A Christian Response to Poverty and Affluence

Bert G. Wheeler

Cedarville University
Abstract

Christians have an obligation to be generous with the wealth God has given them. Poverty is a result of the fall and as we have an obligation to humanity to share the Gospel with people who are not in right relationship with God through Christ we also have an obligation to help people who are acutely suffering from the material effects of the fall. This help in the economic realm should be manifest in two ways. First, relatively wealthy Christians must be aware of people who need economic help and provide what is needed in a timely manner by personally serving those who are less fortunate. Second, Christians should espouse a support for free-market capitalism. Our support should not be uncritical, but tempered with biblically informed reason.
We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters. But if anyone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help – how can God’s love be in that person? 1 John 3:16-17 NLT

You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully. 2 Corinthians 9:7 NLT

Christians are to be concerned about people who do not have their basic economic needs met. Christians are to be moved to action by compassion for people in need. When Adam and Eve chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, one of the primary effects of breaking their relationship with God was manifest in the material world (Genesis 3:17-19). Humanity’s fall changed the way the Father provided for his creation and left us with the need to “struggle to scratch a living from” the earth. An economist might say that we do not have enough resources to meet our need and wants. The lack of usable resources is evident today and illustrated by billions of people who do not have their basic economic needs met. Not only are we severed from the fellowship with God enjoyed by Adam and Eve, we are cut off from his direct provision of material things. All Christians should be very concerned about the plight of fallen humanity, and one way in which our estrangement from God is manifest is in poverty and hunger. To be most effective in helping people who are poor, wealthier Christians must understand the best means of sharing God’s gifts. Our good intentions must be wedded with sound methods for helping the poor. We must be able to connect good intentions with what we understand about how wealth is created. Because all of humanity is created in God’s image we are imbued with creativity. Our ability to take the resources before us and fashion them into a more valuable form to create more wealth is foundational to a proper understanding of how to help those who are economically disadvantaged. A market based economy is best for releasing the ingenuity that creates wealth and private charity is best for helping the poor.
To be more effective in helping to alleviate poverty, Christians should adopt a two pronged approach. The first prong is to give to help the short term situation of the poor through charitable organizations. We must be aware of the economic situation of people around us and be willing to give to specific needs as they arise. There are people in our local communities that need help from time to time. One way in which we show the love of Christ to the lost in fallen world is be being aware of the plight of people who live in close proximity to us who may need short term assistance. The more decentralized our organizational structure the more effective (more money going to those who are in need) and helpful our giving is. For Christians, the local church should be a vehicle for short term aid. There are pockets (for example some rural areas and inner cities) of consistent poverty in the United States. Christians should be active in helping assuage situations of poverty. With improved communications technology in recent decades, we in the West have become acutely aware of the poverty in the developing world. Short term aid will continue to be needed in many, many parts of the world. Christians in the West must care about those suffering from the material effects of the fall in immediate and responsive ways. The second prong in a contemporary Christian approach to poverty is to support institutions that are most conducive to the wealth creation that is necessary in poverty reduction. Christians should have “a guarded support”\(^1\) for capitalism. Our support should not be uncritical, but tempered with biblically informed reason. Our Western economic system makes it possible to create the wealth that is necessary if global poverty is to be reduced. Not only does capitalism create wealth which Christians and others may share with people in need, but perhaps more importantly, a market based economy provides the vehicle for self sufficient economic growth which can raise currently poor economic cultures and societies beyond self sufficiency to be net providers of wealth.

\(^1\) This phrase (or one similar to it) is attributed to John E. Staplerford.
During the month of January 2009, the Cedarville community saw at least two excellent opportunities to exercise the first prong of the Christian approach to poverty. A young person in our small community passed away. The young man’s death provided very real and concrete opportunities to reach out to the family in their time of grief. While some in the community are specially prepared (2 Cor. 1:4) to help, everyone in the community had the opportunity to provide assistance in a variety of ways. An additional opportunity to provide short term relief came with the devastating Haitian earthquake on January the 12. The Haitian’s needs are very real and concrete providing an opportunity to give now and be available for additional ways to help in the near and distant future. The Haitians will need short term relief for many months to come. Transparency International’s 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Haiti as 168th out of 180 nations when ranked according to government corruption. While the Haitian government is ranked as very corrupt, many nations with poorly functioning economies have corrupt governments. Because of the perception of corruption, very little cash aid from the United States government is going to the Haitian government. In Haiti, short term aid and relief and long term rebuilding will best accomplished through private organizations.

Karl Marx, certainly no friend of capitalism, recognized in 1848 that “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.” Economic organization according to free markets produces more wealth than any other system humanity has been able to devise. Poverty, both spiritual and material, is a direct result of the fall of man. Economists work and study to develop the most effective and efficient means to create wealth and hence alleviate poverty. We have discovered the most effective and efficient means for wealth creation occurs when we are tolerant of other’s wishes in the economic sphere and allow them pursue what they think is best.
for themselves. When we are tolerant of others in the economic realm markets develop. A free market is the spontaneous order that emerges when people are allowed to use what God has provided as they themselves see fit. It is this free economic organization that is most efficient at creating the wealth that is necessary to reduce poverty. Without an efficient well functioning economy poverty is greater because less wealth is created. One reason that Christians should have a “guarded support” for capitalism is the simple fact recognized by Karl Marx over 160 years ago – markets are the most efficient means for creating wealth that humanity has been able to devise.

Because we are created in God’s image, “we have been endowed with … the right to exercise free will” (Hill, 2008, pp. 37, 38). It is in a free market based economy that we are given the greatest latitude to choose who, when and where to help those less fortunate than ourselves. When we retain these choices and do not abdicate them to the State we are freest to exercise our full humanity. We must be able to choose to give to those less fortunate than ourselves before we can truly exercise care for them. If the State chooses where we give, we the people are robbed of the responsibility, accountability and joy of helping. Hayek (1944) reminds us a government dominated economic system does “… not leave the individual conscience free to apply its own rules and does not even know any general rules which the individual is required or allowed to observe in all circumstances” (p. 146). Another characteristic of a free market economy that leads to a basic Christian support of the system is the fact that people are free to use their own resources as they see fit. If the government marshals our resources and choose who, when, and where to give, it is much more difficult to bring glory to God by sharing what He has given us with someone less fortunate than ourselves.
The economic history of the world is a history of pain and struggle. Most of recorded economic history is a story of bare subsistence and failure. We find brief glimpses of instances of wealth but the wealth was concentrated in the hands of the powerful in social structures that were much more unequal than today. Evidence of trade and markets dates to several thousand years B.C., however, it was not until market economies fully developed on the European continent in the last millennium that large segments of people were consistently able to enjoy the fruits and responsibilities of relative economic success. In a market economy wealth can be created beyond what is needed for subsistence and co-requisite political freedom provides the environment so that we are free to share with others. Only market economies have sustained economic development to lift the poor out of poverty. It is only when we have the freedom to choose how to give our surplus that we are able to reflect God’s glory by helping people who do not have their economic needs met.
References

