken and graciously expressed: but one is left with some uncertainty as to how the Biblical principles are to be derived from the text. The Reconstructionists are mentioned, but mainly as an example of how not to do it. Rather more surprising, there is no mention of the Reformed tradition (most recently expounded by a team from Calvin College: J.P. Tiemstra, ed., *Transforming Economics*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), with its conviction that the focus should be on institutions and their role in society, rather than on principles for economic life.

Given the lack of guidance on how to perform the hermeneutical task, the subsequent chapters illustrate a great diversity of approaches. A number of authors construct long lists of principles with an impressive array of Biblical references to back them up. Others restrict themselves to stating a few key principles which they will use in their policy analysis, without feeling the need for detailed justification. Only one (Vickers) takes a directly theological approach, using a theological framework to give structure to the principles he is going to use. Despite the diversity of approaches, we should be comforted that a considerable degree of agreement emerges from this reflection on the Scriptures: the

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themes of stewardship of creation, the dignity of the human race, the role of work in human life, the requirement to show compassion for the poor, the need for justice and honesty in economic life, and the dangers of reliance on material possessions.

There is however one issue on which the conclusions of the authors seem quite unclear. In a book on public policy, the proper role and limits of government need to be carefully spelt out. But uncertainty on this issue pervades the book. All acknowledge that "the powers that be are ordained of God." But most of the authors do not believe that government should be trusted to do very much at all. The prevailing view is that markets are always better than governments in allocating resources. The difficulty, as several of the authors acknowledge, is that market outcomes do not always give tolerable results: for example, those with inadequate human capital, and poor access to jobs, may be condemned to a life of poverty and deprivation. But if governments have to intervene in market outcomes, for this or any other reason, then the consensus is that intervention should be as decentralized as possible, and subject to democratic control. The spectre of Leviathan is very real. But since governments are for our good, perhaps we should be more concerned with how we can get the political authorities to act wisely and justly, than with denying them the scope for effective action.

Turning now to the contributed essays, our particular interest is in the degree to which the Christian framework makes the contributions distinctive from those that might be written by secular experts in the different policy fields. Two of the essays address concerns that are broadly macroeconomic (Wilkinson on unemployment, and Vickers on monetary and banking policy). Both take a Keynesian approach, and are fairly dismissive of the new Classical school of macroeconomics, with its insistence that

markets can do it all. Vickers, in particular, points to the instability of the macroeconomy, and sees this as a symptom of a deeper disorder in human affairs occasioned by the Fall. He does not however come up with any particular policy prescriptions, other than to observe that the monetary authorities need to be vigilant and ready to act when required by circumstances. Wilkinson argues that the primary responsibility for the needy (in this case, the unemployed) should be devolved, and gives a brief account of some local initiatives by Christian groups in his home city.

Eight of the papers focus on microeconomic concerns including income distribution (Kosters), public welfare programmes (Mason), taxation (Anderson), antitrust and regulation (Wood), natural resources and environmental policy (Hill), agricultural policy (Wilson), education (Skillen) and health care (Henderson). It is not possible to do justice to all these diverse contributions in the space of a short review. As might be expected, the standard is variable. Some are able to articulate particular policy proposals, while others are more exploratory. The main Biblical themes are stewardship, organizing freedom for economic actors to make their own responsible choices, and a particular concern for the poor. Several contributions document the plight of the poor in America, with low incomes received, lack of education and employment opportunities, and inadequate access to health care. Some startling facts emerge: agricultural subsidies go mainly to the wealthier farmers, tax exemptions benefit mainly the rich and middle classes, the share in national income of the bottom 20% of families declined in the period 1947-87, and although the United States spends a much higher proportion of GNP on health care than any other advanced nation, it rates no higher in rankings of indicators like infant mortality rates and life expectancy. "Bias to the poor" is evident in many of the

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policy reforms that are proposed: the emphasis is rightly on enabling the poor to escape from deprivation via skill acquisition and productive work rather than welfare payments in cash or kind. Among many excellent contributions in these chapters, three stand out for their success in making Biblical principles relevant to policy issues, and for the clarity with which the application is presented. John Mason focuses his attention on ghetto poverty, and includes in his programme the active encouragement of family life, the provision of scattered site low-cost housing in suburban areas, and the improvement of schooling provision. He argues persuasively that at least some of these require intervention by the government. P.J. Hill, by contrast, is unwilling to grant the authorities any role in natural resource management and environmental policy, arguing that Christian objectives of stewardship and conservation are best served by the assignment and protection of individual property rights. It is, of course, a little difficult to envisage what this might mean for policy on greenhouse gases, for example. But Hill cheerfully admits to difficulties, whilst averring that no (government) alternative is going to perform any better. The chapter by J.W. Skillen, on education, does not address economic issues directly. He argues that the primary responsibility for the education of children should lie with parents rather than government, the school being an agent *in loco parentis*. If parents wish a distinctive education for their children e.g. in religious schools, then such schools should be funded by the authorities to the same extent as secular public schools, so long as they can prove that they will provide a satisfactory education.

Two remaining papers deal with international issues: international trade policy (Grinols) and national security policy (Malloch). The latter deals with issues of international relations, arguing that nationalism is to be countered, and that ethical norms of behaviour in interna-

tional affairs should be obeyed, in contrast to the non-moral approach of "realists" such as Henry Kissinger. For economists, the paper by Grinols is the best in the book. A powerful grasp of international economic issues is combined with four judiciously stated Biblical principles to derive some very definite conclusions about the directions for U.S. trade policy. It is also very well written.

To conclude, this is an extremely useful book. It shows that Biblical principles can be effectively used to get to grips with economic policy issues, and that Christians do have distinctive things to say. Inevitably, some of the chapters have made more progress than others: but all are asking the right questions, and hopefully will provoke others to take the discussion further. Two omissions should, however, be noted. First, it is surprising that there was no essay addressed specifically to economic relations between the United States and Third World countries—trade relations, debt, aid. Is this issue not as high on the agenda for Christian economists in the U.S. as it is elsewhere in the world? The second omission is any discussion of the form and structure of economic institutions—the public company, labour unions, financial institutions, the family as an economic unit. These complaints apart, Professor Chewing is to be congratulated on an excellent concept, and on his ability to persuade his authors to produce such readable material. It is unfortunate therefore that he was unable to resist the temptation to "top and tail" every essay with his own commentary, which is often quite naive. Since the papers were given and discussed at a colloquium, it would have been preferable to print some summary of the questions raised and issues discussed at that meeting. ■