

The last five chapters are easier going because they deal with particular areas of environmental policy such as sanitation and water, energy, rural land use, and the greenhouse effect. There is less here that is new or original, and the generalizations are not quite so broad. Students will find these chapters easier to handle, but there is less in them that will take students beyond where regular textbooks go.

Though this book may not be useful as a supplementary text to be assigned to students, I think it can nevertheless be a

useful resource for scholars as they prepare to teach development economics, public finance, and applied micro topics. This is especially true for Christians who have a strong interest in the implications of the Cultural Mandate for environmental stewardship, and a strong interest in serving the needs of the poor. This book is well aligned with those concerns, and offers a wonderful array of information to support teaching that is directed along those lines. For this purpose, I recommend it highly. ■

The Problem of Poverty by Abraham Kuyper, translated and edited by James W. Skillen

Baker Book House, Co., 1991. ISBN 0-8010-5256-4.

The *Problem of Poverty* is a translation of a speech given by Abraham Kuyper at the opening of the first Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands in 1891. James Skillen, director of the Center for Public Justice in Washington, D.C.¹, translated Kuyper's original Dutch text² on the 100th anniversary of the presentation to raise the questions: "How...shall we answer the question of poverty in our own time? If socialism is not the answer, is capitalism all we have left?...Can we learn anything from the Christian response of one hundred years ago?" (p. 11). Skillen contends these are timely questions in all corners and systems of the world. Skillen also rightly asserts: "I doubt that anyone, after reading this speech, can walk away believing that Christianity is out of date and powerless to address the complex questions of poverty today (p. 12). This conclusion follows as much from the intensity and emotion with which the message is presented as from the message's content.

Several features of the speech and Skillen's introduction of it make worthwhile reading. Skillen's introduction to the speech³ includes a brief but captivating biography of Kuyper and a summary of Kuyper's Christian

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worldview. A statement by Skillen captures the root of Kuyper's world-view: "...[R]eligion [is] the totality of what human beings are, and what life in this world is all about" (p. 16). The question is not whether one lives to serve a god; but rather, whether one serves a true God or false gods. From the discussion of Kuyper's theology it is clear that Kuyper urges Christians to serve the true God in all areas of life, including the affairs of family, church, business, economic policy, and in addressing social need, by applying their biblical understanding consistently and completely to these areas. Christian efforts to engage society were especially urgent for Kuyper because of the growing popularity of two clashing social and economic views of his day, liberal individualism and socialist collectivism. Kuyper viewed these as false gods. In developing a theology that effectively addressed these secular movements, Kuyper established a foundation for today's neo-calvinist strain of Christian economic reflection which continues to cast a critical eye toward modern variants of these same movements.

Kuyper's argument about the late nineteenth century problem of poverty and how Christians should address it is developed in the following way. Because Christians in nineteenth century churches in the Netherlands, and Europe generally, were slow to recognize their appropriate role in dealing with the growing social problem of poverty, Kuyper contends the agenda for dealing with poverty was being determined by the secular socialist movements of the day. Thus, Christians now not only had to fight the problem of poverty, but simultaneously had to struggle to overcome the secular, or "material," view of people within the reform movements. Thought not indicating whether a quicker response would obviate the latter efforts, Kuyper incites Christians to take action on behalf of the poor, suggesting that poverty results from people failing to honor others

as created in God's image, in both their private affairs and in the public institutions they create. Kuyper continues his case, describing activities and teachings of Jesus that compel Christians and the church to take action against the evil of poverty and against misdirected and ill-founded socialist efforts. He also models how to test such secular philosophies against God's ordinances.

Kuyper concludes by defining a Christian approach to poverty founded on truths in God's Word. He says:

We as Christians must place the strongest possible emphasis on the majesty of God's authority and on the absolute validity of his ordinances, so that, even as we condemn the rotting social structure of our day, we will never try to erect any structure except one that rests on foundations laid by God (p. 64).

Though he never systematically outlines foundations applicable to the question of poverty, important themes illustrated at different points in the speech include divine compassion, a charitable heart, work and individual initiative, sanctity of family, a government to administer justice, a balance between the sovereignty of the state and the sovereignty of created persons, and a view of private property that scorns both absolute community and absolute personal use. Kuyper uses these themes and others to compel Christians to action of behalf of their poor brothers and sisters. The action is two-pronged. First, institutional injustices should be addressed: "We fall short in our duty as Christian citizens if we shirk the serious task of reconstructing whatever is manifestly in conflict with the ordinances of God" (p. 72). Kuyper sees a role for the state in this, especially in defining legal measures to protect laborers and the poor. But the state's role should be limited: "...unless you wish to undermine the position of the laboring class and destroy its natural resilience, the material assis-

tance of the state should be confined to a minimum" (p. 72). The second prong is a requirement for individual giving of time and money for the poor. In Kuyper's words,

the holy art of 'giving for Jesus' sake' ought to be much more strongly developed among us Christians. Never forget that all state relief for the poor is a blot on the honor of your Savior (p. 78).

Though arguments could be raised about how durable these very general policy prescriptions are, or about the appropriateness of his interpretation and use of Bible passages, Kuyper's speech raises three issues that remain remarkably relevant for Christians involved in economics and public policy today.

First, there is a clear message to Christians to use the scripture to discern an appropriate mindset and direction for social policy. Emphasis is on taking on the mindset of Christ and discerning general principles for living from the Bible, rather than keying on specific proof-texts. This might encourage Christians today to seek Biblically-centered approaches to economic life and policy that will have important implications for personal stewardship, business policy, church outreach and governmental responses to economic and social problems.

Second, Kuyper reminds us of the great attention in scripture given to the poor. Not only are we reminded how spiritually impoverished we all are in the eyes of God, but many teachings on "living out the gospel" use examples of individual and community responsibility toward the poor, and how the poor and wealthy express their love of God through their mutual treatment of each other. Christians should not neglect divinely ordained personal and civic responsibilities in this matter.

Third, Kuyper teaches us that Christians should not expect ideals of Biblical social justice to fit neatly with existing

private or government policy agendas for dealing with social problems and that Christians should not rely on government exclusively to solve these problems. When it comes to policy, we are likely to experience a sense of "holy tension" or even alienation, largely because many of today's policy agendas are founded on the same secular foundations Kuyper describes. We, like Kuyper, should expect tension and avoid baptizing a particular political or economic agenda. Instead, we should continue to assess policy possibilities in light of God's Word, nudging policy or the political process so that it best enables people to fulfill God's intention for them as created beings.

In conclusion, if the reader is looking for specific Christian policy measures toward the poor that have weathered time, this book will not be helpful. However, this speech by Abraham Kuyper should promote fruitful discussions about how to read the Bible, how to put one's Christianity into action, and how to define and implement Biblically consistent policy. I encourage all ACE members to read and discuss *The Problem of Poverty*.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Center for Public Justice is an organization committed to development of a Biblical understanding of public policy and political service.
- 2 A previous translation by Dirk Jellema is titled *Christianity and the Class Struggle*, (Grand Rapids: Piet Heim, 1950).
- 3 This introduction complements well the discussion of Roland Hoksbergen's "A Reformed Approach to Economics" in this issue of the *ACE Bulletin*. ■

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