



Called to Compassion: Biblical Motifs of Justice

Can the Bible instruct us about matters of social ethics, or is it hopelessly outdated for our times? Henry E. Felder explores several biblical motifs of social justice.

by Henry E. Felder

HOW RELEVANT ARE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ethics, value, and money in a society that has virtually eliminated hunger and has established a federal system that spends billions to assist the poor, widows, and homeless? In the movie *Wall Street* there is a scene where the hero, a young, idealistic stockbroker (some might suggest that an “idealistic stockbroker” is an oxymoron), confronts Gordon Gecko, the ultimate greedy guy. Gecko had just scored another economic coup. By manipulating the price of a stock, he was able to secure additional millions for himself, but at the cost of the ruin of another.

At this point, the hero asked the essential question, “How much is enough?” How much

more money, he wanted to know, would it take to be satisfied? How many yachts could Gecko waterski behind?

By all reasonable measures, the United States (along with Australia, Japan, Canada, and the countries of Western Europe) has achieved a level and breadth of consumption and affluence unparalleled in human history. The vast majority of U.S. residents no longer live under the dictatorship of economic deprivation.

In the United States, poverty is the exception, affluence the norm. The median family income is now more than \$35,000 per year. One-fourth of all families have incomes that exceed \$50,000. Our consumption is not only conspicuous, but obscene. Our voracious appetite for goods means that we consume more than 25 percent of all the goods produced in the world—this from a country that has just 5 percent of the world's population.

We have eliminated systemic hunger (that condition that leads to malnutrition and the opportunistic diseases that feed on that malnutrition). But the magnitude of our accomplish-

Henry E. Felder (Ph.D., Economics, 1975, Stanford University) is a senior economist with the U.S. General Accounting Office. He is a member of the Sligo SDA church, the Andrews University College Board of Trustees, the Oakwood College Board of Trustees, and numerous professional associations, including the American Economic Association. He has written extensively on economics, social, and financial matters. He teaches courses in finance, housing, and urban policy at the University of Maryland.

ments stifles our ability to comprehend the ethical dilemma surrounding wealth and consumption in an affluent postindustrial society. It is easy to be lulled into complacency—into expecting a seemingly omnipresent government to carry the burden of care for widows, orphans, and the needy.

The staggering wealth in this country has made commonplace that which an earlier society would view as unseemly wealth. But we have not eliminated poverty (defined as income of less than \$13,000 a year for a family of four), and the ancient quest of the prophets for social justice has not been realized.

As a society, we continue to confront the needs of the 33 million poor, the more than 1 million homeless, the elderly, and numerous others through an elaborate system of federal and state cash and near-cash transfers. In 1990, these transfers amounted to more than \$600 billion in federal dollars.¹ Make no mistake about it; economic deprivation, or poverty, has both an absolute and a relative meaning. In his 1968 book, *Guaranteed Annual Income: The Moral Issues*, Philip Wogaman argues that social deprivation is not the physical deprivation that comes with absolute poverty.² Social deprivation is relative poverty, a deprivation in the conditions of social existence serious enough to impede normal human relationships. This social deprivation creates barriers between neighbors that frustrate God's intended human community. Relative poverty can lead to frustration, high infant mortality rates, and pathologies that are consummated in crime and violence.

Does the Bible have anything to say about

all this? To what extent can the Christian develop the proper perspective on poverty and the oppressed by reading the stories, parables, and metaphors of the Bible?

First and foremost, we must recognize that Christian ethics spring from a covenant relationship with God, a relationship that induces action. In his book, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*, Cain Hope Felder asserts the relation of action in theology:

It is not enough for churches to glorify the victory of the cross without a parallel commitment to making the resurrection victory a reality in the global context of suffering and oppression.³

Next, to utilize biblical stories and metaphors it is useful to distill, to the extent possible, empirical evidence and the cultural context to glean the Bible's underlying principle. For example,

Deuteronomy 15:7, 8 says:

When one of your fellow-countrymen in any of your settlements in the land which the Lord your God is giving you becomes poor, do not be hard-hearted or close-fisted with your countryman in his need. Be open-handed towards him and lend him on pledge as much as he needs (NEB).

Deuteronomy 15 here articulates a moral imperative, made necessary by the cultural context—the tenuous economic position of a nomadic people.

Last, we must recognize that values are in conflict. Waldo Beach, in his excellent book, *Christian Ethics in the Protestant Tradition*, puts it this way:

Human choices are squeezed between serving the needs of some neighbors versus the needs of other neighbors, when in an economy of scar-

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city, it is impossible to serve them all. The conventional Christian moral platitude calls us to love all humankind. But the forced options are never between meeting and denying universal needs. The actual situation of choice is to provide for the good of some neighbors or to provide for the good of other neighbors. . . . The tightest decisions are those in which the needs and rights of some collide with the needs and rights of others. This dilemma confronts me daily in handling my finance. Should I pay a higher tuition bill to secure the best possible education for my children, or should I heed the desperate appeals for money to feed hungry children in Africa when my income cannot afford both?⁴

We speak of values. But what values? When we move from basic values of life and health—our daily bread, as it were—what are the values that constitute the abundant life (see John 10:10)? Is not life meant to be more than the minimum? What about the social values of friendship and concern? What about the values of the aesthetic, the cultural, and intellectual? The human spirit seeks to realize a full range of these values. But some values conflict—one neighbor against another, the present against the future.

Against this background, what does the Bible say to the modern Christian regarding the role of the state in providing for social justice? the role of the corporate church as surrogate? and the consumerism legacy that we have inherited and developed? Several motifs are suggested.

The Pastoral Motif

This motif is best exemplified by such biblical models as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job. In the stories of these men (and it is always men), we learn primarily of their dedication to the will of God. The fact that they were all wealthy is only incidental to the greater meaning of their lives. We learn, through the stories of these nomads and wanderers, how God's rich blessings can be given to those who love

him. However, I suggest that the implications of the Bible for the ethical treatment of money in modern life are limited.

The Theocratic Motif

The Judeo system of mutual responsibility was at once a model for the world of man's relationship to man, while meeting the particular needs of first, an unorganized people, then, a theocratic nation state, and finally, a secular nation-state. The early injunctions regarding mutual care as found in Deuteronomy find their contemporary realization in a combination of the state welfare system, the corporate state, the private charities, and the individual response.

When the Christian returns a 10 percent tithe, and has extracted the 30 percent of income for federal, state, and social security taxes, there is a pattern of exchange that mimics the Jewish system of gifts to care for the sacred and secular responsibilities of the state. The institutions vary, but the values are similar.

The Prophetic Motif

The prophets called the Jews, and us, to account in a personal way for the needs of the downtrodden. Isaiah 58 and 59 are calls to personal justice. Amos 5 rails against the injustice of the state, Israel, and the individual.

. . . you levy taxes on the poor and extort a tribute of grain from them, though you have built houses of hewn stone, you shall not live in them . . .

. . . you who persecute the guiltless, hold men to ransom and thrust the destitute out of court. . .

. . . Seek good and not evil, that you may live (vss. 11, 12, 14, NEB).

Micah 6:8 distills ethical behavior into precepts whose applications remain undefined:

God has told you what is good;
and what is it that the Lord asks of you?

Only to act justly, to love loyalty,
to walk wisely before your God (NEB).

As Spike Lee says: "Do the right thing."

Jesus Christ and the Individual

In Jesus Christ we find the fullest expression of the individual, of values, and money. But was Jesus speaking of wealth or of the violation of the first commandment when he told the rich young ruler to sell all? If the latter, it has universal application. If the former, then there is an apparent inconsistency. What comes through most clearly is the violence that wealth can do to the individual's relationship with God. But what constitutes wealth in a surplus economy? How much is enough?

The industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, is said to have answered that question in this way:

There is but one right mode of using enormous fortunes—namely, that the possessors from time to time during their own lives should so administer these as to promote the permanent good of the communities from which they were gathered.

Maybe it was easy for him to say!

In Matthew 25 Jesus calls us powerfully to individual responsibility. Here there is no ambiguity regarding purpose and individual ethic. It is the individual, not the corporate state or church that stands before the judgment seat of God.

The Apostles and the Early Church

We need not dwell on the communal financing of the early church as a model for Christian sharing—it is not an appropriate model for the late 20th century. Perhaps a better model is the financing of the work through gifts from the church in Antioch to the church in Jerusalem.

In James 5, the rich are excoriated in a theme similar to those found in the earlier prophets, especially Malachi. "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you" (KJV). Karl Marx, in his tirade against capitalist and expropriated capital, could not have said it better!

Conclusions

The Bible provides a mixed message regarding ethics, money, and value for the modern Christian. Unfortunately, the true ethical response is not unambiguous. As the role of the state becomes more pervasive, and the church is scarcely able to provide substantially for these needs, the manner of Christian ethical response must take on a modern cast. However, the ultimate ethic is still defined as a call for social justice. It is a call for action motivated by love. The modern Christian remains called to address the needs of the homeless, the orphans, and the widows. The Bible and its stories, parables, and metaphors continues to be relevant to moral treatment of the poor.

Notes and References

1. *Historical Tables, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 1992* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), Table II.3.

2. Philip Wogaman, *Guaranteed Annual Income: The Moral Issues* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 58.

3. Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 20.

4. Waldo Beach, *Christian Ethics in the Protestant Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 46, 47.