

Thoughts on a biblical economic worldview or Godonomics

By Graeme Leach

This fifth extract continues consideration of '10 thoughts on a biblical economic worldview' concentrating on the eighth principle.

Biblical welfare is voluntary not coercive

The Bible states that: 'The motive for giving should be love, so there can be no compulsion' (2 Corinthians 8:8). Poverty policy is to be driven from a change in heart - from the inside out – not a change in government. The Bible never says take from one to give to another. There is virtue in voluntarism, but none in coercion. Public spending doesn't build up social capital (in fact it can very often deplete it), but a voluntary system rooted in love builds up what might be described as virtue capital. This has been the Christian position down the centuries.

The Book of Acts highlights the pooling of resources in the early church in Jerusalem, but this does not provide a biblical endorsement for Marxian collectivisation and the end of private property. The fundamental point is that **the re-distribution was voluntary not coercive**. Moreover, it only appears to have been practised in Jerusalem - for special circumstances - and not elsewhere¹ and even there quickly gave way to a more sophisticated system (the deacons).

The Year of Jubilee re-distribution of land (Leviticus 25:10) is also used to support claims for re-distributive government policies, but the Jubilee was meant to ensure that each family had a permanent stake in society. It merely confirms the importance of property rights for the effective functioning of a free-market, and therefore is an argument against interventionist government economic policies.

Other important characteristics of the biblical model of welfare are:

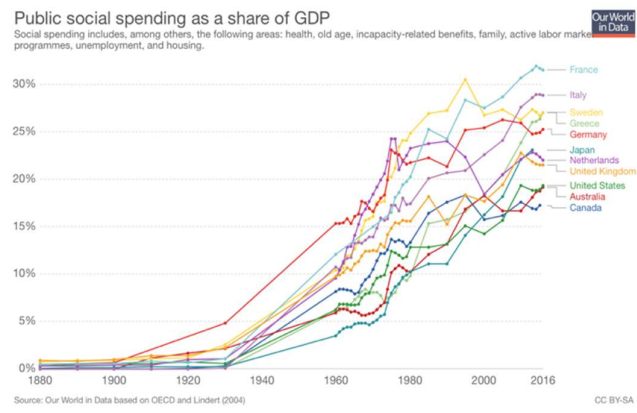
- **Radically different** - The Bible focuses on the elimination of poverty whilst contemporary secular social justice is based on the re-distribution of income. There is

¹ The special circumstances might have been members of the Jewish diaspora who had been converted, but then stayed on in Jerusalem and not returned home but needed support.

a big difference. Hebrew words for justice² in the Old Testament never take the specific sense of bringing about equality of possessions. Scripture teaches equality before the law, but it does not support any egalitarian equality of material reward. Exegetically, equality of reward is found nowhere in scripture. In fact, rather to the contrary (1Tim 5:17-18).

- **Small state** - The systemic consequences of the biblical welfare model are profound, because the optimal size of the welfare state when the family/extended family are strong is zero.

- **Contented** - God’s creation displays an unequal distribution of talents and changes in the market value of those talents, which will always result in a different endowment of wealth. People may recoil at the salary package of an American or British CEO, or the sponsorship income of Cristian Ronaldo, Lionel Messi or Tiger Woods, but despite this we are to be contented (Hebrews 13:5, Philippians 4:12-13, Luke 12:15, 1 Timothy 6:6-7). Someone living in one of the least developed countries might look aghast at the lifestyle of somebody on average income in the US or the UK,



but who is to decide what income differential is fair and would income caps or ceilings or increased taxation help, or perhaps hinder the situation? It’s all too easy to be discontented and make erroneous choices, but we need to remember Ludwig von Mises³ when he stated that: ‘The riches of the rich are not the cause of the poverty of anybody.’ US Senator Phil Gramm has stated that, ‘the only bigotry that is still socially acceptable is bigotry against the successful.’ Abraham Lincoln made the point more succinctly: ‘You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich.’ Robin Hood – rob from the rich to give to the poor, and a take a chunk for the bureaucracy – isn’t found anywhere in

² Chewning (1989), op. cit., p. 46.

³ *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, Ludwig von Mises, 1972.

scripture. Part of the reason why we must be contented is that we must respect the property rights of others.

- ***Individually responsible*** - We are not to pass-by on the other-side as that would commit a 'sin of omission'. A free-market is intended to be counter-cultural and different. It is meant to bring together the needy and the provider via the invisible hand of love. There is no love in a cheque from the welfare state. Individual (and group) voluntary giving creates a people who are forever conscious of the needs of others, and an awareness that they should help, because they may be in need of help one day. These effects create a social glue holding society together. The long history of Christian social welfare voluntary societies is a testament to this principle.
- ***Generous*** - Because the Lord loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). The cheerful giver is not the same as a cheerful taxpayer (if that isn't an oxymoron). Don't live, but do give beyond your means, with the ultimate accounting in heaven (Luke 14:13-14).
- ***Localised*** - Paul states that if you won't work you won't eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). The Bible also says that if a believer won't provide for his own family, he is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). The Bible teaches that those who can't work must be given help, but not those who won't work – this is the concept of the deserving versus undeserving poor. The assumption also is that help is temporary. The only way to manage such a system is to get as close as possible to the individuals concerned and understand their true circumstances.
- ***Trusting*** – Perhaps the reason God wants a voluntary, decentralised welfare model is because it gives us the opportunity to show that we trust Him. Unfortunately fallen man's desire for security is greater than the desire for God.

After more than a century of welfare the biblical model is challenging to say the least. The biblical model would have made 20th century public social spending look very different, but the challenge is obviously to persuade people that a private sector model could perform even better. The biblical model points towards a decentralised voluntary system regardless of whether or not people actually step up to the plate and give. In a fallen world there is a very

real risk that a voluntary system of welfare wouldn't provide universal coverage and some people would fall through the cracks. And yet the opportunity for a social entrepreneurship revolution is hugely exciting.

These are understandably uncomfortable areas for many Christians who recoil at the thought of the 19th century Poor House as portrayed in Charles Dickens. But they should pause here. The Poor House was a government institution! Surely, we should instead flash forward to today and ponder the global social entrepreneurship revolution which could be made possible by the identification and matching of need and provider in the digital age? Israel never fully obeyed God's economic laws, but that didn't mean that He changed them in favour of state intervention. The American Christian writer, Marvin Olasky⁴, surely captures the essence of this debate when he states that, 'a truly compassionate government is one that rallies those armies of compassion and provides an environment in which they can thrive.'

If the Bible does deliver any message on re-distribution, it appears to be limited to land. Families were given an equal division of land in Canaan and the Jubilee Laws were meant to ensure these lands were not held in perpetuity (Leviticus 25:1-4, 8-10). God's restoration was clearly aimed at curbing any build-up in the concentration of wealth. So there are warnings, but proponents of Jubilee do cherry pick from these verses. There is a principle, but not a masterplan.

This also raises interesting questions about our contemporary planning laws in the UK, which result in a gross distortion of land prices and ownership. Agricultural land selling for £10,000 per acre in the South East of England, would with planning permission sell for between £1 and £1.5 million per acre. This is a truly enormous market distortion. The planning system makes land and home ownership very difficult for a large numbers of households – they are priced out of the market - and would appear to be at odds with a biblical system of land tenure which sought to ensure that every family had a permanent stake in society through land ownership. We might do well to reform this system.

⁴ *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Marvin Olasky.