

Prospects for Growth: A Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future

We are bombarded daily by claims that overpopulation will lower the quality of life of all mankind, that our natural resource base is finite and mismanaged, and that corporately we must develop plans to remedy these situations. E. Calvin Beisner, in his recent book, *Prospects for Growth: A Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future* (Crossway Books, 1990), laments this handwringing and proposes in his introductory chapter to challenge the doomsdayers' predictions using statistics and God's moral Law. Specifically, the author's goal is to ". . . try to understand some of the basic problems and opportunities connected with economic and population growth and to apply Biblical ethics to them to help us shape our attitudes toward growth and our views of appropriate public policy" (p. 18). Similar to many "Biblical economics" books (e.g. Gary North, David Chilton, Ronald Nash) that have appeared in the last decade, Beisner argues in his volume that Christians can develop wiser policy options for society by drawing upon guidance in the inspired Word of God, the Bible.

Beisner claims that economic and political problems are rooted in ethics. He rightly places beliefs and values at the core of his political economy framework. The author then establishes five conceptual foundations for his analysis. The theological foundation is the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient God. Yet the claim that "Theology . . . supplies the guiding principles by which to answer all the pragmatic problems of political economy" (p. 19) may be questioned by some evangelical Christians in public policy-making positions. The anthropological foundations, which have a direct impact on economic relationships, are an understanding that (1) man is created in the image of God, (2) man has a dominion and cultural mandate over the earth, and (3) man is sinful. The Biblical ethic, the third foundation, is demonstrated by the Christian through actions of justice, love, prudence, and by glorifying God.

Two additional foundations are developed in the following chapter to assist with the analysis: the governmental and economic foundations. Well-known arguments are made against the state, bureaucracies, less than free markets and the coercive laws that undermine the sovereignty of the individual, church and family. Beisner uses this limited- or anti-state position as his governmental

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foundation. It is complemented by the economic foundations of scarcity, the marginal utility theory of value, economic and technical efficiency, and free markets. In general I found this chapter poorly supported by empirical evidence or convincing economic arguments although I know both evidence and sounder arguments exist in the literature. As will be noted later in this review, Beisner loses a golden opportunity to establish a stronger analytical foundation by treating government and economic realities so lightly and superficially.

I have a friend who claims that economists spend half their careers predicting what is going to happen and the other half of their careers explaining why it didn't. Donald McCloskey's new book, *If You're So Smart* (University of Chicago, 1990) picks up on this idea as well. To his credit, Beisner challenges the predictive accuracy of not only economists, but experts in general who continually predict the imminent demise of the world or a part thereof. He uses a vast amount of statistical information to support his claim that the world is not crowded or overpopulated. Beisner, with this reviewer's support, attacks the experts who claim that the only way to reduce poverty is to restrict family size through abortion, family planning and enforcement of government laws restricting family size. Yet the author's use of measures of central tendency (or means) to support his arguments is, in my opinion, seriously flawed. By ignoring the variability of the natural resource base worldwide and by arguing that under no circumstance is crowding a problem, Beisner fails to capture the true essence of the development problems facing society. For example, urban life is championed simplistically by the author when he predicts that ". . . new technology will be found to make more land suitable for habitation." (p. 57) In general, by using averages to argue his points Beisner demonstrates a shocking naivete about the variability in urban and rural living conditions in the world.

In Chapter 5, the author continues his

statistical tour de force by using U.S. and world averages to argue that crowding is not evil, and that a large and growing population can be a blessing. Urbanization is supported due to economies of scale, and the availability of utilities, transportation and communication. Beisner does not make clear how this chapter relates to the ethical foundations of the book; but for the reader interested in statistical information (only averages) this chapter and Appendix 2 provide some useful numbers.

The core of *Prospects for Growth* is Beisner's effective critique of Malthus (Chapter 6) and his less than accurate description of technical change (Chapter 7). Again, "economic facts" or statistical data are used to challenge Malthusianism: population density, per capita production, calorie supply, population growth rates and per capita GNP are measures used in the arguments. Drawing heavily on the work of Julian Simon, the author argues that population growth increases economic productivity and hence economic growth. Beisner concludes that economic data indicate that standards of living are improving worldwide and that everyone is getting richer. (p. 94) One of the major reasons for this phenomenon, according to the author, is "multiplying returns." The advance of human knowledge has replaced the concept of diminishing returns with the "law of increasing returns" (p. 110). Education becomes the driving force which has shifted supply curves to the right and lowered prices. The supply of new technology will generate increasing wealth. "Barring major catastrophes there is little reason to doubt that the vast majority of people will be comfortably wealthy in a few generations." (p. 130)

Chapters 8 and 9 discuss explicit resource issues, particularly the problem of environmental quality and regulation. Water quality, the disposal of solid, toxic and nuclear wastes, global warming, ozone depletion and acid rain are some of the issues discussed. Beisner correctly points out the importance of good science

in measuring the threat or danger of these environmental problems. Yet we should recognize that information is not costless and that policy makers never have perfect information. Therefore, the Christian must make decisions under uncertainty, both in a private and public policy setting. Beisner implies that the road to optimal resource management is known and unobstructed. Wiser policies will follow God's law (i.e. 5th-10th commandments), protect private property, limit government and let markets work their magic.

Prospects for Growth concludes with a summary of several key ethical beliefs that should be central to a Christian analytical framework. The first is that while material prosperity is not evil in itself, there is a more important factor in mankind's well-being: man's spirituality should be the critical concern. Hence evangelism and discipleship play critical roles in Beisner's Biblical worldview. Second, the author convincingly argues that Christian morality places a high value on people, all people. Therefore, pro-life positions should be broader than anti-abortion statements. The third and final position is that organizations, particularly government, should be servants and not masters. The individual should enjoy life, liberty and property without undue coercion by other parties.

My final remarks, while directed towards *Prospects for Growth*, also can be pointed towards some of the "Christian economics" work that has been written in the last decade. I believe there are three serious flaws which appear in many of these books and reduce their credibility. First, the authors generally exhibit a limited understanding of economic theory and applied economic analysis. Beisner cites David Ricardo and Adam Smith as his authorities and largely ignores the following 200 years of economic literature. If the author has little faith in the work of contemporary Christian and non-Christian economists regarding population and natural resource issues, this lack of intellectual trust should be stated explicitly. By

ignoring general equilibrium theory, externalities, institutional economics, public goods, the economics of technical change and many other relevant topics, this book (and others) leads this reviewer to discount its economic analysis. The recent volume by Richard Chewning (*Biblical Principles & Public Policy: The Practice*, NavPress, 1991) is a superior model for a Biblical view of economics and public policy.

A second flaw in this and other analyses is the use of averages to support economic arguments. My perception is that Jesus Christ is not interested in only statistical means, but also in individual observations which form a "probability distribution" of societal behavior. Christian economists and policy makers should be concerned about variances and skewness. Variability in performance indicators creates the conflicts, frictions and interactions in modern society which, in turn, produce pressure on individuals and organizations to revise institutions (e.g. laws and regulations) which govern human behavior. Beisner's total dependence on averages does not capture this critical ethical issue, namely the interdependence of man.

The final limitation of this book, and many others of similar ilk, is the dearth of analysis concerning issues of equity. Distributional issues are assumed to take care of themselves provided markets are free and government power is limited. Yet we all know that these idealistic conditions fail to exist anywhere in the world. Having lived and worked in some of the poorest areas in the Western Hemisphere, I was shocked that a book on population and resources would ignore distributional concerns. Beisner glosses over the inherent tension between justice, love, prudence and glorifying God in formulating public policy. This tension produces a sixth and necessary foundation, charity, which must play an important part in any Biblical view of ethical behavior and in our attempts to glorify God. ■

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