

III GOVT WELFARE IS THEFT

Government welfarists' concern for the poor should be commended. Without a doubt, God cares for the poor. The question is: What is the *just* way—i.e., the God-ordained way—to care for the poor?

Civil powers have divinely defined limitations which they may not overstep. They exist to restrain or hold back public evil; not to educate, to medicate, to house, to feed, to clothe. Yet to deny the State the duty of caring for the poor and needy is not to neglect them. It simply means that it is no more the duty of the State to provide for the poor than it is for the National Football League. God has assigned others to their aid: individuals, families, churches. (see my tract *Charity That Ends Poverty*)

When civil rulers exceed their jurisdiction, imposing taxes for unauthorized purposes, they have left the confines of justice. “Justice being taken away, then,” St. Augustine once asked, “what are kingdoms but great robberies?”

So government financial welfare is not really like the duck-rabbit picture. The eye of the beholder does not determine whether it is social justice or theft. God objectively declares it social *injustice*. God declares it theft.

We should have known this. Hiding thievery behind a care for the poor has a long tradition (John 12:3–6).

ANSWERING OBJECTIONS

Obj. #1 “To forbid the State from welfarism is to be against the poor.”

But Christianity opposes only a *humanist* social order. We favor very much righteous poverty relief.

Obj. #2 “The State must intervene in welfare because the Church is not performing its duties.”

But may a man be intimate with another man's wife simply because her husband is not fulfilling his marital duties? Duties must be performed by God's lawful means.

Obj. #3: “The State must offer welfare provisions because not all go to church.”

But may a man steal because he will not go to work? We may not overturn social order because some will not follow God's ordained means.

Obj. #4: “Only the State can conquer poverty. What can State intervention hurt?”

But welfarism does not wage war on poverty; it aids and abets it. When the State disobeys God, He curses that society, bringing about conditions *creating* poverty: scarcity of food (Deut. 28:17–18, 38–40, 42), adverse weather conditions (28:23–24), insecure property (28:30–31), and debt (28:43–44). Society is never benefitted by disobeying God (see my article “The War on Poverty: A Quagmire”). Only obedience to the Lord's just standards truly wars on poverty (Deut. 15:4–5).

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GOVT WELFARE:



Social Justice or Theft?

“Duck or Rabbit?” is the question elicited by the cover picture. Some see a duck, others a rabbit. The eye of the beholder determines. In a way, government financial welfare is similar: some see it as social justice, others as theft. How do we decide?

I GOD'S WORD THE STANDARD OF JUSTICE

To ask if certain actions are just requires that the concept of *justice* be first known. What is justice? Many of the various theories offered throughout history have proved insufficient. Some have sought to locate justice in the *feelings or intuitions* of people: “Do what’s in your heart.” Other theories have sought to locate justice in the *consequences* of actions: “Do what brings about happiness or liberty.” Still others have said that justice is whatever obeys certain *rules*: “Follow the Constitution or International Law.” But these theories cannot explain why any particular feeling, consequence, or set of rules is morally obligatory.

The Christian conception of justice does not suffer this defect. Justice is whatever conforms to the just character of God—an all-knowing person who created the world, thus obligating His creatures to His will (see my tract *Jesus Christ: Savior of Morality*). This God reveals His will in His Word—the perfect standard of justice (Ps. 19:7).

II GOD'S WORD DISALLOWS GOVT WELFARE

In this Word God reveals not only His concern for the destitute—“He shall stand at the right hand of the poor, to save him from those who condemn him” (Ps. 109:31)—but also His prescribed means of caring for them.

JURISDICTIONAL LIMITATIONS

Most of what many today consider social justice for the poor falls within the jurisdiction of:

(a) *Individuals*. “Whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17; cf. Lev. 25:35; Deut. 15:7–8; James 2:15–16).

(b) *The Family*. Scripture clearly lays the duty of poverty relief within the family’s domain (1 Tim. 5:4, 16), charging any who forsake this duty as having “denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8).

(c) *The Church*. The Church, likewise, shares this responsibility (Deut. 14:28–29; Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37), even designating a special office for the task (Acts 6:1–6).

No such duty, however, is laid on the State in the Bible, though many have attempted biblical cases to prove it so. These attempts have been unsuccessful (see my article “Government Welfarism: A Theory Hallucinating Biblical Support”). Most of the verses appealed to fall within one of the above three categories.

STATE MAY NOT EXCEED ITS JURISDICTION

Without permission from God, the State may not participate in financial poverty relief. The Lord regulates the State’s authority by His Scriptures, strictly forbidding it to “turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left” (Deut. 17:20). It may not shrink from the responsibilities God has given it, nor may it take on responsibilities that God has not given it. The Bible presents a definite limit to the “things of Caesar” (Matt. 22:21). (see my tract *Govt Policy: Regulated by Rule of Divine Law*)

When we find civil ministers transgressing their bounds, usurping prerogatives of other institutions, they are roundly judged. King Saul, for example, has his kingdom stripped from him when he performed the Church’s duty of animal sacrifice (1 Sam. 13:9–14); and King Uzziah’s offering of temple incense earned him leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16–21).

What is more, God specifically forbids the State from partiality (Deut. 1:17; 2 Chron. 19:7), even towards socioeconomic classes: “Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great” (Lev. 19:15; cf. Ex. 23:3). Consequently, we can hardly consider any policy advocating State partiality to the poor as social *justice*. All forms of welfarism, then, distort justice (Deut. 16:19)—whether it is the welfarism of Pres. Johnson’s War on Poverty or the toned down welfarism of Pres. Bush’s Faith-Based Initiative.

What, then, *is* the State’s purpose?

STATE’S JURISDICTION: RESTRAIN PUBLIC WICKEDNESS

God ordained political rulers to *restrain* public evil—no more, no less. They do this by punishing outward actions, such as theft (Ex. 22:1–4), kidnapping (Ex. 21:16), murder (Lev. 24:17). In so doing, they give to criminals what they “deserve” (Deut. 21:22; Acts 25:11). When the New Testament summarizes the Old Testament’s teaching on political rulers, it mentions only this restraining function: “he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4).

One of the titles, in fact, used for this political office is *yarash ‘etsar* (KJV translates as “magistrate” in Judg. 18:7), which means *heir of restraint*. A cognate (*‘atsar*) is used elsewhere to describe the restraining of a plague (Num. 16:48) or God’s holding back rain from the land (Deut. 11:17). Accordingly, when God describes Saul’s kingly function He says, “He it is who shall restrain my people” (1 Sam. 9:17).