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## Doing Good and Welfare Dependency

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## Doing Good and Welfare Dependency

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by Beryl Huguen

**W**elfare, or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), reaches about five million families and absorbs a rather small percentage of federal and state budgets. It has nevertheless been the subject of enormous publicity during the last several years. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a leading national voice in welfare policy, has even claimed that "welfare dependency is the defining issue of post-industrial society." Identifying solutions to dependency has thus become high politics. Governors and legislators, together with liberal and conservative commentators and policy

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experts, vie to win public attention for their welfare reform proposals. President Clinton in his campaign promised to introduce federal legislation to "end welfare as we know it."

The proposals are remarkably similar. All emphasize that poor women must be coerced or encouraged to break the habit of dependency on the state. Most proposals rely on market coercion, and a few rely on a combination of both market and state coercion. Charles Murray (1984) would simply abolish income supports, forcing poor mothers to expose themselves to the "curative discipline" of the labor market. Lawrence Mead (1985) is less optimistic about the ability of the poor to respond to market sanctions, and calls instead for an "authoritative work policy" that would include systematic monitoring by government, along with rewards and sanctions to force the poor to behave in socially-approved ways.

Some liberal policy analysts also find the idea of coerced work appealing, albeit only if coupled with higher minimum wages and with programs for education and job training, health care, and child care. The availability of welfare benefits would thus be temporary, at least for the able-bodied, lasting only long enough to prepare poor women for the labor market.

More recently, in addition to straight cuts in AFDC and General Assistance Programs, a number of states have considered proposals intended to reduce dependency on public assistance by conditioning receipt of benefits on the recipient's personal behavior. These proposals include, for example, penalties for bearing children, for failing to

have a child immunized, for failure to marry, for not participating in work activities, for children's poor school attendance, or for moving to a new state. These proposals involve more of the stick than the carrot approach.

Overall, these reform proposals all share a common assumption, that in freeing the poor from the responsibility for their own circumstances, the welfare state alters their lives for the worse. In fact, they would say that governmental efforts to do good, or be benevolent, actually cause or at least significantly contribute to the problems they were intended to remedy. This is the popular wisdom of our day.

But is this popular wisdom also Christian wisdom? How can it be that "doing good" can really be "doing harm"? Does not the Bible speak clearly as to how we are to do good? We are told in Acts 10:38 that Jesus "went about doing good." Would the popular wisdom of today fulfill the Old Testament prophet Micah's statement that God requires us to do good by "acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God"? A central question in the current welfare debate and this article, therefore, becomes this: Is the popular wisdom of welfare reform grounded in, or compatible with, the Christian duty of being our brother's keeper? Are the current welfare reform proposals truly helpful Christian responses? Or do they reflect an entirely different perspective and value premise? It is this question I will attempt to address in this article.

### **Approaches to Welfare**

First of all, it is important to recognize that there have been and are different ways of thinking about welfare and social services. In one approach, the function or purposes of welfare is to intervene on behalf of individuals or groups who are in some sort of social difficulty, trouble, or need. According to this view, welfare helps those unable to keep step with the social system, or eases strain on the system itself, especially in periods of crisis. The overall goal is largely to maintain social control or protect the prevailing social order. Another approach has been to regard welfare as a means for helping persons meet their obligations to their fellow human beings and for helping society to carry

out some higher goal—for example, a religious or democratic ideal. At times these two approaches have complemented each other; at other times one has been derived from the other. I would argue that within the last one hundred and fifty years, the first approach has clearly become the preferred model, almost completely usurping the second approach, such that today discussion about religious ideals regarding welfare, even for many Christians, is either absent from the present public debate, or has almost entirely been redefined into arguments attempting to maintain the social order, an order which today is largely controlled and influenced by economic models and ideals. As a result, the Biblical principles of justice, mercy and humility, instead of playing a significant role in welfare policy, have largely become contextualized within the ideals of current economic theory and practice. To do good related to welfare today is to do good within the prevailing economic paradigm.

### **Capitalism and the Poor Laws**

Is there any evidence for the above assertions? Perhaps the best way to develop a clearer understanding of the current controversy over welfare dependence is to sketch a historical situation that illustrates one part of the problem of dependency. At the beginning of the Industrial Age, a situation occurred which gave form to much subsequent thinking on dependency. It also brought about some of the enduring difficulties and contradictions that affect welfare dependents today (Eden, 1834, et al.).

The situation occurred in late-eighteenth-century England where the traditional rural economy and organization of life were undergoing significant change. The customary provision and obligations which supported and bound peasants to the land were, for the first time, disappearing. Land holdings were being consolidated on a large scale, creating a rapidly increasing population of agricultural laborers who were without work.

The organization of labor in England for many centuries rested largely upon a series of late medieval laws based generally on the principles of regulation and paternalism. The best known of these, the Poor Law of 1601, declared that all the

able-bodied poor must be put to work of some kind, so they could be said to earn their means of support; the means of support was provided by the parish, the local unit of administration. The obligation of relief rested directly upon the parish itself, which also had the powers to raise the necessary funds by means of local taxes. This system, although sometimes inadequate, remained functional till the later part of the eighteenth century. At that time, rural poverty began to rise and continued to rise. Something unprecedented was occurring; a permanent surplus of labor was coming into existence in the countryside, resulting from the budding capitalistic economy of the time. The result was an increase in the distress of the poor and a rise in relief. Poverty, as a result of unemployment, had become very expensive.

The administrative machinery of the time went to work to find ways to increase efficiency and reduce expenses. In 1782, under the Gilbert Act, parishes were strongly urged to find work for the able-bodied poor in their neighborhoods. In order to help facilitate more work opportunities, occasional aid-in-wages or cash supplements, were permitted to induce employers to hire workers. The overall intent of such supplements was to reduce the costs of relief for the able-bodied poor. By 1795, a relatively new measure, a subsidy in wages determined by a scale that depended on a fixed standard, the price of bread, was granted. In effect, a minimum income of sorts was guaranteed to the poor, irrespective of their earnings. This measure, which was in part intended to protect the agricultural and village working poor from the harsh effects of a new capitalist free market in labor, had a disastrous effect. Under the new system, a working man got relief, even if he was working, as soon as his wages fell below the family subsistence income granted by the scale. With his meager income now guaranteed however low his wages would fall, the laborer had little impetus to satisfy his employer. Conversely, the employer could now obtain labor at minuscule wages; whatever he paid, the subsidy brought the laborer's income up to the guaranteed minimum scale. There was no easy way out of this vicious circle.

### **English**

#### **Poor Law Reform**

It quickly became clear a monster had been created. As the poor rates rose, productivity fell. The

situation became very severe, and from 1795 to 1834 an extended discussion of the problem of poverty and relief took place. The schemes and proposals put forward at the time to remedy the situation varied from the hopeless to the horrible. Perhaps the harshest was proposed by Thomas Malthus, known for his views on population control. For Malthus, the only way to deal with the question of the dependent poor was to abolish the Poor Laws altogether. Public relief does no good and must be withheld, he advocated, but private charity had value. It was after all, a Christian act (and Malthus was a clergyman), but he thought it to be no more than a minor stop-gap approach to

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*Welfare reform is too often driven by the notion that present welfare policy does little good.*

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poverty. He believed if all relief were withheld, the poor would learn to "defend themselves." He, in effect, suggested that "nature" should be reintroduced into society: in sum, that the dependent poor be abandoned. Those who survived would have learned the virtues of self-dependence. The harshness of his proposal was too much, even for those harsh times.

What was accepted was the more moderate utilitarian approach of Jeremy Bentham. He was not for complete abolition of the Poor Laws, but for radical reform. He proposed developing hundreds of workhouses where the dependent poor could be placed and made to work. The guiding principle that governed his plan was a principle referred to as "least-eligibility." Accordingly to this principle, if persons maintained at public expense received more than those persons maintained on their own, calamity like what was happening would be inevitable. Therefore, the conditions of persons on relief should be made worse than the conditions of the lowest paid (least eligible) worker maintained on his own. The solution therefore involved making the conditions of relief in the workhouses so odious, humiliating, demanding, and forbidding that one would do anything short of starving not to choose them. This principle would help remove the confusion between work and relief which had become common during the prior forty years.

Through “least eligibility,” the responsibility for providing an adequate standard of wages was transferred away from the assistance system to the normal employment market. When in 1834 a new Poor Law came into being, this was the rule that was essentially followed. The only thing worse than dependency would be death itself. The Poor Law reform of 1834 was the most important welfare legislation passed in the nineteenth century. It became the model for welfare policy for years to come.

When the new law went into effect, it was greeted with great anger. Probably no piece of legislation in English history has ever been so hated, cursed and despised. The English poor were being compelled to be “independent” and forced into the competitive labor market. Under the old system, they had been given care as dependents; now they were to take care of themselves in the face of extremely difficult circumstances. They were now “free and independent” in a new and unheard-of way.

One of England’s greatest writers was on hand to comment on this development. Charles Dicken’s novel, *Oliver Twist*, is a blistering satirical attack on the new Poor Law and on the principles that animated it, including the awareness that “independence” in the new political economy resulted in isolation and abandonment for many people. What was clear was that laissez faire economic principles were to be the prominent principles on which progress, if it was to occur, would need to rest. Economics or economic self-sufficiency and its accompanying virtues had now become the epicenter of welfare policy.

### **America’s Poor Law Response**

This debate was watched carefully in America, and it influenced American attitudes and subsequent social policy regarding relief during the first half of the nineteenth century. Many Americans agreed that poverty was not a result of defects in the economic order, but rather of individual character deficiencies which the poor laws only exasperated. Intemperance, laziness, improvidence, and lack of moral character—singly or in combination—were thus held accountable for most cases of want. Charitable organizations felt strongly the

need, therefore, to avoid indiscriminate almsgiving, lest the unworthy get what was meant for the worthy poor. The worthy, those driven to seek alms as a result of an act of God, were obviously entitled to more comforts than those impoverished because of their own folly or vice. Despite the practical difficulties in distinguishing between the two classes of poor, most people felt the great majority of cases of poverty could be traced to vice and personal failings. As a result, they believed it was not helpful to show kindness and mercy to welfare recipients. In fact, they felt such behavior only weakened character, made recipients of such acts content to remain dependent and destroyed their moral fiber.

There was a strong belief that “poverty which proceeds from improvidence and vice ought to feel the consequences and penalties which God has annexed.” By removing the dread of want, widely held to be the prime mover of the lower orders of society, the poor laws destroyed the main incentive to industry. The laws “have come in collision with the retributive justice of the deity, and frustrated, to a certain degree, his plan for reclaiming and meliorating our fallen race,” proclaimed a Pennsylvania minister. Governor Thomas of Delaware told the Legislature in 1824: “If the door of public commiseration is thrown too widely open the great stimulus to exertion, which providence in his wisdom, has implanted in the bosom of the community, is too apt to be weakened” (Poor Laws, 1833).

Perhaps most troublesome, however, was the pernicious influence the poor laws were believed to have on the relations between rich and poor. Francis Wayland, in *Elements of Political Economy*, the best-selling text in the field before 1860, saw the poor laws promoting insubordination; once the obligation of the rich to support the poor was admitted, where would it stop? Dissatisfaction on the part of the poor, because they felt they should be supported better, would likely lead to “collision between the classes.” Equally galling was the attitude of the pauper that relief was his right and the consequent lack of gratitude toward those who made it possible. In addition, compulsory charity deprived the giver of the pleasure of observing the supplicants’ joy when his plea was granted. Such was the popular

wisdom of the nineteenth century regarding welfare reform (Klebaner, 1964).

The most notable results of the welfare debate in America during this period was that policy and practice followed closely English reform patterns, particularly the impetus to institutionalize assistance. Organized charitable societies with highly fixed rules of procedure became the common practice in the private sphere; and in public relief, poorhouses replaced informal outdoor relief. There was no clearly defined method of dealing with people in trouble during this period. The method, which can best be described as punitive and moralistic, grew out of the prevailing ideology regarding economic dependency. The fault lay in the moral weakness of the individual and religion was deemed the best source of information for dealing with the morally weak. What was clear then already was how the Christian virtues of mercy, justice, and humility, as related to the poor, were being contextualized and interpreted within the prevailing ideology regarding economic dependency of the times.

### **The Professionalization of Welfare Practice**

Many leaders in the welfare field during the next seventy-five years were in close touch with new developments in the physical and social sciences. For many, the passion to achieve a "scientific" charity became little short of a mania. In this pursuit they found support in the clarity and ordered assurance of the sociology of Spencer which agreed so well with the biology of Darwin. Charity Organization Societies, the major welfare agencies during this period, became highly vocal exponents of "scientific charity." Since most of the needy were recipients of help from public relief authorities, and since the administration of public relief had for generations been under fire in England and America, they primarily operated from the proposition that public relief was the cause of "pauperism" or dependence. Charity Organization Societies believed strongly, therefore, that if charity were not tempered by judgment, recipients would inevitably learn to be dependent.

In this new "scientific" conception of charity, the old conception of charity as a sentiment of kindness or benevolence was replaced by the higher

conception of it as a "scientific law of love." Law meant an order or process, discovered by the human mind through experience. Benevolence, it was said, had been nothing but quackery, however amiable its motive, until it found the effective methods and sound principles of its science. Mary Richmond's (1917) book *Social Diagnosis*, one of the earliest social work texts, first articulated a scientific method of charity for the rapidly developing social work profession. The focus of this scientific method was the study of "personal character under adversity," and the influences which mold it for good or bad (Cabot, 1915).

What had been developed earlier as popular

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*Economic models have dominated our ideas of doing good and welfare dependency.*

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wisdom regarding dependency was now given a procedural means to be carried out. The means were scientific and represented the "immutable laws" of creation. These methods not only sanctioned the economically dominated notions of dependency but better yet, they were "marketable," enabling social work to become a true profession, similar to medicine, in a market economy. Those who helped without the means of science were labeled "do-gooders" or "bleeding hearts," labels the new professional social workers were anxious to repudiate. Acting justly and showing mercy, which had been suspect at an earlier time, now were almost completely out of the picture.

### **Critical Voices**

Not everyone agreed with this popular wisdom, however. Jane Addams (1860-1935), a leading figure in the field of charity, found the new scientific methods harsh and the focus narrow. She wrote (1961):

One of the root difficulties ... lies in the fact that the only families who apply for aid to charitable agencies are those who have come to grief on the industrial side ... they are industrially ailing, and must be bolstered and helped into industrial health. The charity visitor ... lays all the stress of her teaching and advice upon the industrial virtues ....

The members of her assigned family may have charms and virtues ... but it is her business to stick to the industrial side. For most of the years during a decade of residence in a settlement, my mind was sore and depressed over the difficulties of the charitable relationship. The incessant clashing of ethical standards ... made it seem reasonable to say that nothing could be done until industrial conditions were made absolutely democratic ....

Recently, however, there has come to my mind the suggestion of a principle, that while the painful condition of administering charity is the inevitable discomfort of a transition into a more democratic relation, the perplexing experiences of the actual administration have a genuine value of their own ....

The Hebrew prophet made three requirements from those who would join the great forward-moving procession led by Jehovah. "To love mercy," and at the same time "to do justly," is the difficult task. To fulfill the first requirement alone is to fall into the error of indiscriminate giving, with all its disastrous results; to fulfill the second exclusively is to obtain the stern policy of withholding, and it results in such a dreary lack of sympathy and understanding that the establishment of justice is impossible. It may be that the combination of the two can never be attained save we fulfill still the third requirement, "to walk humbly with God," which may mean to walk for many dreary miles beside the lowliest of his creatures...with the pangs and misgivings to which the poor human understanding is subjected whenever it attempts to comprehend the meaning of life. (275-77)

Her goals, methods and Christian principles were quite different from the popular wisdom of her time. She hoped an infusion of Christian humility would help give meaning to the discomfort she experienced with the new charity methods, recognizing clearly that justice and mercy were being defined within the pervasive economic dependency model, the popular wisdom of her contemporaries.

But it was not the biblical principle of humility that would make for more democratic and secure relationships or facilitate the attainment of mercy and justice, as she hoped. Rather, it was economic theory itself.

## **New**

### **Economic Models**

In the traditional framework of economic theory, the forces of the market automatically kept

the economy at full employment and its "invisible hand" led to the best outcome for all and to the production of goods and services society needed. But sixteen depressions between 1870 and 1929 were an embarrassing discrepancy between classical theory and facts. The traditional belief that economic problems are best solved by benign governmental neglect was finally undermined by the Great Depression of the 1930's. Hesitantly by 1929, in full measure by 1933, thousands of Americans came to share the conviction that personal security and individual liberty were not antagonistic principles, but rather interdependent and mutually supportive aspects of the general welfare. Without security, no man was truly free; without liberty, security implied tyranny.

The concept was hardly novel, however. What was novel was to accompany these principles with an economic rationale. The failure of classical economic analysis to provide solutions opened the door to new economic views. This rationale was macro-economics, or Keynesian economics, introduced during the 1930's depression by John Maynard Keynes. Keynes argued that a laissez-faire market economy contains the all-too-frequent potential to generate insufficient demand, thus creating involuntary unemployment unless the state initiates activist and interventionist economic policies. Appropriate governmental fiscal interventions, he argued, consisting primarily of public expenditures and taxation, could actually increase consumer demand and overcome any unemployment caused by a deficient demand.

The Keynesian view of an unmanaged market economy that is subject to recurrent recessions and depressions provided a fundamental rationale for the emergence and growth of the welfare state without challenging the hegemony of private capital or the notion of a free economic market. Government expenditures for the welfare state, it was now believed, stimulated production, augmented the national income, and increased human capital investments. Thus spending for welfare was perceived as beneficial rather than detrimental in an otherwise recessed economy. In this view, public expenditures for social welfare should actually increase rather than shrink in times of economic recession.

Henceforth, a wide range of welfare policies generally considered vices in classical economics suddenly became virtues in the context of Keynesian economic theory. The Keynesian view justified the expansion of income transfers to the poor, the expansion of social insurance and unemployment compensation, and even the monetary compensation for those who suffer unduly from market dysfunctions. The origins of the welfare state were thus, in good part, responses to the Great Depression and Keynesian economics. The Social Security Act of 1935, the Employment Act of 1946, and the Great Society policies and programs of the 1960's, could be understood as social measures consistent with the analysis of Keynesian economic theory. Although moral (both Christian and humanistic) rationales accompanied the introduction of these programs, their support in large, I would argue, rested primarily upon this new economic justification.

Keynesian economics has not gone unchallenged. Too often forecasts using macroeconomic models failed. But, more importantly, Keynesian economics was attacked by Reaganomics in the 1970's and 1980's. Reaganomics urged a return to classical capitalism, the reduction of government in economic matters, and the shrinking of the welfare state. As a result, a lively controversy developed among politicians and economists as to what model and economic approach best captures the nature of the economy and indicates what government could or should do to achieve growth in GNP, lower unemployment, or control inflation.

Although the controversy continues, there developed a strong consensus that economic theories now establish the boundaries of what is possible and even desirable in most domains of organized life, including welfare policy. Economic theory and analysis now frequently precedes, sets the parameters for, and has become synonymous with welfare policy. Economics is regarded as being independent of and overarching other societal policies, in effect defining the morality of the culture. This is most evident in the purposes or aims, even in the terminology of welfare reform today. Even some Christian economists are busy searching the Bible to justify family self-sufficiency and individual responsibility as Biblically-based welfare goals or principles, giving evidence to the pervasiveness of this economic ethos.

### **Contemporary Perspectives on Welfare and Economics**

What is the relationship today between economics and welfare policy? Is the relationship antithetical or is there a more consonant viewpoint? Welfare historian Michael Katz (1986) sees welfare policy as essentially explaining and responding to the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor and their treatment. He sees these categories primarily as economic ones, meaning what category you were in depended on your ability and willingness to work. He also stresses the tight correlation historically between changes in the low-wage market policies for the deserving and in wel-

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*Christian principle offers  
a different emphasis to  
welfare reform.*

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fare work policies for the undeserving. Mimi Abramovitz (1988) postulates the addition of a "family ethic" along side the work ethic, as the controlling paradigms of welfare policymakers today. Both Katz's and Abramovitz's analysis borrow from Frances Piven and Richard Cloward's (1971) thesis on the relationship between welfare policy and the regulating of economic and social relations. In one of their latest books, *The New Class War*, Piven and Cloward (1982) argue that welfare policies, particularly as expanded in the 1960's and 70's and justified by Keynesian economic models, undercut the low-wage labor market. They claim the large cuts in poor people's programs under Ronald Reagan and the current anxiety about welfare dependency have grown from an expansion in welfare during the 1960's and 70's that served to strengthen the bargaining power of workers not to accept low-wage jobs.

In many ways, the welfare crisis today appears very similar to the crisis that occurred in England earlier. One solution tried then and suggested now is as Charles Murray (1984) bluntly suggests, "scrapping the entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working-aged persons, including AFDC, Medicaid, subsidized housing, and the rest. It would leave the working-aged person with no recourse whatsoever except the job market, family, friends or private locally funded services...cut the knot, for there is no way to untie it."



As in England, so in America<sup>8</sup> a less radical and more utilitarian approach has been adopted: the implementation of the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988, federal legislation that redefines the responsibilities of parents and government for families receiving benefits under the AFDC program. The FSA's centerpiece, the Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS), provides new funding for state initiatives that seek to move people from welfare to employment and to reduce long-term welfare dependency. The act identifies a set of targeting and participation goals and a choice of service methods for achieving them, allowing the states to transform these into concrete programs. The act targets long-term welfare recipients and works toward a largely non-exempt caseload. Emphasis is also on increased job training so as to enable recipients to obtain better paying jobs.

States have responded with reform programs, many consisting of coercive and at times punitive program requirements for recipients, but with little or no increased funding to carry out the new federal mandates. In fact, in 1991 the amount of funds states allocated towards the JOBS program as a proportion of the available matching federal funds was only a median ratio of 65 nationally (Candidate Kit, 1992). This means 35 percent of federal monies needed if these program goals were to be even minimally successful, went unclaimed. Many states have had difficulty putting up the matching funds because of economic recession or have chosen to forego some of the funds for other reasons. With few states increasing funding, most job training will give way to the less costly job search strategies.

In addition, with limited child care assistance and the majority of the targeted jobs paying the minimum wage (with no health care benefits), most recipients will not better themselves. In fact, the government's own research studies indicate that while the range of tested pilot JOBS programs modestly improved people's income, they proved unlikely to move most people out of poverty. These studies suggest that if reducing poverty is the goal, other policies directed at providing more income to the working poor would need to be added as program complements (Gueron & Pauly, 1991). These JOBS programs are also highly

dependent on a strong local labor market. Without this, government assisted workers simply displace others who are unemployed and seeking employment.

President Bush in his 1992 State of the Union address praised state efforts to "replace the assumptions of the welfare state" with inducements to get welfare recipients to accept "responsibility to get their lives in order." He pledged to help this movement by making it easier and quicker for states to obtain waivers from federal regulations needed to implement new and more restrictive state welfare reforms. President Clinton has pledged, along this same line, to make welfare a "second chance, not a way of life."

There is little reason to believe, however, in the current political climate that minimum wages will increase or comprehensive health care, day care, and job training measures will be enacted. The costs of such measures would far exceed welfare savings and states have shown they are either not willing, or not in a position, to pay for such programs. What is happening instead, as in the past, is that the poor are being forced into the labor market without any lasting protection. Along with new work and family ethic policies has come a host of new humiliating and punitive sanctions introduced by differing states. Taken together, these welfare reforms intend to make any work, at any wage, seem preferable to the "dole."

This rhetoric regarding welfare dependency continues despite scant evidence that welfare generates dependency or promotes a lowering of moral character in recipients. Ironically, those who think that giving people welfare is debilitating and enhances dependency are the same ones who try to accumulate large amounts of money to leave to their children. To be sure, the insufficient grants and humiliating procedures of the existing welfare system demoralize people. The recurrent crises of welfare dependency are perhaps more reflections on the validity of economic theory than the character inadequacies of people who need assistance. Attitudes and practices related to doing good continue to be defined in economic terms. And in an environment particularly receptive to marketplace arguments and generally unreceptive to other values, individual and family behavior continues to be adjusted to the economic norms of family self-sufficiency and individual responsibility.

## **Christian Principles for Welfare Reform**

Which Christian principles might regulate or transform the current welfare debate? The Christian community has typically anchored discussions on issues related to welfare, such as poverty, human rights and social justice, to the principle of being created in the image of God. This means any discussion on how to relate to poor and dependent persons needs first of all to acknowledge these persons as being image bearers of God. This principle becomes the central regulating idea in all policy and practice.

Christian thought views the image of God in several ways. One way is as a characteristic or quality that humans possess. Typically this is taken to be human rationality or the moral ability to choose right and wrong and thus human freedom. Others view imaging God more as a relational concept, something humans do. We are created as a being-with—being with God, with others, with the environment and even with oneself. We image God when we relate properly in our interactions with each of these four realities of our world.

The image of God, therefore, is what we humans are, but also how we live together and are connected to God and the world. Being in community, in covenant, and in communion are ways of imaging God. Sin in the social dimension is a violation of these ways of being related. Being autonomous (apart), alienated (against), prideful (above), or irresponsible (below) all express sinful brokenness in imaging God. This is why the issue of justice is so basic in the Bible. Injustice violates the essential character of humanity. It prevents the highest calling of humanity—to portray at a human level the character and activity of God. Justice means, therefore, establishing the material and institutional relationships that best guarantee to every person the right or freedom to participate fully in the life of a community as an image bearer of God.

The Biblical concept of shalom characterizes this ideal community. In this community all relationships—with God, others and the environment—are harmonious and right. Justice and peace prevail in this righteous and responsible community. The Bible makes clear there should be no poverty in a community characterized by shalom. The Bible connects poverty with a lack of justice. The poor have a right to relief from their

poverty, because in their poverty they do not receive the respect due them as image bearers loved by God and for whom God desires shalom.

## **Welfare Reform Recommendations**

What welfare reform must do is transform our social and economic relationships to promote the imaging of God in all persons, rich and poor, so that our community is characterized by shalom. This transformation does not mean doing away with current capitalistic models. Capitalism, if appropriately regulated by Christian principles, is perhaps as promising as any economic arrangement practiced in the world today.

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Within the present economic order, at least two areas need transformation in relationship to welfare reform. These areas are work and wages. In spite of the curse pronounced by God on work, work is a gift of God. We work for the purposes of serving others and glorifying God. Work is also the primary means God has given us to provide for our daily needs. Whatever denies work, therefore, corrupts the very structure of human existence and image of God. Furthermore, those who hire others are responsible for paying a just wage, a wage based not on the legal minimum, but rooted in the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This means employers must pay wages that can support a life of dignity in service to God and others. Because ultimately wages come from God, an employer is actually paying out God’s wages to God’s servants. Not to pay proper wages is to defraud and embezzle from God.

Welfare reform should start, therefore, with a transformation of economic structures that tolerate and perpetuate the social injustices of unemployment and inadequate wages. Current unemployment rates are roughly 6 percent and poverty rates around 15. Our economic structures do not make available sufficient work for welfare recipients and what work is available does not pay a just and living wage. Coercing welfare recipients into this unjust economic structure without first addressing these injustices is not Christian wisdom.

In addition, unless these work and wage issues are addressed, government will most likely continually be called upon to subsidize these unjust economic practices. As the cost of this subsidizing increases, as is presently the case, voices advocating the repeal of current supports—our current poor laws—grow louder. The old arguments, rhetoric, and proposals of earlier poor law reforms resurface. In what has become historically a predictable cyclical pattern, a new “mean” season has again arrived for welfare recipients.

Unfortunately, the situation with work and wages is actually worsening. Economist Sheldon Danziger (1994) reports that 21 percent of males who graduated from college in 1991 found employment which paid less than \$15,000 a year. (Poverty income levels are presently set at slightly less than \$15,000 for a family of four.) Thirty-seven percent of male high school graduates in 1991 took work paying less than \$15,000 annually. Percentages for females are significantly higher for both groups. If employers can hire college graduates at income levels less than family poverty levels, few untrained, uneducated welfare mothers will be employable or find employment unless funding increases significantly for education, job training, and child care. As noted earlier, this most likely will not occur.

Neither does remaining on public assistance provide any brighter outlook. In 1992, only one state provided a benefit level, even when combining AFDC and food stamp benefits, above the poverty line (Selected Background, 1992). Christian principle demands large increased financial support by government, to lift welfare recipients out of poverty. If government does not adequately support welfare recipients, probably no one will. There is good reason why in our sinful world and religiously pluralistic society, government has a particularly important role to play in forestalling and undoing the injustices welfare recipients currently endure. There is little evidence given the aggressive impulses of human nature and from history to suppose that purely voluntary arrangements will be sufficient to right these injustices.

### **Judgementalism or Mercy**

There are many today, including many Christians, who are offended by these claims.

Some agree that poverty, low wages, and unemployment are unjust, perhaps even violations of God’s creational purposes and a distortion of being created in His image. But, they argue, the right to be relieved of these oppressions should be predicated at least partially, on the merit or behavior of welfare recipients themselves.

The Biblical record, however, lends little support for such a position. In significant stories having to do with legalistic attitudes toward sin, Jesus repeatedly reminds his listeners of God’s preference of mercy to sacrifice (Matthew 9:13, 12:7). Mercy triumphs over judgement, says James—in the context of what he refers to as the royal law, loving our neighbor as ourselves. He advocates we embrace welfare recipients as real neighbors, recognizing that those who have been oppressed must be treated as rich in faith and inheritors of the kingdom he promised those who love him (James 2:1-13). Christian principle requires we become servants of the oppressed, that we actually identify with the poor, exemplifying the Christian humility Jane Addams advocated.

John Calvin (1962) whose theology many today believe spurred market economic thought, provides an excellent summary of Christian mercy when he says:

The Lord commands all men without exception “to do good.” Yet the great part of them are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider what men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love. However, it is among members of the household of faith that this same image is more carefully to be noted, in so far as it has been renewed and restored through the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say, “He is a stranger”; but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you, by virtue of the fact that he forbids you to despise your own flesh (Isaiah 58:7). Say, “He is contemptible and worthless”; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in his own place in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to him. Say that he does not deserve even your least

effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions. Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf. You will say, "He has deserved something far different of me." Yet what has the Lord deserved? . . . It is that we remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them.

Ultimately, the major question regarding mercy may be in deciding whether to protect the economic and social situation of children. Over 65 percent of AFDC recipients are children. Imposing punitive policies so as to constrain or shape the behavior of adults really means choosing to harm children. If punitive policies are enacted without the supports of child care, health care, job training and jobs that pay a livable wage, the results are likely to be tragic for children. By placing a time limit on welfare without creating viable alternatives, many families will break up, send their children to live with relatives, or show up in shelters. More children will also eventually end up in foster or institutional care.

### Summary

Christians should avoid being seduced or co-opted by economic based definitions of social problems, even though they have again captured the welfare reform agenda. We must reject theories that attribute poverty solely to personal morality without recognizing the relationship between welfare and economic ideology. The pressures for welfare reform have occurred as the result not only of a fiscal crisis, but also from the erroneous economically based premise that those on welfare need to be motivated by punitive policies, because if given a choice, they will choose welfare over work. Christians ought to focus instead on righting the injustices of unemployment and unjust wages and advocate for policies that reduce poverty and provide a stronger "safety net" for families who are unemployed or receiving inadequate wages. This includes funding for increased education, job training, and employment opportunities for those

presently receiving welfare. Christians should oppose punitive and invasive measures directed toward AFDC clients and other low-income people. Perhaps doing good is not popular wisdom today, but we certainly ought to continue to recognize it as Christian wisdom.

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