

## *Welfare Reformed: A Compassionate Approach*

David W. Hall (ed.)

Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994. ISBN: 0-87552-301-3, \$10.99.

The book under review grew out of a 1992 conference organized by the senior pastor (David Hall) of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The purpose? "On the supposition that the Bible does and should speak to this societal issue, just what are the specifics of the Biblical teaching on the proper administration of welfare?" (p. 27). Counting the substantive forward by R. J. Neuhaus, Hall (with four) and George Grant contributed half of the twelve essays. An Appendix prints the "Oak Ridge Affirmations and Denials," twenty seven brief statements about proper responsibility for the poor of society—which, due to their brevity and punchy character, would serve well as the basis for discussion. Among the eight contributors Calvin Beisner is the only one (to my knowledge) to do considerable work in economics.

Three arguments provide a useful summary of the book. First, state-mediated income redistribution (welfare) in the U.S., at least since the 1960s, has compounded rather than alleviated the problem: bred greater poverty than otherwise, created a condition of moral hazard which induced the growth of permanent dependency among a number of the nation's poor, encouraged greater illegitimacy, and worsened the unsavory realities afflicting so many of our central cities. This critique hardly is new and stands squarely in the tradition of—and draws heavily upon—policy analysts like Charles Murray and Robert Rector. The two R. C. Sprouls (Senior and Junior) add a more distinctive element, with their concern that the widening role of the state since the 1930s practically will supplant the Church as the agent of redemption—an unhealthy condition of "statism."

Second, the unique emphasis of this collection is to place the proper response to poverty within society primarily upon the shoulders of church deacons—a responsibility churches have not borne well in the modern era (p. 96). Interesting reference is made to late medieval responses to poverty in Protestant and Roman Catholic communities influenced by Calvin, Luther, and Juan Luis Vives—with Calvin providing the greatest help for the current scene.

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The Bible allows little, if any, role for the state to mediate income redistribution. In his *Prosperity & Poverty*, Beisner contended that the Bible's conception of justice does not allow the state-mediated income redistribution involved in the welfare system. Hall claims here that "a New Testament warrant for the state doling out welfare is absent" (p. 103). Grant reviews four movements keyed to 1891: Abraham Kuyper's address to the first Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands; Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical which grounds contemporary Roman Catholic social teaching; the Southern Agrarian movement; and the American Progressive movement. Each of these, Grant claims, held a profound distrust of central government, affirmed the importance of private property, held a sober awareness of the Fall, was committed to the central role of the family, and saw the church as central "to any and all efforts to mete out mercy, justice, and truth" (p. 174).

I take it there is some ambivalence in assigning the state no normative role in welfare, however. Hall writes:

To my friends who categorically say there is no room for state welfare at all, call me pragmatic, but I'd be willing to allow the state to aid any who pass (a restrictive means test—willingness to work, moral lifestyle, no nuclear or extended family, no church to assume responsibility), including the prerequisite that they join a functioning local church, prior to assistance (on the analogy of I Tim. 5:10) (p. 104).

In concluding the last essay of the collection Hall notes, with pleasure, recent state initiatives within the federal welfare system. "It is heartening to see these various states, apart from overt pleas from the Christian community, adopting principles which conform to Biblical teaching on welfare structure...many of these welfare reforms are the types which Biblical Christians have been urging for some time" (p. 211). Doug Bandow's essay, recalling the mutual aid societies of the

1920s—as well as their demise in the 1930s, wonders whether a sufficient private alternative to welfare would be forthcoming (and, by implication, whether the government should scale back altogether).

Third, leaning heavily upon Marvin Olasky's *Tragedy of American Compassion*, proper assistance to the poor requires far greater personal and family responsibility than exists in the present system. Hall sees the needed system starting with (a) personal industriousness, followed by (b) extended family assistance, and where these resources are inadequate supplemented with (c) church-based assistance (p. 103). Grant contends a system of charity which would handle the problem requires three essentials: a proper faith, a strong family, and work. With Olasky, effective assistance requires the non-poor to "suffer with" the poor and exercise far more discernment (yea tough love) in the provision of assistance—attributes far more likely to characterize private charity than public welfare.

I raise two major concerns with the arguments in this book below. Before doing so, I offer brief reactions to several of the essays. Reference is made at various points to "poverty experts" who clearly have not perceived the problems before us accurately. The only specific citations to policy analysts, however, are to the favored Murray and Rector. In heeding the proffered criticisms of the welfare system, I would have liked to see occasional reference, at least, to names like David Ellwood, Rebecca Blank, or Robert Haveman, to be assured the book's authors had actually struggled with the arguments of the poverty experts they refer to, and not worked only with summaries from the frequently cited names like Olasky and Grant and Colonel Doner and Ronald Nash.

Hall's specific effort to develop "the specifics of the Biblical teaching on the proper administration of welfare," works from the New Testament—and especially I Tim. 5, which "provides the most promis-

ing values at the forefront of welfare in our time" (p. 100). As one who has pursued this question more than most (and found I Tim. 5 important instruction), I question the primary reliance upon the New Testament in this book as the best source for the basic question posed. To be sure, theological arguments built from New Testament teachings like "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:38) and "if a man will not work, he shall not eat" (II Thes. 3:10) have been used to this end. But far greater specific instruction lies in the Mosaic legislation which is addressed to a larger social context (the nation of Israel) rather than extended families in a local church setting. It is the fullness of the Biblical witness that will protect us from the utopian designs drawn from Scripture that trouble Hall so.

As noted, we are offered helpful glimpses into how poverty was handled in the late medieval communities influenced by Calvin, Luther, and Vives, as well as the important church-based movements around the turn of the present century. In the reasonably extensive reading I have done of these same eras and movements, I have not found the entirely negative assessment of state-involved assistance or calls for sole reliance upon private charity, but rather a far more interwoven use of both church and state—the lesson I draw from the Bible as well.

I turn now to my two major concerns with this collection: (1) the issue of how "bad" conditions are for the poor today—and especially how they got that way; (2) the sufficiency of a private, charitable response for addressing the realities of poverty today. An important question running through the essays is how truly poor the poor are today. Neuhaus bemoans the "mendacity fatigue" thrust upon the American public by the poverty establishment, claiming the poor are simply not that bad off. A few paragraphs later, however, we hear him talking of a crisis of behavior and of broken families, absent fathers, and poor quality schools—yea, of an underclass caught in harmful

behavior patterns that cause dependency. Beisner tells us the "welfare state ensures that [the poor] not only eat but also live in what can only be called luxury by historic standards" (pp. 129-30). Grant tells us that "the underclasses have suffered in our time like never before. No century has been more comprehensively brutal, onerous, or despotic to what the Bible calls 'the least of these'" (p. 168). Which is it?

Given our Lord's repeated warnings, Christians should be the first to recognize how inadequate are material measures for defining well-being in life, and how the truly dreadful thing is to be caught in cycles of destructive dependencies upon realities other than the compassionate God of all creation—whether one is poor or rich. I cannot help but conclude from these essays, therefore, that many of the poor are indeed worse off today than earlier—especially so in the pockets of concentrated poverty in or near our central cities.

The more intriguing question is not the condition of the poor today, but how they got that way. Murray's *Losing Ground* argued that modifications to welfare made during the 1960s created incentives which induced many of the poor into the trap of dependency. Michael Bauman's essay draws the clear implication of this; we (the non-poor) created the problem of entrenched poverty. We created the trap of moral hazard; we made low-income husbands extraneous; we helped undermine traditional family values; we taught the poor to blame their poverty on prejudice. "Much of the blame is ours" (p. 53).

If the non-poor are more to blame for the conditions of dependency in which so many of the poor find themselves today, who then should bear the greater cost for addressing the problem? The answer to that question seems obvious to me. And yet the dominant calls for reforms in welfare today are to scale back government assistance considerably and require the poor to modify their behavior in ways which, at least in the short run, can only be seen as painful for them. Amidst such policy changes, we (the non-poor; those

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who bear the major responsibility for creating the problem) hope to enjoy lower taxes rather than bear a share of the cost of adjustment. Troubling ethics surround this debate, which betrays the face of selfishness more than Godly justice. If the authors of these papers, along with their readers, take the counsel they offer seriously, then the non-poor should indeed bear a significant cost as we both give more sacrificially through our local churches and engage personally in suffering with the poor. I wish this message had been emphasized more amidst the calls for dismantling the welfare system.

As something of a corollary to the concern for how bad-off the poor are and how they got that way, is the question of whether the poor must be "deserving" in order for us to help them (whether through welfare or church-based structures). The work I have done with Biblical teaching suggests the often difficult question of desert determines not the fact of our assistance but the nature of that assistance. How deserving were (and are) those of us who claim to be Christians of our salvation? I appreciated F. Edward Payne's counsel: "Christians should be charitable and always to care. Broken lives and broken bodies should be shown the love of Christ, regardless of what caused them" (pp. 188-9).

A question that inevitably must be asked in response to these essays—and the one Bandow raises—is the adequacy of private charity as welfare is reduced or eliminated. What plausible forms will this charity take and how forthcoming will the citizenry be? Grant builds the adequacy of charity upon the foundations of faith, family, and work. What portion of the people today submit themselves to the teaching Grant finds necessary (including many of those within Christian churches)? The family (both nuclear and extended) has been under severe attack from numerous economic and social forces over the twentieth century. Given all this, can we be assured the emphasis on work (which lies at the center of most everyone's desire

for welfare reform) will yield the desired fruit?

Olasky's *Tragedy of American Compassion* seems to have assured many of his readers that a resilient private outpouring is possible if not likely. I confess to wondering whether we are all reading the same book. Perhaps because I have undertaken considerable effort into this same question, I read him observing a reasonable amount of local, state and church cooperation earlier in this nation's history—due in part, no doubt, to the "compassion fatigue" that occasionally sets-in and limits the sufficiency of charity. Moreover, I hear his clear lament over growing "economic segregation" in the late 19th century as growing numbers of middle class citizens moved away from the central cities, along with the consequent professionalization and underfunding of charitable organizations (typically not church deacon-boards, by the way) as a result of the loss of volunteers and closer proximity to poverty that served to remind and motivate. Such cautionary warnings are all there in Olasky, along with his commended emphases upon suffering with, discernment, and tough love. Given the nature of socio-economic developments over the past century, a healthy skepticism should stand as to the sufficiency of a charitable response were welfare to be dismantled.

If we are as serious about the project of truly compassionate welfare reform as the editor of this book suggests, then I would have expected to see greater concern than we do for the strategic steps to take at this point in our nation's history. This is the agenda I have understood Neuhaus to pursue in his numerous efforts to allow religion its proper play in the public square. So it is, then, I read with some dismay Hall's call, during the pragmatically designed twenty-plus year phase-out of welfare, that each welfare recipient *be required* to join a functioning local church *prior* to receiving assistance (p. 104). Amidst the current debate over church-state relations, such a suggestion stands a zero chance of receiving serious attention.

I close by listing efforts which I deem far more helpful in offering strategic guidance to push this nation towards the Biblically-informed system of assistance desired by the authors of this book as well as this reviewer. We need: (1) more work than is underway at present combing both the nation's history of moral obligation and the history and tapestry of case law surrounding the church-state problem, so as to pry open the possibility for using religiously-oriented organizations to deliver welfare; (2) examples and models in contemporary context of churches (and deacons' boards within them) and para-church organizations which are providing effective ministry to the poor; (3) more historical work in the tradition of Olasky which uncovers the socio-economic circumstances in which charity is more or less likely to be forthcoming, such that we develop realistic expectations (and know where and how government structures

may be necessary to supplement private assistance); (4) further explorations of how faithful Christians and Jews over the centuries have interpreted the Bible and structured assistance to the poor accordingly, so that we learn as much as possible from faithful followers of Yahweh over the millennia; (5) cooperative efforts with Roman Catholics, plumbing the thrust of their social teaching, from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) through *Centesimus Annus* (1991), especially as this relates to the doctrine of subsidiarity regarding care for the poor.

The time is passing rapidly for continued complaining about the woes of our welfare system. We need to engage ourselves and the broader society in strategic and plausible steps that will lead to the creative and God-pleasing interaction of church and state which will indeed hold out far greater hope of releasing our poor citizens from the bonds that ensnare them and keep them poor. ■

## *Christianity and Economics in the Post-Cold War Era: The Oxford Declaration and Beyond*

Herbert Schlossberg, Vinay Samuel,  
and Ronald J. Sider (eds.)

Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994. ISBN: 0-8028-0798-4, \$10.99.

**I**s it possible for evangelical Christians to arrive at a consensus about the implications of Christian faith for economic policy in the contemporary world? Is working toward such a consensus a useful exercise? What exactly does a Christian Worldview imply about the nature of economic justice, the nature of work, and our relationship to the environment? These and other questions are addressed by this volume of essays which

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