

Prosperity and Poverty. E. Calvin Beisner. 1988. Crossway Books. Reprinted 2001 by Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR 97401

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Prosperity and Poverty by E. Calvin Beisner is a scholarly, albeit somewhat opinionated, attempt to elaborate a standard for the world economy with a Biblical basis and an evangelical Christian solution to poverty. “The purpose of this book is to explore Biblical principles and methods of stewardship essential to effective, compassionate ministry to needy people – poor, middle-class, and rich alike Our goal as responsible stewards, accountable to God, is to identify Biblical and effective ways of allocating the world’s scarce resources to the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services so that true justice prevails and human needs are met in every nook and cranny of society.”

The book is not an easy read but is worth it. Dr. Beisner fearlessly takes on many economic “sacred cows” and political “third rails”, e.g., subsidies, price controls, import restrictions, welfare, redistribution of wealth and even liberty, equality, and fraternity. He asks anyone who disagrees to let him know. The book has been reviewed previously reviewed by Peter J. Hill (http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/book-review-prosperity-and-poverty-the-compassionate-use-of-resources-in-a-world-of-scarcity-by-e-calvin-beisner/#axzz2URwYWCrQ) and Thomas Purifoy (<http://www.economicsforeverybody.com/2012/10/christian-response-poverty/>) and others. This review was prepared specifically for *Theoecology Journal*.

Dr. Beisner describes how Biblical standards of justice can be applied to our economic system, but, unfortunately, he does not clearly establish that this is the one true standard. It is not made clear that applying economic models of Moses’ time is God’s will for the world today. If we do choose to adopt the Biblical model, the only mechanism suggested is to vote the opponents out of office and supporters into office. If that were achievable for the United States, we still lack the power to effect such a system ex-US for the rest of the world.

Part One delves into principles for proper understanding and action as stewards. We are caretakers of the world, God is the owner. Acquiring wealth is not necessarily contrary to Christ’s teachings. But when acquiring wealth for its own sake becomes an idol, it violates the First Commandment. Wealth can be used to help others. “Nothing else so certainly and powerfully breaks the bonds of Mammon” than giving.

Work is an essential element of Christian stewardship and is an important factor in building wealth and reducing poverty. It is not an option. “Our work makes visible our invisible spiritual nature... and is closely related to our spiritual maturity.”

Part Two goes into the Biblical understanding of justice and how it applies to stewardship and economics. Biblical justice does not demand equality but to each man his due. God has given “individuals different aptitudes, abilities and stations in life.”

Everyone must work and play his appropriate role. These differences lead to varying levels of accomplishments and to different levels of wealth. This is not an injustice. “To prove injustice one must prove that his position, function, wealth, and so on are contrary to what are *due* him – not merely that they differ from another’s.”

People have different God-give gifts that lead to varying roles in society. “The Bible recognizes the justice of societal differences of position, privilege, and power, as well as of material wealth and personal relationships.” The Bible demands impartiality, not equality. Laws giving special advantages to business owned by minorities, handicapped individuals, or other groups are unjust. “The Bible clearly approves of both economic liberty ... and economic inequality.” An honest and free market is the Biblical standard recommended by Dr. Beisner.

While presenting his opinions on the jubilee, Dr. Beisner dismisses opinions of one author having opposing views with “A more thorough case of reading into a text what one hopes to find can hardly exist.” He then follows the same path, citing Biblical scripture and other text to support his thesis. Of course, if you are right as Dr. Beisner believes he is, you have nothing to fear.

Part Three reviews stewardship and basic economic principles. “Work is an essential factor in reducing poverty and producing wealth.” Here, again, Dr. Beisner emphasizes the importance of work and the dire consequences of sloth. “The first principle of overcoming poverty is that in order to move up, the poor must not only work, they must work harder than the classes above them.” There is a tendency to suggest that people living in poverty do so because they are not applying God’s gifts. They are poor because they are lazy. Allowances for other causes (i.e., sloth, calamity, exploitation and personal sacrifice) are made in later chapters.

The lazy can be delivered from the economic and spiritual bondage they suffer only by spiritual transformation. Evangelism and discipleship are very important elements in the church’s efforts to help the poor out of poverty. And we must work smarter. Until about 200 years ago most of the world’s people lived in base poverty. Then the industrial revolution, division of labor in the factory system, greatly increased productivity and lifted great numbers of people out of poverty. Free trade between states would maximize productivity and raise standards of living everywhere. Barriers can be defended only on grounds of national security. “Competition results in production sufficient to meet consumers’ demands at the lowest possible prices.” Dr. Beisner reaches the conclusion that allowing markets to function freely results in the greatest benefit, especially for the poor.

“The degree to which we use whatever God entrusts to us to further the growth of God’s Kingdom determines the degree to which we are good or bad stewards. We must end inflation and keep it down. When governments need more money, they just print more. This leads to inflation, legalized theft. Inflation devalues savings and makes it even harder for people to rise out of poverty. “Making something legal doesn’t make it right.” One solution is for enough voters to grow in understanding of this problem, to vote out

of office those politicians who support inflationary policies, and to run for office ourselves to get the job done. Civil government should not be minting money. Instead, it should enforce laws against fraud and theft and limits on banking. Production of money would be handled by the private sector as regulated by civil government.

Part Four explores a Biblical understanding of civil government in terms of Biblical justice and how it relates to the economy. “Proper government is a good thing, and normally those who govern deserve the utmost respect.” Dr. Beisner writes that civil government cannot require teaching in schools subjects that ridicule their parents’ values. This would argue against teaching anything in public schools that disagrees with parents’ beliefs, such as, evolution, global warming, or rising sea levels. I recall an event in which a colonel and dean of a military academy in North Carolina berated an eighth grade teacher for telling his son that chickens come from eggs. The teacher had no knowledge beforehand that the dean refused to believe that chickens come from eggs or that he felt eighth graders are too young to know about it. Would Dr. Beisner join the dean to condemn this teacher? I hope not.

In reviewing stewardship and economic regulations on price controls, Dr. Beisner indicates that “the chief criterion for judging economic regulation must be God’s Law as the standard of justice.” As rules of thumb, “any regulation that restricts or prohibits an owner’s use of exchange of his property is unjust” and any regulation that makes goods and services artificially scarce is bad stewardship. Price controls are a violation of the Eighth Commandment’s prohibition of theft. “Perhaps the most pernicious of price controls is the minimum wage law.” These laws have led to increased unemployment among the very people who needed to work. Dr. Beisner charges Christians as stewards of God’s resources to work through the political process to eliminate price controls of all types, especially minimum wage laws. He also opposes occupational licensure for barbers, dentists, doctors and anyone else because it violates the Eighth Commandment’s implied prohibition on controlling another’s property. He then finds fault with trust and antitrust laws, quotas and tariffs, zoning, and subsidies for the poor. “Subsidies to the poor increase their numbers rather than decreasing them.” Enforced redistribution of wealth through subsidies for the poor is contrary to Biblical justice, has increased the magnitude of the problem, and civil government should not be involved in providing relief for the poor.

Part Five uses Biblical principles of stewardship and justice to consider how best to minister to the poor. Dr. Beisner concludes that “by properly applying Biblical principles of stewardship, we can minister effectively to all of the poor and see major reductions in the amount of poverty in our nation and the world.” He reviews the nature and causes of poverty, how churches can help, and how individual families can help.

“The chief objection to the idea that civil government should not be involved in poor relief is that the problem is too enormous to be tackled by any other entity.” Biblical standards applied to the problems of poverty are used to redefine poverty as a destitute condition, lacking food and cover. Addressing problems of poverty by denying that 90% of it exists is specious. It does not mean that you have solved 90% of the problem.

“Poverty is the natural condition of mankind, a condition from which some have risen from time to time, from which many have yet to rise, and which any will fall back if they ignore, misunderstand, or fail to apply the causes of wealth.” Causes of poverty include sloth, calamity, exploitation and personal sacrifice.

With the population of the poor reduced to 10%, churches can help the poor by providing adequate nourishment, clothing and shelter. This will require evangelism and discipleship, charitable giving, and political action. The poor will need help in changing their way of thinking and living. They must adopt the Christian faith. They must adopt “Biblical principles and practices of justice, economics, personal financial management, work, saving, staying out of debt, and caring for one’s family.” “Churches have available, in the form of members’ tithes, sufficient financial resources to handle the problem of poverty in the United States.” “The goal of Biblical charity to all but the totally disabled is to teach them to support themselves and, later, their families and others.” “The challenge is for churches to practice charity without repeating government’s mistakes.”

Individuals and families can also help the poor. “Our actions as stewards of God’s gifts in service to the poor need to be rooted in four principles: justice, charity, contentment, and devotion to God.” We should render impartially to each his due. In addition to investing to increase productivity, raise wages and lower prices we can help the poor by sharing the gospel with them and teaching them to live by Biblical values. Teach them how to hold jobs. “Every Christian, then, needs to be willing and ready at every opportunity ... to do good to everyone, including giving outright gifts to the poor.”

So, we must work and work smarter following God’s laws with a Biblical economy. People living in poverty worldwide must be helped financially and converted to Christianity so they become good stewards. The government has done a terrible job of helping the poor and should stop. It should also stop minting money, imposing any fiscal control over free markets, and regulating personal property in areas such as zoning. These solutions for reducing or eliminating poverty would cause major shifts in our government, culture, and personal lives. Christians would have to take over the whole world in order to apply Dr. Beisner’s solutions to poverty. This is a worthy goal, but not one likely to be reached in the foreseeable future.