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Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market (Book Review)

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done. She gives less attention to the question than to other topics discussed in the book.

Another minor shortcoming of the book is that Winner sometimes talks as if her own body were something other than herself, as if it had desires and cravings that were not quite *her* cravings or *her* desires. Although there is a long tradition of doing so, speaking this way is misleading because it suggests mere occupancy of our own flesh and blood. Isn't it clear that it is *our* eyes, *our* life history, *our* feelings that are at play in sexual desire? Isn't it our

lack of care and love, or more pointedly our love for the wrong things, that turns temptation into acts of sin? By not having trained our taste buds, nose, and eyes (when we had the opportunity), we easily attach ourselves to things less lovable than God, fellowship of the saints, and good works. It is we, our person, that is having the craving, not merely our "body."

All in all, though, it is a good book that is worth reading and worth giving as a gift.

Van Til, Kent A. *Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007. 161 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8028-1767-9. Reviewed by Abby M. Jansen, Instructor of Social Work at Dordt College.

In *Less than Two Dollars a Day*, author Kent A. Van Til argues that the Christian faith requires that all people have access to basic sustenance. In an extensive review of economic and political theory as well as biblical and contemporary theologies, Van Til lays out the need for distributive justice and, ultimately, an alternative system of distribution.

Van Til is currently a visiting assistant professor of religion at Hope College. This book, which is a product of his doctoral work at Marquette University, combines his interests in economics, political theory, and theology. Van Til spent time working in Central America and uses those experiences and his family friend, Ester, to highlight the stark inequalities of the current system:

The simplest explanation for the privileges I have received and the hardships that Ester has endured is that I was born in the United States of America and Ester was born in Panama: as a result of this accidental difference, I received many of the benefits of my society, and she received many of the burdens of her own (2).

An estimated forty percent of the world's people live on less than two dollars a day. Not surprisingly, these people do not have the capital to participate in the market. The poor do not have access to basic goods and services, never mind the rewards and benefits of the market economy. In the initial understanding of the free-market system, as described by Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century, there was the assumption that "within a properly functioning market economy, the entire population would necessarily receive basic sustenance" (18). Clearly, the historical and current realities indicate that either the market is not functioning properly, according to Smith's intention, or the assumption itself is faulty. One thing should be made clear: Van Til does not propose an entirely different system of distribution; he lauds certain components of the free-market capitalist system, especially its efficiency in the distribution of goods. However, the main flaw of free-market capitalism, he asserts, is that there is no moral

component to the system: "the market is not designed to value claims based on human need" (52).

Free market capitalism as it stands currently, then, runs contrary to the biblical mandate to care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphans. Using examples from both the Old and New Testaments, including the Year of Jubilee, distribution of land within the Promised Land, the importance of work, and shalom, it is clear that God established and promotes systems of distribution that, in some way, provide basic sustenance for all members of the community. In addition, "At the heart of Scripture's teaching on wealth, property, and poverty is the belief that the world and all things within it belong to God, and whatever portion of it we receive is a gift of God" (67).

All wealth and property belong to God, and his Word indicates that he favors systems of distribution that provide basic sustenance for all. From these two basic principles emerge a variety of contemporary theologies that attempt to navigate a world in which goods are not distributed equally. In fact, as Van Til points out repeatedly, the free market system allows for inequality and does not include a mechanism that addresses human need. A review of Catholic and Protestant theologies provides a helpful backdrop for the subsequent conversation. Van Til lays the groundwork for an alternative system of distributive justice that seeks to go beyond the current flawed system to validate both the biblical and moral claim of the right to basic sustenance for all.

On what basis should such a system be devised? Van Til synthesizes work by Abraham Kuyper, the Calvinist theologian and Dutch statesman from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Michael Walzer, a contemporary Jewish political theorist, to develop a theory of justice for just such a system. Van Til draws heavily on Kuyper's Reformed Christian perspective of "sphere sovereignty" and of people as image-bearers with a creational mandate to develop and care for creation and created order. From Walzer, Van Til seeks to simplify the concept of "spheres" to three basic relationship types: instrumental, solidaristic, and citizenship. Although Van

Til finds Walzer's simplification and use of contemporary language around human rights and social justice very useful, Van Til also insists on infusing this understanding with Christian theology—namely, Kuyperian theology. As image-bearers, people cannot be viewed as only individuals, but rather, they are part of something larger. The image-bearers live in community and in relationship with others. A system of just distribution as called for by Van Til certainly has an individual component that rewards contributions made by those able to participate in the market, but it also includes a component in which citizens are treated equally and all image-bearers have their basic needs met.

In the final chapter, Van Til comes to a conclusion similar to those drawn by other leading development economists and antipoverty advocates: there are enough resources in the world to provide basic sustenance for all people at a relatively small cost, but what is lacking is the political or moral will to distribute goods in such a way that provides for all people. The nuance and value that Van Til brings to the discussion, however, is an articulate and deliberate theological and biblical discussion about poverty, theories of distributive justice, and systems of distribution. His conclusions clearly support and justify not only an alternative system of distribution that takes into account human need, but also the responsibility of Christians to be involved in providing for the basic sustenance of those made in God's image. Another asset of this book is the comprehensive discussion of the various contemporary theologies on poverty and economic distribution, both Catholic and Protestant.

Two Dollars a Day is bound to appeal to a wide audience, especially to those in the fields of economics, development, political science and theology. Van Til includes an extensive but accessible review of both economic and political theory as well as theology, and this book could serve as a valuable primer for readers not well-versed in these fields.

Although the book provides a convincing argument for an alternative system of distribution, little is offered in terms of what the alternative might actually look like.

Smidt, Corwin, Donald Luidens, James Penning, and Roger Nemeth. *Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, 226 pp. ISBN 0-8028-0385-7. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Professor of English at Dordt College.

Good evangelical brothers and sisters of mine have, in the past, approached me rather quizzically and asked me to explain, in a line or two, the difference between "that college where you teach and that other one—the one that's right there down the road from you." That college down the road is Northwestern College, a century-old institution created and sustained by, basically, members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Dordt College's founding—and its majority constituency—comes from a denomination that shares similar creeds and history, the

Van Til points out that providing basic sustenance for the world's poor costs relatively little, but what steps can or should an individual, church or community be taking to move towards a more just system? Also, what might be the main mechanisms that would move the current free market system to a more just system? Van Til also states,

In most contemporary societies, the claim to basic sustenance is either not recognized as a political right at all, or it is seen only as a moral option....The moral right to basic sustenance is thus a political orphan. (156)

Van Til's observation is, in some ways, very true. However, since the United Nations' Millennium Summit in 2000, where substantial promises were made by 189 countries to eradicate extreme poverty by 2015, there has been substantial movement by citizens within developed and developing countries alike to hold governments accountable to these promises. In addition to urging countries, organizations and individuals for more financial aid, these citizens' movements call for changes to the rules that govern the global market. For example, a global citizens' campaign called the Jubilee Debt Campaign argued for and achieved debt relief for the world's poorest countries. The debt relief allowed the countries to be released from crushing debt repayments to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to instead invest in basic infrastructure and needs like education and healthcare. The name of the campaign alludes to the Jubilee year as described in the Old Testament. Such movements and the surrounding activities are significant enough to be mentioned in this final chapter; these would have offered the readers a tangible example of what really can be accomplished in moving closer to an alternative system of distributive justice.

Two Dollars a Day is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions around poverty and to the growing realization, particularly by people of faith, that the world in which we live is not the world as it ought to be.

Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC).

The question people ask me is not an easy question, and were one to ask many people—even many who live in our own neighborhood--I am not sure one would hear very clear definitions. The differences between Northwestern and Dordt (or of the RCA and the CRC)—if there are differences at all—can likely best be understood by way of some rudimentary understanding of Dutch-American (and Dutch Reformed) history.

That history is crucial, say Corwin Smidt, Donald