

GOVERNMENT WELFARISM: A Theory Hallucinating Biblical Support

By Alex Soto

WHAT WE CANNOT BEAR may give birth to new powers of perception. The widow who cannot bear the loss of her beloved may perceive his existence still at her side. She may continue to butter his toast in the morning, may still wash his clothes, may continue to take her daily constitutional with him, and may still read with him before bedtime. Unbearability, at times, makes us see more with our hearts than with our eyes.

Perhaps a similar psychological explanation underlies the rise among Christians of welfarism—the doctrine that the civil authorities should financially aid the poor in one way or another. Poverty presents images often too painful to tolerate: intense hunger impelling emaciated bodies to rummage trash bins; children who attend school wearing dirt-stained clothes, making them the focus of peer ridicule; men reduced to the indignity of begging; tired souls who lay on sidewalks and park benches at night, covered with whatever they could find to keep warm. Such scenes oftentimes move Christians to action, any action, so long as indigent persons receive aid. If government action can accomplish this then compassion requires it.¹ For the government to neglect this supposed duty would be hardhearted.²

And having permitted the State into poverty relief, the scope of its responsibility has expanded to burst all bounds. With the poor, Christian welfarists maintain that the State should also aid the elderly, the disabled, the involuntarily unemployed, the sick, the homeless, and those in family crises—not only in our own nation but also in others through foreign aid. These should be provided food, clothing, shelter, health care and health insurance, education, and job placement. Such provisions should be obtained by governmental policies that redistribute the wealth, positively discriminate, place strict controls on multinational corporations, force racial integration, and require businesses to consider all categories of people for hire. Government-jireh is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think!

Yet any biblical support for this has been hallucinated, spurred perhaps by a noble desire to relieve the poor. Without question, our Lord enjoins care for the poor, but not by means of State financing and administration.³ And God must approve our means as well as our end sought (Rom. 3:8). Seeking means unapproved by God has caused welfarists to error in at least the following four ways.

¹ See Marvin Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism: What It Is, What It Does, and How It Can Transform America* (New York: Free Press, 2000). A popular proponent of Compassionate Conservatism was George W. Bush. He wished to replace the Democrat Party's highly bureaucratic form of welfarism with a form of welfarism that merely provides "seed money" (223) for already existing and effective private charities. In this way, he thought, "Government cannot be replaced by charities—but it can welcome them as partners" (*Compassionate Conservatism*, 221).

² Bush would challenge fellow Republicans who might have misgivings about Compassionate Conservatism: "Should our party be led by someone who boasts of a hard heart?" (*Compassionate Conservatism*, 13).

³ To see how God wills relief of poverty, see my tract, *Charity That Ends Poverty*, available at www.annodomini.co.

1. READ WELFARISM INTO GENERALITIES

Many of the verses used to justify government aid to the poor are simply too general. The Bible's general teachings are a favorite refuge for preconceived theories. For example, Dispensationalism—the position teaching that Christians are not bound to any Mosaic commandment except those repeated in the New Testament—appeals to the Bible's general command to love. Yet they ignore the many Old Testament commandments specifying how to love, choosing rather to fill in the duty of love with their own specific commandments. This refuge in generalities especially occurs in political discussions. A general term to which welfarists often appeal is “justice.” God does indeed encourage justice and discourage injustice. For example, because Israel would “deny justice to the oppressed” (Amos 2:7), God sternly rebuked them: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17). The Lord pronounced woes even on the civil legislators of Israel “who enact evil statutes” and “deprive the needy of justice and rob the poor of My people of their rights” (Isa. 10:1, 2). Another catchword among Statist welfarists is “oppression.” Here, too, Scripture repeatedly condemns oppressive behavior. Israel is told to “Amend your ways” and to “practice justice” by “not oppress[ing] the alien, the orphan, or the widow” (Jer. 7:3, 5, 6). God castigates the wealthy women of Israel “who oppress the poor, who crush the needy” (Amos 4:1). Zechariah encourages the people: “Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor” (Zech. 7:9–10).

Welfarism's Non Sequitur

Yet where in the above verses does God instruct the State to aid the poor with financial aid, subsistence programs, education, clothing, housing, and so forth? These verses commanding justice and forbidding oppression are too general. Welfare advocates must read their specific teachings into these biblical generalities. The logic of welfarism goes like this:

- (1) God clearly wills us to do justice to the poor.
- (2) God wills us as a society to do justice to the poor.
- (3) In many ways, the State is the arm of society.
- (4) Therefore, the State may engage in welfarist activities.

The conclusion does not follow from the premises, however. The first two premises are certainly true, as the above verses display. And premise three accords with Scripture as well. Yet we can see the non sequitur when we throw in another relevant biblical truth: God strictly confines the State to His Law (Deut. 17:18–20). So a more biblical argument is:

- (1) God clearly wills us to do justice to the poor.
- (2) God wills us as a society to do justice to the poor.
- (3) In many ways, the State is the arm of society.
- (4) Since God strictly confines the State to His Law, we must cite a *specific* command allowing the State into this or that area.
- (5) The proffered verses give no specific command for the State to engage in welfarist activities.
- (6) Therefore, Statist welfarism is yet unproven by these verses.

Defining Justice and Oppression Biblically

Well, what does God mean when He demands justice for the poor and that oppression of them must cease? The verses have to mean something. If we would define justice and oppression by God's specific guidance, instead of defining it by our will (as Dispensationalism does with "love"), we will get a grasp of what God means.

Many of the cited passages themselves name the specific acts of justice and oppression. Leviticus 19:15, for instance, warns against perverting justice, which it specifies as a judge's favoritism toward a particular socioeconomic class. In the first chapter of Isaiah, after encouraging the rulers of Judah to "seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (v. 17), it goes on to explain that this should be done by stopping the practices of murder, of dishonest commerce, of bribery, and of ignoring the legal pleas from orphans and widows (vv. 21–23). These texts say nothing of monetary aid as government's means of justice or the lack of State programs as oppression.

Even in passages that do not specify the acts of injustice or oppression, familiarity with Scripture's ethical system would help flesh it out. Notice the many illustrations Scripture provides: *Individuals* would be oppressing the poor or performing an injustice to them if this individual refused the poor their gleaning rights of his land (Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–21); or refused them the closely related right of harvesting lands resting during the Sabbatical Year (Ex. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:1–7); or if through fraud or violence property was stolen (Mic. 2:1–2) or refused redemption (Lev. 25:23–27, 29, 31) or not returned during the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25:10, 13, 28, 31); or if they encouraged the poor in their laziness (Prov. 6:9–11).

In their loans to the poor, individuals could oppress by charging interest (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35–37); or by refusing to lend charitably (Deut. 15:7–11); or by keeping a collateralized garment overnight (Ex. 22:26–27; Deut. 24:12–13, 17); or by taking as collateral the poor's necessary means for living (Deut. 24:6); or by shaming the poor by searching their belongings for appropriate collateral (Deut. 24:10–11).

And injustice could be performed to slaves if they were ruled over ruthlessly (Lev. 25:43, 46, 53); or were forced to serve more than six years (Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:1–6, 12); or refused redemption from slavery (Lev. 25:47–52); or obstructed from release in the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:40, 54); or when freed were not furnished with the means to start a productive life anew (Dt. 15:13–14); or the freed slave was not allowed to take his family that he brought into slavery (Ex. 21:3; Lev. 25:41).

Familial injustice could happen when parents refuse to leave an inheritance for their children (Deut. 21:16–17; Prov. 13:22; 19:14); or when children refuse to care for their elderly parents or grandparents (1 Tim. 5:4, 8, 16).

Churches may oppress by not utilizing one of the God-ordained purposes of the tithe: the relief of the poor (Deut. 14:28–29; Acts 6:1–4; 11:29–30; 20:34–35; Rom. 15:25–26; 1 Cor. 16:1–3; 2 Cor. 8–9; Gal. 2:10; 1 Tim. 5:16).

Civil government may oppress the destitute by refusing to hear their cause in the courts or by railroading their trials (Ex. 23:6–9; Amos 5:12); or by turning a blind eye to their oppressors; or by judges not giving proper penalties to their oppressors.

Businesses act unjustly to the lowly by stealing from them through unjust weights and measures (Lev. 19:35–36; Deut. 25:13–16); or by withholding daily wages from employees who need it (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14–15); or by denying them rest on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; 23:12); or by taking advantage of the ignorant (Ex. 22:22–24).

Notice that in all of these failed duties nothing like welfarism is named. Consequently, when Scripture decries the injustice and oppression in society we should not read into these expressions the State's lack of welfarist policies and programs. We should interpret these biblical terms *biblically*.

How Government Is “For Your Good”

Another passage teaching a general truth to which welfarists frequently appeal is Romans 13:3–4:

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Rom. 13:3–4)

About this text, Timothy Keller comments: “Romans 13 does not provide a specific mandate for the state’s aid to the poor, but it does allow the state to be involved in a wider variety of activities that positively promote temporal welfare, rather than simply involving itself in the restraint of crime and injustice.”⁴ And Wayne Grudem repeatedly cites this passage to justify any number of government intrusions into poverty relief. Believing that Romans 13:3 teaches “that government has a role in promoting the common good of a society,”⁵ he writes:

I think there is some need for government-supported welfare programs *to help cases of urgent need* (for example, to provide a “safety net” to keep people from going hungry or without clothing or shelter).

I also think it is appropriate for government to provide enough funding so that everyone is able *to gain enough skills and education to earn a living*. So with regard to some basic necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter, and some education) I think it is right for government to “take from everybody else and give to the poor.” Such assistance can be provided from general tax revenues.

Those convictions are based on the purpose of government to promote the general well-being of the society.⁶

Yet Christians should beware of any teacher that selects to follow God’s general principles and yet ignores the specific jots and tittles of the Law (Matt. 5:18). Such a teacher will likely establish his own heart, not God’s.⁷ Grudem thinks that Romans 13:3–4—which teaches the general truth that civil rulers are for our good—frees him to decide many matters according to what seems right to him, only leaving him to answer the question, “What is the best way to do good for the nation in this area of its life?” He immediately explains how he goes about answering this question:

The answers I give do not come directly from moral principles of the Bible or from biblical teachings that speak directly to the issue, but instead come from an evaluation of whether a certain policy truly fulfills the government purpose of doing good for the nation as a whole. . . .

The biblical justification for this approach is the basic responsibility of those in authority to use their office as “God’s servant *for your good*” (Rom. 13:4).⁸

⁴ Timothy J. Keller, “Theonomy and the Poor: Some Reflections,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, eds. William S. Barker & W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1990), 281.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Politics—According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 80.

⁶ Grudem, *Politics*, 281.

⁷ In the collaborative work, *Wealth & Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), three of the four authors deny that the Bible offers a specific economic theory or deny that there is such a thing as distinctively Christian economics (101, 107, 118, 124, 125, 140, 168, 181, 183; one wonders why they contributed to a book on *Christian economics*). These denials, of course, come before they offer their specific economic theories that actually contradict the specific theory of the Bible!

⁸ Grudem, *Politics*, 513. This statement opens the chapter on “Special Groups.” Though he intends this statement to describe his interpretive approach only for matters discussed in this chapter, he utilizes this approach throughout his book on several other matters. For a detailed critique of Grudem’s book, see my booklet *Review of Wayne Grudem’s Politics—According to the Bible . . . or Talk Radio?* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2013).

As with the other verses, though, welfarists read their sociopolitical philosophy into Romans 13:3–4. When Paul says that rulers are “for your good,” must that mean welfarism? Is it not more than a little odd, then, that no *specific* welfarist duties are laid on the State in the Bible? God does direct His civil ministers to execute His commandments (Deut. 17:18–20; Ps. 119:46; Prov. 16:12), which commandments are “for your good” (Deut. 10:13). In these commandments the Lord gives no welfarist duties to the State but rather *punitive* duties, which is exactly what Paul specifies in Romans 13:3–4: rulers are a terror to bad conduct and a sword-bearer to avenge God’s wrath on wrongdoers. In this way civil authorities are “for our good,” enabling law-abiders to “lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:2). In this Romans passage, therefore, Paul describes two sides of one coin: the one side, that of punishing criminals, simultaneously creates the other side, that of good social conditions whereby godliness can flourish.

Moreover, rulers “approve” or “praise” (Rom. 13:3, KJV) the good when, for example, they justify the righteous in the courts against the offenses of the wicked, according to Christ’s righteous law: “When people have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty” (Deut. 25:1). Such righteous rule is for our good, bringing an exalted city that rejoices and where the wicked perish (Prov. 11:10–11).

In political discussions, we come across too much advocacy for positions that *seem* right to the advocate—“there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12)—and too little advocacy for God’s revealed laws, which we *assuredly know* are “for our good” (Deut. 6:24; cf. Deut. 10:13).

Welfarists’ tender hearts have hallucinated support from these passages.

2. MISINTERPRET PET PASSAGES: SABBATH LEGISLATION

Political welfare advocates sometimes appeal to *specific* guidance in the Bible. This is a more trustworthy method than the refuge in generalities criticized above. But, of course, the passage appealed to must be interpreted properly. Failure to do so has led many to waste much ink on the laws concerning the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee Year. In this legislation welfarists believe they have discovered a gold mine for their policies. A coalition of activists even labeled one of their movements to fight global poverty, “Jubilee 2000.”⁹

The Sabbatical Year occurred every seven years and the Jubilee Year occurred every fifty years. In these sabbath years,¹⁰ poverty-debts were canceled, poverty-slaves freed, and in the Jubilee lands were restored to their original owners. By these laws, some welfarists hold, God decries private property:

The whole concept of the Jubilee year flies in the face of private-property rights as we know them.¹¹

We as Christians can institute the Jubilee among ourselves, give up all private property, have everything in common, and start living the way God wants all the world to live.¹²

⁹ Jim Wallis and Sojourners, *Justice for the Poor Participant’s Guide: Love God. Serve People. Change the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 45.

¹⁰ Though only the Sabbatical Year is expressly called a sabbath (Lev. 25:2, 4), both were considered sabbaths inasmuch as both required the land to rest (Ex. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:2, 4, 11–12).

¹¹ William E. Diehl, “The Guided-Market System,” in *Wealth & Poverty*, 68.

¹² Art Gish, “Decentralist Economics,” in *Wealth & Poverty*, 146.

By these laws God supposedly gives the State the right to interfere in the free market for the sake of the poor:

This passage [Lev. 25] prescribes justice in a way that haphazard handouts by wealthy philanthropists never will. The year of jubilee was an institutionalized structure that affected all Israelites automatically. It was the poor family's right to recover their inherited land at the jubilee. Returning the land was not a charitable courtesy that the wealthy might extend if they pleased. . . .

Only God is an absolute owner. And the right of each family to have the means to earn a living takes priority over a purchaser's "property rights" or a totally free market economy.¹³

And this legislation supposedly teaches God's desire for economic equality:

Every seventh year was a Sabbath year in which all debts were to be canceled and all slaves freed (Deut 15:1–6). Any inequality that existed was to be remedied every seven years.¹⁴

The sabbatical release of debts was an institutionalized mechanism to prevent the kind of economic divisions where a few people would possess all the capital while others had no productive resources.¹⁵

A great deal of the Mosaic legislation was designed to keep the ordinary disparities between the wealthy and the poor from becoming aggravated and extreme.¹⁶

In short, they believe a major purpose of these sabbath years is "humanitarian,"¹⁷ intending to alleviate the hardships of poverty.

Yet one scholar retorts: "the purpose [of this legislation] is not, as many hold, 'humanitarian.' Certainly, 'the poor of thy people' ate of the field in the sabbath year, but they could glean the fields every year, so that no special sabbatical year was necessary to provide for the poor."¹⁸ Before making Moses the patron saint for LBJ's Great Society, we should look more carefully at these laws.

For starters, they definitely did not decry private property. In the Jubilee, lands restored to particular families, not to Israel in general as common lands. Though God ultimately owns all lands, with the human occupants as mere tenants (Lev. 25:23), still any lands lawfully obtained actually became the property of that private individual or family (Acts 5:4). These private families, and these families alone, made all decisions for the land indicative of private ownership: whether to sell it, whether to redeem it, what to grow on it, whom to employ to work it, and so forth. Ironically, these sabbath passages declare as clearly as any the right of private property. Even Christian socialist Ron Sider acknowledges that by the Jubilee law "private property was not abolished."¹⁹ The prohibition of tampering with a neighbor's landmarks reinforces this sacred right of private property (Deut. 19:14; 27:17).

And neither did these laws allow the State to intervene in the free market. To be sure, one can use the civil courts to punish the stealing or defrauding of money and property (Ex. 22:1–4, 7–13), which includes wages (Lev. 19:13) and real estate (Luke 12:13–14). This is the extent to which the State may interfere with the markets.

¹³ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 69.

¹⁴ Gish, "Decentralist Economics," in *Wealth & Poverty*, 136.

¹⁵ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 71.

¹⁶ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), 33.

¹⁷ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 70.

¹⁸ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1973), 1:140.

¹⁹ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 68.

The egalitarian reading of these texts, though, is probably the greatest misinterpretation of them.²⁰ For, first, these laws did not equalize incomes. Lazy and unproductive Jews would have to sell their land. Diligent and productive entrepreneurs would swoop up the land and make it profitable until the time of Jubilee. When restored to the original owner, the land was hardly in a condition to produce wealth, having lain untilled for a year (49th year was a Sabbatical Year). And it would have to lay untilled for another entire year (50th year was the Jubilee Year). By the time the fifty-first year came, if the family retained their unproductive habits, they would have to sell the land again to survive. So though the Jubilee would tend toward equalization, the varying work-habits of the people would tend toward inequality. Second, these laws did not equalize property. Urban houses that were sold to escape poverty remained with the new owners in the Jubilee if the original owners did not redeem them within a year of the sale (Lev. 25:29–30). The Jubilee did not equalize land holdings for foreigners either, since they inherited no land in Israel. This goes for foreign slaves in Israel as well, who not only received no land in the Jubilee, but did not even receive their freedom from slavery as did Hebrew slaves (Lev. 25:39–46). We could also mention how family inheritances distributed lands unequally. As North points out, “the law could not possibly have equalized land holdings; families are not all the same size. The larger the family was, the smaller the individual inheritance was.”²¹ Additionally, firstborn sons received double the portion of the other sons (Deut. 21:17), while wicked sons could be disinherited (Prov. 17:2).

Nor can we even consider these as laws for the care of the poor. As mentioned, urban dwellings could not be redeemed after a year; and where but urban areas do the destitute naturally gravitate? And the Jubilee did no good for poverty-stricken foreigners, whether slave or free. If Jubilee did not aid destitute foreigners and destitute urban dwellers, we see how off the mark is Sider’s belief: “The year of jubilee was an institutionalized structure that affected all Israelites automatically.”²²

Now Sider confesses: “I have only a very incomplete idea of what a modern version of the year of jubilee might look like.”²³ He offers a suggestion though: “God wants society’s pool of productive assets to be disturbed so that everyone has the resources to earn his or her own way.”²⁴ Apparently, the people of any given society must combine their real estate, stocks, bonds, pensions, businesses, and evenly disperse them. However, such an arrangement would place capital into the hands of kingdom-obstructors. How can this be an application of Jubilee if biblical Jubilee excluded unbelievers from the benefits of it? Sider’s proposal would be a “program of economic surrender to paganism”²⁵—the opposite of God’s will for the world’s economic flow. Our policies should reflect the Bible’s fiscal expectation wherein “the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous” (Prov. 13:22). Recall how the righteous people of God plundered the Egyptians; and how God allowed the peoples of Canaan to create a land flowing with milk and honey only to be commandeered by God’s righteous conquerors; and how the wealth of the sinner Haman was stored up for righteous Esther and Mordecai (Est. 8:2).

²⁰ Of great aid on this subject are: David Chilton, “The Jubilee Principle,” in *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, TX.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982); Gary North, “Boundaries of the Jubilee Land Laws,” in *Boundaries and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Leviticus* (online: <http://www.entrewave.com/freebooks/docs/html/gnbd/Chapter25.htm> [accessed September 20, 2013]).

²¹ North, Commentary on Leviticus 25.

²² Sider, *Rich Christians*, 69.

²³ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 266.

²⁴ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 161.

²⁵ North, Commentary on Leviticus 25.

A major reason Sider finds it difficult to conceive of a modern version of Jubilee is that God never intended its application outside of ancient Israel. Statutes tied to the Promise Land, as were the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee Year, uniquely pictured the coming Messianic-King and the kingdom blessings He would bring. Failure to understand the significance of the Land contributes to misunderstandings about Land-statutes.

God promised to Abraham and his descendants a plot of ground in the Middle East (Gen. 15:18–21). It would be their “inheritance” (Deut. 26:1; Ps. 105:9–11; Heb. 11:8). Yet the faithful always knew that the Land foreshadowed the Messiah and the kingdom blessings we receive in Him. All of God’s promises are affirmed in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20), and the Abrahamic promise of the Land is no exception. The apostle reads this promise as the very gospel of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:8, 14, 16, 18). And God opened the mind of the one to whom the promise was spoken so that he would understand the promise correctly. Thus Abraham looked beyond the physical real estate unto the greater land to which it pointed: “the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God”; Abraham and his righteous seed “were longing for a better country—a heavenly one . . . for [God] has prepared a city for them” (Heb. 11:10, 16).²⁶

The Land-statutes of the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee Year only heightened this Christological teaching. The Sabbatical occurred every seven years, a highly symbolic number in the Bible denoting completeness, and the Jubilee after seven Sabbaths, or after a fully complete and perfect period. And lest we miss the redemptive significance of the year, the Jubilee began on the Day of *Atonement*.

Therefore the announcement of the Jubilee was made on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:9), after seven sevens of years, a perfect fullness (Leviticus 25:8), symbolizing Christ, who came in “the fullness of the time” (Galatians 4:4).²⁷

These Sabbath years that brought rest (Lev. 25:2–4, 11–12), liberty (Lev. 25:40–41; Deut. 15:1–3, 12), and land restoration (Lev. 25:10, 13, 28, 41), signified the Lord of the Sabbath who in a perfect way ushered in an era that will bring restful peace for all lands (Isa. 2:1–4; 9:6–7; Rom. 14:17; Rev. 22:2), liberty from the bondage of sin (John 8:34–36; Rom. 6), and the restoration of the entire planet to the original owners, His people (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 2:26–27). At His first coming Jesus commenced the great Jubilee, calling it “the favorable year of the Lord,” wherein He would “proclaim release to the captives” and would “set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18–19).

We can only shake our heads, therefore, when Christian socialists write that the provisions of these Sabbath laws “form the foundation for the Christian concept of social justice.”²⁸ Not only have these scholars misunderstood these laws—mistaking them as legislation for the poor, as economic equalizers, and as permission for some State regulation of the markets—but they also misunderstand their ceremonial import. We should no longer seek to redistribute lands or implement years of debt release any more than we should reinstitute animal sacrifices or cities of refuge. The Mosaic Sabbath and Jubilee years merely shadowed the New Covenant era, the great Sabbath and the great Jubilee. With our Jubiliary-Messiah ushering in the Year of the Lord, those shadow years must flee.

Consequently, even these frequently appealed to pet passages must be seen as mirages, images projected perhaps out of a strong desire to help the poor.

²⁶ For more on this subject, see my tract, *Is the Land of Israel Still Holy?*, available at www.annodomini.co.

²⁷ Chilton, *Productive Christians*, 173.

²⁸ Wallis, *Justice for the Poor*, 72.

3. MISAPPLY TO THE STATE VERSES DIRECTED TO INDIVIDUALS

The Bible inundates individuals with their responsibilities to the poor. It tells us to be concerned for them (Ps. 41:1; Ezek. 16:49) and charitable to them (Luke 6:34–35). It motivates us with words such as “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord” (Prov. 19:17). It reminds us to provide food, clothing, shelter, hospitality, and healthcare to the needy (Job 31:17, 19; Isa. 58:7; Matt. 25:35–45; Luke 14:12–14; Acts 2:44–45; James 2:15–16). It forbids us from taking advantage of the destitute employee, saying, “Pay him his wages each day before sunset” (Deut. 24:14–15). To the poor we must “freely lend him whatever he needs” (Deut. 15:8), and this without interest (Lev. 25:37). Any person seeking knowledge of his or her duties to the poor can read Christian socialism literature which wonderfully collects such verses.

One would err, though, to take these duties that God lays on individuals and transfer them to the State. Sometimes individuals and the State share similar duties. Yet as God ties civil government to His Law, we cannot simply infer its responsibilities from the responsibilities He gives to individuals. For example, we know of the State’s duty to acknowledge Christ publicly not by inferring this from the individual’s duty to do so (Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9), but by locating specific Scriptures directing the State on the matter (Dan. 4:25–26; Ps. 2:10–12; Matt. 28:18; Rev. 1:5; John 5:22–23).

Partial socialist, Wayne Grudem, commits this error of inferring State responsibilities from God’s directives to individuals:

The command of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39), gives warrant for thinking that nations should seek to do good for other nations insofar as they have opportunity to do so. A government’s first obligation should be to defend and seek the good of its own citizens, but it can often bring positive influences to other nations without significantly hindering that primary goal.²⁹

He goes on to explain that these “positive influences” can include military alliances and foreign aid. But where does God allow civil governments to love other nations in these ways? Grudem illegitimately infers international governmental duties from the interpersonal individual duty to love your neighbor. We can see the absurdity of this maneuver by making similar inferences: Does the State have a father and mother to honor as do individuals (Ex. 20:12)? Is the State forbidden to lie carnally with its neighbor’s wife (Lev. 18:20)? Can the State cross-dress (Deut. 22:5)? When God prohibits individuals from taking the life of another (Ex. 20:13), must we infer a similar prohibition for the State (a prohibition expressly antithetical to God’s revealed will, see Lev. 24:17!)? Or how about an inference directly challenging Grudem’s illustration of loving our neighbor: Considering Christ’s instruction to individuals to turn the other cheek when slapped on the right cheek (Matt. 5:39), if the Russian military takes Los Angeles, should our civil government give to them Seattle as well? No, this is not sound hermeneutics.³⁰ And neither is it sound to infer governmental welfarist duties from individual welfarist duties. The Bible knows how to distinguish between individuals and the State (Ex. 22:9; Deut. 25:1–3).

Having established the unsoundness of such inferences, where is the specific passage directing the State of its welfarist duties? Here again the heart has overpowered the eyes to see these verses aright.

²⁹ Grudem, *Politics*, 437.

³⁰ It would be similarly absurd to transfer duties of the State (e.g., capital punishment) to individuals.

4. MISAPPLY TO THE STATE VERSES DIRECTED TO THE CHURCH

At times Christian welfarists cite verses that direct the Church to care for the destitute—passages such as Acts 4:34–37, where the early Christians in Jerusalem liquidated assets and brought the money to the apostles for distribution to the needy; and Acts 6:1–7, where the Church created the diaconate, a special office to care for the poor. And most times these Christian scholars properly specify that these verses are instructing the Church of its responsibility.

The problem comes when they want to transfer these Church-duties to the State. Sider encourages this interpretive maneuver:

I believe that the first application of the biblical teaching on economic relations is to the church, and I expect the church to be well ahead of the rest of society in implementing God's will. But I also believe there is a secondary application of the biblical social vision to secular society. . . . To the extent that a modern society approximates the biblical ideal in any area (say, economic justice), to that extent it will experience wholeness.³¹

He writes in another place that the Church's giving provides "a new model of sharing" for "secular governments" to institutionalize.³²

Keller is not so explicit. He likens the Acts 4 passage to Deuteronomy's "social righteousness legislation,"³³ which is something of a buzzword among Statist socialists. A Church passage where he does explicitly read into it State welfarism is Deuteronomy 14:29, which reads (verses 27–28 included for context):

You shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you. At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. (Deut. 14:27–29)

Keller lists this passage among the "state-sponsored laws and institutions."³⁴ But to see his error, some preliminaries must be understood.

The Levites were officers of *the Church*. They became the tribe especially devoted to God when He substituted them for the firstborn of all the other tribes. While enslaved in Egypt, the Jewish firstborn deserved death as much as the Egyptian firstborn, but were redeemed by the blood of the lamb. Thereafter, "all the firstborn are Mine" claimed God, "on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, from man to beast" (Num. 3:13). When the time came to build the tabernacle, God exchanged the firstborn of the twelve tribes with the Levites (Num. 8:14–18); in effect, making the Levite tribe "a tithe of all the tribes."³⁵

The Levites were extensions of the *ecclesiastical* priests. Several times God reminds His people that He had "given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons" (Num. 8:19; cf. Num. 3:6, 9; 18:2, 6). As such, God devoted them to ministry in the central ritual structure, aiding the priests in the maintenance of the tabernacle and temple (Num. 3:7–8; 8:15, 22, 24; Deut. 33:10). The Lord also appointed them as

³¹ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 65–66.

³² Sider, *Rich Christians*, 87.

³³ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 59.

³⁴ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 29; cp. 27.

³⁵ *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1967), s.v. "Levites."

ministers of the Word. The priests, as intermediaries between God and man, educated the people in the Scriptures (Lev. 10:11). “For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth” (Mal. 2:7). As priests were few in number, though, the Levites, the “gifts” to the priesthood, multiplied the mouths for this teaching ministry (2 Chron. 17:7–9; 19:8; 31:4; Neh. 8:7–9). And as Israel’s constitutional experts, they would help civil magistrates discern the Word’s verdict in difficult legal cases (Deut. 17:8–11; 2 Chron. 19:8–10). Moses speaks of these dual functions of the Levites in his parting words: “They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar” (Deut. 33:10).

Furthermore, God strategically scattered the Levites all over the nation (Num. 35:1–8; Josh. 21). Obviously, their ritual duties they could perform only at the central location of the tabernacle and temple. However, they exercised their teaching duties throughout the Land as they conducted Sabbath worship assemblies (Lev. 23:3). Calvin notes the wisdom in dispersing these educators:

They were so distributed over the whole land, as to be, as it were, guards regularly posted for the preservation of the worship of God, lest any superstition should creep in, or the people should fall into gross contempt of God. For we know that they were chosen by Him, not only to attend to the ceremonies, but to be the interpreters of the law, and to cherish sincere piety among the people. Now if all had been placed in one station, it was dangerous lest the doctrine of the Law should immediately fall into oblivion through the whole land; and thus the other tribes should grow irreligious.³⁶

The Levites were supported by the people’s tithes (Num. 18:21–31; Neh. 10:37–39). These were their wages, financial compensation for services rendered (Num. 18:21, 31).

Coming now to our passage under consideration: Deuteronomy 14:27–29 concerns the third year tithe, or perhaps it is the tithe every three years, making this tithe occur every third and sixth year of Israel’s seven year cycle. In the other years of this cycle, Israelites brought their tithe to the central sanctuary (Deut. 12:17–18; 14:22–26). There, during the Feast of Booths (Deut. 16:13–14; 2 Chron. 31:7), the covenant people would celebrate the festival with what was tithed and give the remainder to the Levites who served at that central location. But in the third year, and possibly in the sixth year as well, the Jew would give the remainder of the tithe to the local Levites who served him in his hometown. It became the *ecclesiastical* Levites responsibility, then, to distribute this tithe to the poor of their locale: the stranger, the fatherless, the widow. Deuteronomy commentator, Peter C. Craigie, corroborates this understanding:

The time specified in v. 28 would seem to be year three and year six of the seven-year sabbatical cycle. On every third year in the cycle, the tithe was not taken to the sanctuary, but was to be set aside especially for certain less privileged classes of people. *You shall deposit it in your towns*—the tithe would be brought by each Israelite to his town (in or near which he lived) and there either stored for subsequent distribution when need arose, or else distributed immediately to the needy persons. The persons who were entitled to participate in the third year tithe were the Levites (who also shared in the annual tithe, v. 27), the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; all these groups, for a variety of reasons, might be dependent on the community as a whole for their welfare.³⁷

From this passage, the nearest one could get to a biblical justification for State-enforced welfare would be to argue that since tithes were the Levites’ wages for work performed (Num. 18:21, 31); and

³⁶ *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), Num. 35:1.

³⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy of The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, eds. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 234.

since the unlawful withholding of wages is robbery (Lev. 19:13), thus enforceable by the State; and since part of these tithes went to help the poor (Deut. 14:28–29); then one might conclude that the State enforced welfare aid. This argument, though, does not hold. The only way the State enters this argument is by way of a wage law; but the wages went to the Levites. They had a legal claim on the tithe. The money going to the poor widows, strangers, and orphans was charity not wages. They had no legal claim to the tithe. Therefore State enforcement involves Levite wages, not poverty charity. We cannot conclude that the State enforces welfarism just because welfare aid comes with tithe money any more than we can conclude that the State enforces entertainment because someone uses his State-enforceable wages to purchase theater tickets. Though two things may be joined, we can still distinguish them. Consequently, if a pastor is not getting his tithe-wage, he can bring legal charges. But if a church gives none of that tithe money to diaconal aid, though grievously sinful, the State cannot intervene.

So we see how far from endorsing socialistic welfare is this passage. Deuteronomy 14:27–29 concerns a *Church* function, not a State function. And *Church* officers, not State officers, distributed *non-State-enforceable* charity to the poor.³⁸ Let our society continue this God-ordained means of helping the impoverished, not the homemade means of socialist eisegetes.

CONCLUSION

Chilton once wrote about his experience of two Christian scholars formally debating how we should care for the poor. Particularly struck by the presentation of the disputant arguing for government aid, he recounts this disputant's presentation thus:

First, he said, *the individual* has a duty to the poor. With an open Bible before him, he admirably defended this from Scripture. *Second*, he observed, *the church* has a duty to the poor; again he quoted copiously from Holy Writ. *Third*, he declared, *the state* has a duty to the poor. He then picked up the Bible, closed it, and put it aside.³⁹

The disputant could cite no Bible verses for the State's financial duty to the poor.

And yet the thought of this is unbearable to some. Their desire to help the poor becomes so great that it causes them to see the coercive ways of Marx within the writings of our Lord.⁴⁰ But money extracted by force, without God's permission, is theft.⁴¹ If we wish to see poverty eliminated, remaking the will of God into the image of Marx is not the way to do it. Proper pragmatism recognizes that God's ways bring about the best results. He blesses obedience not disobedience, however well-intentioned. God-ignoring pragmatism, sooner or later, brings nothing but harm—witness the destructive consequences of the federal government's War on Poverty.⁴²

³⁸ For more on the duties of Church and State, and how neither institution is to perform the unique duties of the other, see my tract, *Separation of Church and State*, available at www.annodomini.co.

³⁹ Chilton, *Productive Christians*, 94.

⁴⁰ "This is Marxism: From each according to his means, to each according to his needs. Christ, on the other hand, said: 'Sell what thou hath and give to the poor.' The only difference is free will. Marxism is an attempt to achieve Christianity by force." Robert W. Blake, "Equality should be enforced by law," in *How to Argue with a Liberal . . . And Win!*, ed. Joel McDurmon; originally published as *Clichés of Socialism* (n.p.: Foundation for Economic Education, 1962, 1970; rev. ed., Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2009), 215.

⁴¹ See my tract, *Govt Welfare: Social Justice or Theft?*, available at www.annodomini.co.

⁴² See my article, "The War on Poverty: A Quagmire," available at www.annodomini.co.

We walk “not by sight” indeed, but the apostle did not mean that we thereby walk by hallucinations. Should we continue to walk by faith in the promises of the State, an institution renowned for promise-breaking? No, the poor can no longer endure hallucinatory theories. But if we walk by faith in the promises of God, soberly and maturely read, our promise-keeping God assures us that a social policy faithful to His Word will eliminate poverty (Deut. 15:4–5). Choose you this day whom you will serve.