

large and growing segment of economic literature that speaks favorably of ancillary virtues, like saving, trust, cooperation, and the institutions that encourage them, to which Schneider refers.

5 See Cobb (1991).

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## Is Affluence Good?

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**T**he *Good of Affluence*, by John Schneider, is a heavily revised edition of his earlier *Godly Materialism*. The title alone is a decided improvement, since "materialism" by definition in many contexts means an inappropriate attachment to possessions. Schneider has two related objectives—to sample the Scriptures to see what they teach about the Christian and affluence, and to promote capitalism as the economic system most likely to produce Biblical economic priorities in today's world. I am not nearly as competent to assess his success with the second objective as with the first, so I will focus primarily on his exegesis. I must also be highly selective because of the word limit my editor has given me. Inevitably, that leads to disproportionate attention to areas in which I disagree with this book.

The first chapter is largely a summary of Michael Novak's and Dinesh D'Sousa's cases for "democratic capitalism." We are told that this system has liberated 25 entire

populations from poverty in the last fifty years (p. 18). But we are never told which countries these are. I imagine Japan and Singapore are two; several other East Asian nations are regularly touted as having dramatically improved economically through capitalism, though no other country is entirely lacking a sizable minority of poor persons. How as many as two dozen could be enumerated is beyond me. And nothing is said about all the post-Soviet republics where capitalism to date has largely failed, arguably making matters economically worse for many in lands without a significant base of Christian morality to temper the human greed that otherwise corrupts every economic system.

Chapter Two treats Genesis' "cosmic vision of delight." Most of this chapter correctly establishes God's originally good intentions in creating a material universe, and his plan for the patriarchs to enjoy some of the bounty of this world. The abundance of the Garden of Eden is an important, unifying theme of God's desire for his people throughout history. Missing from this chapter, though, is hermeneutical reflection on the link between the patriarchal blessings and the unique covenant God would establish with their descendants, the people of Israel. The theme of the land and its material prosperity is consistently "spiritualized" in the New Testament; conspicuously absent is any promise of sizable material reward for spiritual faithfulness (except as Christians share with each other) comparable to Old Testament arrangements.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis in 48 out of Genesis' 50 chapters of life after the Fall seems to be played down, too. God is working redemptively to vindicate his original creative purposes, but the two testaments together make plain that any significant redemption of the material world awaits Christ's return and the coming new heavens and earth (Rev. 21–22). To claim that "the creation story suggests that physical and material delightfulness (superfluity) is needful for healthy human well-being everywhere" (p. 61) generalizes far beyond anything Scripture states; if it were true, millions of God's people throughout history could rightfully call "foul!"

Chapter Three turns to the exodus. Schneider rightly stresses that physical liberation cannot be separated from the spiritual purposes of God's unique covenant with Israel. Particularly helpful is his discussion of the intricacies of the Jubilee and the difficulty of applying it to our vastly changed world. But it is a little misleading to claim that "the poorest people in society were unaffected by it" (p. 83). Not all of the "aliens, sojourners, non-Israelite debtors and slaves" were the poorest. Wealthy, nomadic foreigners regularly traveled and settled throughout the Ancient Near East, while many of the poorest in Israel were *Israelite* slaves, sold into their state due to financial destitution, who could be redeemed through the Jubilee. Schneider takes exception to my finding the "manna economy" of the wilderness

wanderings as providing any moral norms because it was a temporary provision until the Israelites entered the Promised Land (p. 70). But he fails to discuss my rationale, which is Paul's transcultural use of precisely this principle in 2 Cor. 8:13–15, a use which the New Testament *never* employs with the theme of the Promised Land as a material possession.

In Chapter Four, representative themes from the Old Testament Prophetic and Wisdom literature are presented. In general, this chapter is evenhanded and accurate in its portrayals. Amos, as a representative prophet, warns against the potential evils of possessions. But, again, what is missing is sophisticated hermeneutical reflection. Christopher Wright's several books on Old Testament ethics stress how, particularly in these two bodies of literature, principles (including those on compassion and justice for the poor) emerge, which God applies to the nations and not just to Israel. That is a clear indicator of cross-cultural relevance;

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whereas even just within the Old Testament, material possessions are *not* generalized as an inherent good that all peoples must seek. Nor does it appear that Schneider has thought through the full implications even of the principles he does espouse. I suspect his notion of moral proximity is largely on target, but why shouldn't a multinational corporation like Nike not be considered a close equivalent to an Israelite king, at least with respect to its responsibility to its employees, and censured—if not even boycotted—by Christians when it pays Michael Jordan as much in one year as its entire 18,000-person, largely-impoverished, Indonesian work force, as Ron Sider (1997) has argued? With respect to my thesis that Proverbs 30:8–9 enshrines a kind of “golden mean” that reappears consistently throughout Scripture, Schneider merely complains that such a norm (because it is not quantified?) is “relative and arbitrary” (p. 104). But it is hard to see how defining the boundary between “extreme indulgence,” which he finds immoral, and “enjoying prosperity in the extreme,” which he finds acceptable (p. 105), is any less subjective. And the fact that both are “extreme” would suggest that confusing the one with the other would be far more dangerous than for those committed to the center of the economic spectrum.

With Chapter Five, we arrive at the New Testament and a discussion of Jesus' economic status. Despite the anachronistic label, it is true that Jesus was probably middle-class,<sup>2</sup> though if one read only Schneider one might be tempted to think that this was a large group within first-

century Palestine as in Western cultures today. One also needs to factor into a discussion of Jesus' social standing issues in addition to sheer net wealth; it is likely that Christ went through his whole life somewhat ostracized by many because of his reputation as an illegitimate child.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter Six (“The Radical Jesus as the Lord of Delight”) is the weakest of Schneider's exegetical chapters. He correctly identifies the prophetic dimension of Jesus' teaching on *mammon*, especially directed to the more wealthy (or at least by Luke in addressing his Gospel to a somewhat wealthier audience). But Schneider's case for a balancing tendency (“The Lord of Delight”) at least as prominent in the Gospels rests on only four texts. Luke 7:34 is an important one, since it reflects a general caricature (“glutton and drunkard,” “friend of tax collectors and sinners”) that must have been based on more than just one or two examples of festive, even costly celebration. But the text on feasting at Levi's house explicitly promises fasting after Jesus' ministry is over (Luke 5:35). The miracle at Cana is primarily a sign to lead people to belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (2:11; cf. John 20:31), not any normative statement about how much wine is inherently good. And Mary's lavish anointing of Jesus (John 12:3 pars.) is clearly a onetime incident. While Jesus is still alive to appreciate it, Mary expends the amount of perfume or spices often used to bury dignitaries. The reference to the poor always being with us actually cites a Mosaic text that enjoins what God's people must regularly do—generously help the needy (Deut. 15:11; contrast p.89).

Schneider notes the “radical demand” in Jesus' teaching but relegates it almost entirely to situation-specific occasions, most notably the sending of the 12 and the 70. Entire swaths of Jesus' teaching en route to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–18:14; Mark 8–10 pars.) are thereby ignored, where the call for disciples is to carry their cross, suffer with Christ, deny self, renounce the world, “hate” family, lose their lives in this world for the sake of gaining them in the next, and so on. The very fact that recent scholarship by Stephen Barton (1994) and Dale Allison (1998) can detect a significant ascetic tendency in Jesus' teaching and ministry, while probably exaggerated, shows how far from a “glutton and winebibber” Jesus really was, despite periodic celebrations that generated that misleading label.

Indeed, it is in this chapter where Schneider makes his most flagrant misrepresentation of the contents of Scripture. With Walter Pilgrim (1981), whom Schneider cites, I agree that Luke portrays Zaccheus as a paradigm—a centrist position between giving up all (the rich young ruler) and investing all (the parable of the pounds). But what Zaccheus does is far more radical than to “give back half (not all) of what he has gained by questionable means” (p. 165). What Luke actually reports Zaccheus saying is,

“Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (NIV). Zaccheus clearly distinguishes what he thinks he earned inappropriately from the rest of his wealth. All of what he gained by questionable means he will restore *fourfold*. And, on top of that, he will give away *half of everything else* he owns.

Chapter Seven, on the other hand, may be Schneider’s best. He treats four key parables of riches (again all in Luke) with exegetical sensitivity and historical accuracy. But a key theme that has pervaded the Old Testament and would lie in the background of all of these parables—the importance of almsgiving (today we would call it charitable giving to the poor)—is still largely absent. Apparently, because Schneider wants to recommend capitalism as the economic system that will best deal with poverty, he overlooks the normative, individual responsibilities of God’s people in both testaments: to live frugally so as to free up money to give to others who are needier. That neither the rich fool nor the rich man with Lazarus follows this important Old Testament obligation makes their accumulation of wealth that much more egregious.

Chapter Eight concludes the exegetical material with “narratives of wealth in the early church.” Again, there is little to criticize in what actually appears, though “Luke’s vivid picture of the new community in constant celebration and delight” (p. 204) seems a bit overstated. Again, too, the biggest problem is simply what’s missing. Schneider can relativize all of the principles of 2 Cor. 8–9, and especially Paul’s appeal to a “manna economy” by pointing to this collection as a onetime response to help Judean Christians after the famine (and demonstrate needed spiritual solidarity with them). It is hard to sustain that relativization, however, after one surveys Paul’s teaching on possessions in every one of his epistles—noting his commitment to the poor from the outset of his ministry (Gal. 2: 10), his concern for the abuse of “welfare” in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the disproportionate number of problems created by the rich in 1 Corinthians, his call to contentment whether rich or poor in Philippians 4:10–20, his balance between enjoyment of wealth and generosity in giving in 1 Timothy 6:17–19, and so on.

The epilogue returns to a defense of capitalism in the modern world. Here Schneider summarizes Hernando de Soto’s work, highlighting the claim that appropriate property laws form the key to making capitalism work. I suspect it is not quite that simple.

The objections I have raised above mask the large sections of Schneider’s work with which I agree entirely. Indeed, as I have regularly had students read both Schneider and Sider as well as my own perspectives on these topics, they have regularly suggested that I am closer to Schneider

than to Sider. I am no ascetic. I state plainly in my concluding chapter that I live a comfortably middle-class life (even while practicing Sider’s graduated tithing), to such a degree that I suspect I still have a lot more to learn about the sacrificial giving that Scripture consistently commends. Four of the five major unifying principles in my study comport closely with Schneider’s results—the goodness of creation, the corruption that possessions can foster, the need for whole-life stewardship, and the interconnectedness of material and spiritual realities. We differ only on whether there are extremes of riches and poverty that are inherently immoral. Published reviews of my book have picked up on this, too, regularly faulting me for not being radical enough in addressing structural evil and the like. But one might not guess how much agreement there is between us from reading Schneider’s own review of my 1999 book (published in *Religion and Liberty*, Sep.-Oct. 1999), or his running critique of my book in his, or his lumping me together with “Sider [and] liberation theologians” (p. 84)—about as helpful as those 1970s battles for the Bible that spoke of “Barth, Bultmann and other liberals” all in one breath!

Perhaps the simplest way to sum up my assessment of Schneider’s work is to return to an illustration he developed at greater length in his earlier edition, though partly retained here. He depicts his family enjoying an outdoor summer barbecue on their cedarwood deck, with their children playing safely in a tree-lined back yard, and imagines numerous people laying guilt trips on themselves (or him) for enjoying such material good.<sup>5</sup> Surely the idyllic scene is a microcosm of what God wants for his people and one day will make possible for all of them. If Schneider knows large numbers of affluent Christians who are unable to relax and enjoy such pleasures from time to time, then his books may be precisely the antidote they need. It’s just that in my experience I’ve rarely met such people, and the ones I have met have lived in conservative, rural Scotland, or heavily Mennonite sections of Manitoba. My experience of a broad cross-section of American rural, urban and suburban Christians is that almost none of them would ever even question the legitimacy and goodness of the picture Schneider paints. Rather, the question Tony Campolo puts pointedly is the one that never crosses their mind: now that capitalism has triumphed in almost every part of the globe, “is there anything wrong with it” from a Christian perspective?<sup>6</sup> My fear is that numerous affluent Christians who need to be challenged to greater levels of stewardship will read Schneider’s book and delude themselves into thinking they need do nothing more.

Endnotes

- 1 Schneider thinks my *Neither Poverty nor Riches* (1999) should have drawn more lines of continuity between the garden and the patriarchal blessings (p. 42). I think he has ignored the significant discontinuity between this theme in the Old Testament in general and in New Testament teaching. Cf. The same problem on p. 67, nn. 5–6.
- 2 I am puzzled as to why Schneider thinks my comments about the Zebedee family's wealth are understated (p. 135, n. 55). As for assuming that most of the Twelve were from among the 70–80% poor of the country, it is simply because it seems Jesus did reach out to all classes of people and, apart from information to the contrary, it would be natural to assume that the majority of the apostles fit the majority of the demographics. I see no principles of homogeneous grouping in the Gospels to suggest that it would be "equally reasonable to think that the others came from comparable economic backgrounds [as the more well-to-do disciples]" (p.136).
- 3 See Chilton (2000), especially pp. 3–22.
- 4 To the extent that Schneider does refer to this material he relativizes it, in a curious way, by labeling it prophetic. He relies exclusively on Luke Johnson's and David Moessner's understanding of Luke's central section as a kind of Christian Deuteronomy, a carry over from several scholarly studies of the 1950s–70s but largely rejected by most scholars today—see my chapter in France and Wenham (1983). Indeed, a weakness of Schneider's New Testament chapters is that he follows almost exclusively Johnson's take on virtually every passage in Luke and Acts—perspectives that are often right, in my opinion, but which seldom expose Schneider to the breadth of possibly valid exegetical options.
- 5 Schneider (1994), pp. 15–16.
- 6 Campolo (1997), p. 23.

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### Delight, Danger, and Duty: *The Good of Affluence and Current Research on Wealth in the Gospels*

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The dawn of the twenty-first century presents an opportunity for reflection on the global ascendancy of capitalism and its meaning for Christians. Ironically the dominance of market economies with rising living standards gives pause to some Christians, particularly a number of those in the increasingly affluent West. The Church has not before faced such a moment. For such a time as this, theologian John Schneider has written a provocative study affirming abundance as explicitly part of God's design for humankind. Schneider undergirds his argument by prodding Christians to work carefully through not only an analysis of Biblical teaching on wealth but also his interpretation of "economic culture." Schneider ultimately calls upon Christians to find delight in the modern culture of wealth.

My discussion of Schneider's work primarily seeks to evaluate his treatment of the Gospel teachings on wealth in light of the ongoing discussion among economic historians, New Testament scholars and others of the nature and relevant features of economic activity in first-century Palestine. In doing so I hope to encourage Christian economists to more carefully consider how our understanding of the teachings of Jesus on economic concerns might be informed by recent research. *The Good of Affluence (TGA)* challenges us to reconsider the ways in which Jesus' life and teachings affirmed the ultimate spiritual significance of economic life. Secondly, I offer some brief thoughts on TGA's perspective on the culture of capitalism.

Schneider is explicit about his intended audience, people active in the business world who are in pursuit of God. For them Schneider states that his purpose is to supply Biblically-informed thinking on "what being affluent means in our time" (p. 2). He pursues his study mindful of the problem that "Christian tradition going back to very ancient times has been mainly negative in its judgments on the morality of affluence" (p. 2). In part this conclusion reflects the fact that throughout most of Church history the vast majority of Christians have lived in a culture of poverty. For