

Helping the Poor Without Feeding the Beast

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Scripture is replete with gracious prescriptions for relieving poverty, and none of them involve government coercion.

A Gracious End to Pursue

Those who have faith in Jesus Christ as their eternal Savior from the guilt, penalty, pollution, and power of sin have experienced grace in its most genuine and supreme sense -- God's lovingkindness exercised self-sacrificially for the redemption of His undeserving people. To put it in an economic figure of speech, God's riches of grace have been freely used to relieve our hopeless spiritual poverty. As Paul said: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). It is obvious from the context in which these words are found -- *viz.* a discussion of giving an offering to minister to the needs of poverty-stricken saints -- that Paul meant it to be more than a mere figure of speech.

The gracious behavior of our Lord Jesus Christ is to be emulated practically by those who trust in Him for salvation. Thus the use of our earthly resources (our riches) should manifest our experience of divine mercy by graciously relieving the poverty of others. This grace demonstrates the sincerity of our love:

But as you abound in everything -- in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and all earnestness, and in your love to us -- see that you abound in this grace also. I speak not by way of commandment, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity also of your love (vv.7-8).

Just because it is grace that Paul is commending here, he makes a point of saying that charity^[1] must be an expression of sincere love from the heart, not something practiced due to external compulsion. So "I do not speak by way of commandment," says Paul. Charity arises from internal constraint. Such constraint is necessarily felt by those who are transformed by the grace of God.

It is inconceivable that a poor sinner could be enriched by the gracious salvation of Jesus Christ and not then show pity upon the economically poor. Doing so is a fleshing out of the gospel which he believes unto eternal life. "The righteous man shows mercy and gives" (Psalm 37:21). Anyone who claims God's love, but who lacks compassion for the needy, has not really experienced that which he professes. The Apostle John wrote:

But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need, and shuts up his compassion from him, how could the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:17)

God's gracious love produces people who exercise gracious love toward others. No other power in the universe can produce such a heart. Grace always begets grace, and only grace begets grace.

We may take it as a Biblical starting point, then, that Christians should feel a responsibility to "work out their salvation" (cf. Philippians 2:12) in the economic realm by seeking to meet the genuine needs and relieve the misery of the poverty-stricken.^[2] To feed the hungry among Christ's brethren, to clothe them when naked, and to visit them when sick is to minister as unto Christ Himself: "Inasmuch as you did it unto one of these my brethren, even the least, you did it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). As Proverbs put it, "he who has pity on the poor lends unto the Lord, and his good deed will He repay him" (19:17). Charity shown to the needy honors the poor man's Maker (14:31), whereas "he who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker" (17:5). The way in which we respond to the poverty-stricken, then, is an index of our relationship to God as Creator and Redeemer.

Proverbs teaches us that a godly woman "stretches out her hand to the poor" (31:20), and "he who gives unto the poor shall not lack" (28:27). Indeed, "he who has a bountiful eye shall be blessed, for he gives his bread to the poor" (22:9). Thus "he who despises his neighbor sins, but he who has pity on the poor, happy is he" (14:21). On the other hand, to oppress the poor and enrich yourself thereby will prove an expensive tactic that brings you into need (22:16) and will make for yourself a divine enemy (22:22-23). Likewise, to disregard the plight of the poor will render your own prayers ineffectual: "whoever stops his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself but not be heard" (21:13).

Biblical Means to the End

God's word not only points us to the gracious end which we all should pursue (viz. relieving the needs of the poor), but it also has a great deal to say about the means by which the Christian graciously accomplishes that end. After all, not just any means-to-the-end carries divine approval. Robbing banks in order to give cash to the needy is one conceivable means of helping the poor that will incur the wrath and curse of God!

How, then, would God's word direct us to show concern for the poor and needy?^[3] First, by not hiding from their needs -- isolating ourselves so that we need not encounter the cries of the poor. The Bible condemns "stopping the ears" and "hiding the eyes" (Proverbs 21:13; 28:27), not so subtle ways of remaining insensitive to the plight of the less fortunate around us. "The righteous takes knowledge of the cause of the poor" (Proverbs 29:7). Indeed, when he gives a dinner, he is acquainted with and able to invite the poor who cannot recompense him (Luke 14:12-14).

Second, and most obviously, we are urged to show neighborly pity to the poor (cf. Proverbs 14:21) by giving generously to relieve their specific needs -- making direct gifts to buy groceries or clothes, pay utility bills, underwrite medical treatment, etc. (Matthew 25:35-39; Luke 14:12-14). "The righteous gives and withholds not" (Proverbs 21:26; cf. 22:9).

Third, God's law protects and provides favorable social arrangements for the poor and needy, such as the prohibitions on taking the necessities of life as collateral (Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:22-13) or charging interest on loans made to them (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 23:19-20). It sometimes happens that a person cannot afford a donation to a brother in need, but can loan him some money for a time. It is a Christian virtue not to turn away those who would borrow from us (Matthew 5:42), expecting nothing in return (Luke 6:35). In such a case, it would be immoral to profit from your brother's distress: the loan may not carry interest charges. God Himself will pay back such a good deed (Proverbs 19:17), whereas the violation of this command from God will lead you to lose your financial gain to someone else more gracious (Proverbs 28:8).

Fourth, the law of God also provides for the poor through the favorable social arrangement of requiring us to allow gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-20). The leftovers in our fields, the pickings which fall to the ground, and the unreaped corners of the fields are to be made available to those who are in need. The poor may hereby work to support themselves and may meet their families' needs with whatever they are able to carry away (thus placing natural requirements and restraints upon the scope of this provision). The application of this divine requirement outside of agricultural settings is not inconceivable (e.g., donation of our still-useable clothes, furniture, appliances, cash change from the market or restaurant, etc.).

Fifth, the word of God offers us wisdom to see that it is inappropriate and worthy of disapprobation for someone to use his advantage in the free market to drive up prices on items which are basic necessities of life. "He who withholds grain, the people shall curse him; but blessing shall be upon the head of him who sells it" (Proverbs 11:26). The greed which would corner the market on some commodity which is a staple of life, calculating to withhold it from sale in order to make people desperate and increase the profit on its sale later, will be cursed.

Sixth, the scriptures require us to protect the property rights of those in society who virtually have no voice, who are easiest to exploit, and who have the least political clout -- people like the orphans and widows (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 68:5; Proverbs 15:25; 22:28; 23:10-11). Tampering with their boundaries or in other ways diminishing the use and value of their property and belongings - - whether through legislation or deceptive contracts or manipulative lawsuits -- provokes the vengeance of their Redeemer according to the Bible, and we should intercede to take their side as well. This is especially needful in a culture where it has become so costly (and tricky) in civil court to resolve disputes and guard one's rights.

Seventh, Christians who plead for the rights of the needy in lawsuits as well as those who are entrusted with judicial authority, such as judges in our courts, are especially commanded by God to relieve the easy social oppression of the needy and to guard against judicial prejudice toward them. God expects kings to "deliver the poor and needy" (Ps. 72:2-4, 12-14) -- which means, according to the Biblical text itself, that they are to "break their oppressors" by securing fairness in the courts and protecting them from "bribes," "fraud and violence" (Leviticus 19:15; Ex. 23:3, 6; Ps. 82:1-4; Amos 5:11-12; cf. Proverbs 22:22-23; 29:14).

Eighth, another way in which those in need are defrauded is when wealthy employers take advantage of them by delaying or holding back the wages of their workers (Leviticus 19:13; James 5:1-6). In such cases the Christian must come to the worker's defense and seek the fulfillment of obligations made to him, lest his economic condition be further worsened. Likewise, Christians ought to take a stand for protecting the freedom of the poor in the marketplace so that they are guaranteed an opportunity to compete for jobs (e.g., over against closed union shops, etc.; cf. Matthew 20:1-16) and to compete at a price that renders them more likely to be hired (e.g., over against wage requirements set by the state, etc.; cf. Revelation 13:17). To deny people the freedom to compete in the marketplace and thereby enjoy upward economic mobility violates the love we are to have for our neighbors and transgresses the golden rule.

Ninth, Christian families must make it a point to make provision for meeting the economic needs of their family members (1 Timothy 5:8), in particular those who fall upon hard times. This will call not only for industry and avoidance of sloth to take care of ordinary living expenses (e.g., Proverbs 6:6-11; 10:4; 19:15; 20:4; 23:21; 24:30-34), but also foresight and frugality to meet emergency needs which could not be predicted (cf. e.g., Leviticus 25:25, 49). Likewise, as an extension of such loving provision, families may show benevolence to fellow-believers who have become insolvent debtors by allowing the poor brother voluntarily to sell himself (actually, his labor) into their servitude, thereby coming to be treated and cared for as part of the household. His debts would be paid (Leviticus 25:39), he would learn responsible labor and financial saving (perhaps enough to buy his own release: Leviticus 25:49), and in time he would be given liberal provisions to start a new life (Deuteronomy 15:14).

Tenth and very importantly, the Christian congregation should corporately minister to the needs of the poor. The office of deacon was specifically ordained as a ministry of mercy to the needy, for instance the daily assistance to widows (Acts 6:1-6). Tithes and offerings which God calls for are regularly to be used for the relief of the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).^[4] And special offerings are to be taken by the church to take care of Christians suffering from special hardships or emergencies (e.g., I Corinthians 16:1-2; Romans 15:25-27; 2 Corinthians 8). The charitable agency

of the church is one of the most enduring, powerful and efficient means of distributing financial aid to people in need. Such distribution of charity is motivated by voluntary and divinely sanctioned sacrifices and offerings from God's people. Its resources ought to be a ten-percent baseline of the earnings, however great or small, of all of God's people -- then further fueled by the freewill offerings of grateful believers who have been blessed with enough to meet their own needs. The oversight and administration are local, accountable to the congregation, and far less vulnerable to freeloading, fraud, and the expenses of a top-heavy bureaucracy.

Even this very sketchy sample of the Biblical evidence demonstrates that God's word has a great deal to say, not simply about the general aim of helping the poor and needy, but also about the specific means which God has approved and commanded for fulfilling that task. The Bible exhorts us to pursue the gracious end of relieving the poverty-stricken. It likewise reveals various gracious means for doing so. Certain recent suggestions have been made by some evangelical Christians which would supplement the means mentioned above by which believers should support the poor, and it becomes our assignment here to evaluate those supplemental means for their Biblical credentials (or lack thereof). Not every means to an end enjoys the approval of God, as we said above. It is important that we do God's work in God's way.

Betraying Grace

It is a tribute to Dr. Ronald Sider that his book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*,^[5] has captured the attention of so much of the evangelical Christian world. He writes with conviction and compassion -- a compassion for relieving the poor and hungry of this world which one could only wish more people shared, especially more financially comfortable Christians. From what has been said above, those who define their Christian perspective and ethic according to the Scriptures should have no difficulty endorsing the goal set forth by Dr. Sider: viz. that of getting Christians activated to meet the genuine needs of the poor. Our evaluation of the means advocated by Dr. Sider, however, cannot be as positive. I believe that a proper reading of Scripture does not substantiate, but rather contradicts, many of Dr. Sider's proposals.

This is not the place to engage in a factual analysis of Dr. Sider's approach to helping the hungry of the world, although a significant critique could be undertaken here.^[6] It is rather our purpose to offer a normative, Biblical evaluation of his approach, particularly as he advocates the intervention and compulsive agency of the state to improve the outward economic circumstances of the poor. Such advocacy is on a collision course with the teaching of God's word. This is evident first, and in the broadest sense, because it abandons the gracious character of Christian charity.

As we can see from the preceding list of means for helping the poor, there are some provisions which are a matter of justice -- that is, protecting legitimate civil rights against those who would oppress the poor by taking advantage of them (e.g., fraud in the marketplace, prejudice in the courts). But other provisions are of a different character altogether, being a matter of grace (or charity) which proceeds from the heart and leads us voluntarily to feed the poor, lend to them, take up offerings, etc.

When someone possess a right, he may claim justice by making a demand upon others; if he has a right (say, to freedom of worship), then the rest of us have a corresponding duty (here, to forbear his chosen liturgy) -- and the state may impose punitive sanctions for my violating that duty. This is "justice." Now obviously the scope of our moral obligation before God exceeds the scope of our enforceable duties within the civil order of the state. God may require me not to snub a grouchy neighbor (and will consider this in the judgment of the final day), but this does not turn a cheerful greeting into a matter of justice -- as though it were my neighbor's right, and the state may punish me for depriving him of "justice"! It should rather be said that by snubbing the grouchy neighbor I have not been "gracious" to him (and have not treated him as God has treated me). The virtue which I lack will come only by the internal, sanctifying work of God; it will not be produced by the compulsion or threats of the state. The state is an agency of justice, not grace.^[7]

Justice and grace (or charity) should also be distinguished when we are thinking of God Himself. The theological concept of God's essential character is logically different from that of God's eternal purposes. The latter denotes His good pleasure which is not constrained or necessary (and thus could have been otherwise) -- such as His choice to send His Son into this world graciously to die for sinners. The former concept denotes what is always and necessarily true of God -- such as His abhorrence of theft. The prohibition of stealing stems from God's unchanging character; it is not an open question whether God might choose to condemn or rather condone stealing. On the other hand, the provision of a saving sacrifice or the granting of regeneration to a sinner stems from

God's eternal purpose; necessity did not (could not) constrain it, but God graciously chose it in His good pleasure. It is crucial that evangelical Christians draw a distinction between these two concepts of justice and grace, lest the nature of the gospel message itself be obscured.[\[8\]](#)

Unfortunately Dr. Sider has not been careful to do so. He advocates what he calls "structural change" such that the state would compel and enforce certain provisions intended to help the poor (like guaranteed income and prices, trade preferences, commodity agreements, land redistribution, foreign grants of economic aid, etc.).[\[9\]](#) About these changes he writes: "Yahweh wills institutionalized structures (rather than mere charity) which systematically and regularly reduce the gap between the rich and the poor." He is forthright by indicating that "what is needed is a change in public policy" -- thus calling "on the government to legislate." His thesis is pointedly stated: "The texts we have examined clearly show that God wills justice, not mere charity."[\[10\]](#) Dr. Sider is pressing for more than charity or grace. He is blunt that certain social policies preferential to the poor are a matter of justice -- to be made a right which the state enforces with its awesome power to punish. Note the stress upon "justice" in this passage:

God wills prosperity with justice. But that does not mean that wealthy persons who make Christmas baskets and give to relief have satisfied God's demand. God wills justice for the poor. And justice, as we have seen, means things like the Jubilee and the sabbatical remission of debts. It means economic structures that check the emergence of extremes of wealth and poverty. It means massive economic sharing among the people of God. Prosperity without that kind of biblical concern for justice unambiguously signifies disobedience.[\[11\]](#)

In the broadest sense, then, our objection to Dr. Sider's proposed means to the end of helping the poor is that it abandons the gracious character of Christian charity. By calling upon the state to enforce certain economic provisions, thereby compelling people to show preference for the poor, Dr. Sider is no longer talking about love which is practiced from the heart self-sacrificially. He has tried to turn grace into justice, only to distort them both.

Wresting Scripture

Beyond this, the "justice" which Dr. Sider proposes is fundamentally at odds with the Biblical concept of justice. He openly endorses economic policies enforced by the state which would show preference to the poor (and to poor nations). However God disapprobates the showing of any respect of persons in judgment (Proverbs 24:23; 28:21). According to His will, justice is supposed to be blind -- not supposed to take account of a person's racial, social, or economic status. A private citizen may choose to exercise discrimination by offering charitable aid to one person instead of another, but the state is prohibited to discriminate or show favoritism. Indeed, God's word explicitly forbids the showing of preference to the rich or to the poor: "neither shall you favor a poor man in his cause" (Exodus 23:3). God's normative view of justice precludes the preferential policies advocated by Dr. Sider from being deemed "justice." Thus saith the Lord: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you shall judge your neighbor fairly" (Leviticus 19:15).

The only cogent way to escape the above refutation would be to argue that God Himself, the one who determines the demands of true justice, has revealed in His word that the kind of preferential economic policies advocated by Dr. Sider are required to be enforced by the state. If God's word teaches (or implies by good and necessary consequence) that tariff preferences, guaranteed income, foreign aid, etc. are part of the legitimate duty of the civil magistrate, then such things become a right to be demanded by the poor (and part of God's conception of civil justice), rather than a preferential violation of the impartiality otherwise required by the justice of God. Has Dr. Sider exegetically demonstrated that his proposals enjoy divine sanction?

Dr. Sider and the author of this essay share the same basic assumptions about Biblical authority in the area of economics.

According to biblical faith, Yahweh is Lord of all things. He is the sovereign Lord of history. Economics is not a neutral, secular sphere independent of his lordship. Economic activity, like every other area of life, should be subject to his will and revelation.[\[12\]](#)

We agree that Scripture is our ethical norm for economics. Moreover, we agree that the whole Bible must be taken into account when determining what the will of God is on a question. Dr. Sider observes:

God gave Israel the law so that his people would know how to live together in peace and justice. The church is now the new people of God....Certainly, as Paul and other New Testament writers indicate, parts of the Mosaic law (the ceremonial law, for instance) no longer apply to the church. But there is no indication that the moral law has ceased to be normative for Christians (Mt. 5:17-20; Rom. 8:4). The Old Testament's revelation about the kind of economic relationships that promote love and harmony among God's people should still guide the church today.[\[13\]](#)

He continues on to say of the Old Testament law: "It is the basic principles, not the specific details, which are important and normative for Christians today."[\[14\]](#) Moreover, the fact that biblical authors did not hesitate to apply these revealed norms to societies outside the people of God supports the conclusion that we should apply them to our society today as well. "Following biblical principles on justice in society is the only way to lasting peace and social harmony for all human societies."[\[15\]](#) In a nutshell, Dr. Sider has summarized my own basic understanding of the normativity of God's law for present day society.[\[16\]](#)

Within the framework of these convictions about the normativity of God's word in economics, however, Dr. Sider has fallen short of demonstrating in any exegetically cogent manner that Scripture supports the state's preferential policies toward the poor which he proposes. How does he attempt to enlist Biblical sanction for such things as tariffs, commodity agreements, enforced land reform, guaranteed income, foreign aid, etc.? By appealing to the "Jubilee" provisions of the Old Testament (Leviticus 25).[\[17\]](#) The reasoning he employs is exaggerated, to say the least.

In the first place, the provisions for the Jubilee were not a matter of state-enforced justice, but rather the moral obligation of a people who had enjoyed the saving grace of God. That is, the Jubilee was a picture of the "gospel" (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18). It displayed grace, not justice. There is no mention of penal sanctions brought by the civil magistrate for violating the Jubilee (although God clearly intervened to judge His people when they ungraciously disregarded it: cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17-32).

In the second place, the provisions for the Jubilee were not a part of that universal justice or righteousness which is known through general revelation as binding upon all mankind.[\[18\]](#) It was only within the "holy land" of Israel that God allotted inalienable family plots of land and then required that any plots which impoverished Israelites might sell (more akin to lease) would revert to the assigned family in the fiftieth year. This was a unique arrangement for God's special people (thus categorized with the ceremonial law) -- based on God's direct granting of the land (Leviticus 25:2) and His work of gracious atonement (vv. 9-10), thus making Israel "holy" or set apart from other nations (v. 12).

In the third place, Dr. Sider has interpreted the Jubilee as a "model" of general economic redistribution meant to "equalize wealth" and "avoid the extremes of wealth and poverty."[\[19\]](#) The actual text of Leviticus 25 does not support such a generalization, nor such an interpretation of the divine intention. The stipulations of the Jubilee protected only the agricultural Israelites (not those within the cities) from irredeemable loss of their land; it did not provide for their sharing in the profits or assets of others. Indeed, during the time that a family's land was alienated from them, they received no income from it at all -- and did not share in the income of the temporary owner (lessor). Economic redistribution must be read into the text.

In the fourth place, Dr. Sider's method of reasoning is exaggerated, even if we granted an redistributory interpretation of the Jubilee text. How do we apply the "underlying principles" of the Old Testament laws? A good example is found in the requirement that a railing be placed around the flat roof of the Israelite's house (Deuteronomy 22:8) on which visitors were entertained. From these we learn the general moral principle that we should provide safety precautions to protect human life, and we could readily apply this principle by requiring fences around backyard

swimming pools. The connection is not hard to see here. Dr. Sider's method, however, renders any specific connection between his preferential economic proposals and the provisions of Jubilee dubious, and he does this by over-generalizing the intention of the text. He moves from the specific provision of restoring family lands to the highly abstract and undefined notion of economic "redistribution," and then applies that abstract notion to any kind of redistribution imaginable -- e.g., pooling and equally dividing all of our assets, institutional policies such as guaranteed income, commodity agreements, foreign aid, etc. This is a long, long stretch of the imagination from the biblical text. One might just as creatively apply the rooftop railing legislation to the modern state, via a completely abstract notion of safety precautions, by making it a law that everyone must wear scuba gear in case he falls into a backyard swimming pool!

If the Jubilee provisions warrant just any and all schemes of economic redistribution, then they justify robbing banks and dividing up the spoil among the poor. This *reductio ad absurdum* is intended to point to the absence of any reasonable hermeneutical control in Dr. Sider's use of the Biblical text to make economic judgments for the modern world. Obviously, our use of the underlying principles of God's law should not bring us into conflict with the clear teaching of God's word elsewhere. It is just here that we come to the greatest difficulty with Dr. Sider's economic proposals for helping the poor. By advocating that certain preferential economic policies be legislated and enforced by the civil magistrate, he puts himself at odds with the Biblical view of the state and its proper limits.

Dr. Sider has correctly stated that the right of private property which is guaranteed in God's word is not absolute, but subject to qualification.^[20] We would certainly agree, but add that only God has the right to abridge the right of private property by prescribing the qualifications upon it through His revealed word -- not by human speculation or the application of abstract principles. Moreover, those qualifications or limits upon the right of private property may be enforced by the punitive power of the state only where God so authorizes. By not showing divine authorization for the state-enforced abridgements of private property and preferential economic policies he proposes, Dr. Sider has urged the evangelical world in the direction of feeding "the Beast."

Unleashing Leviathan

We take it as a Biblical starting point that all civil magistrates today are under moral obligation to be guided and regulated by the law of God (throughout the Bible), where and when it speaks to political matters. The specification and qualification at the end of that sentence is crucial, or else we are deprived of any objective regulative principle for limiting the authority of the state. Without a clear view of the state's function and limits, the Christian cannot develop a Biblically grounded position regarding rights, equality, liberty, loyalty, dissent, or the proper balance between security and privacy (order and freedom) within the state. If we cannot establish boundaries for the state's authority, we will have no logical and principled defense against the growth of the state into Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan" -- an allusion to the beast from the sea (cf. Rev. 13:1).

We must mark off, within the context of public moral duties and responsibilities, a delimited realm where the state has authority to enforce civil sanctions against misbehavior. Not all sins against the law of God are properly to be treated as crimes, and therefore, we must circumscribe the authority of the state to inflict punishment upon its citizens and do so in a way which is open to public scrutiny. Were the sphere of sin (even public or interpersonal sin) to be equated with the sphere of the state's legal prerogative to impose punitive sanctions, the state would be placed in the position of God Himself, leaving it to act (by contrast) like a beast. God has not authorized the state to scrutinize and judge every social misdeed, nor has He granted it the responsibility to produce every social virtue. The state is neither competent nor empowered to judge the private lusts of an individual's heart or even his selfish use of money in light of a neighbor's need.

According to Paul, the special characteristic which marks off the state from other institutions within society is its moral authority (not simply raw power) to inflict public penalties for disobeying civil statutes. It is an institution distinguished by coercive authority -- "bearing the sword" as a "terror" and "avenger of wrath" to evildoers (Rom. 13:4), a prerogative denied to both the family (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) and the church (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Because the state possesses this awesome prerogative to use compulsion in enforcing its dictates (whether by threat of death, monetary fine, or imprisonment), the state must be carefully and ethically limited in its proper jurisdiction. If the state lacks moral warrant for imposing a civil penalty upon someone for violating a public statute, its punitive action would be indistinguishable from murder (called "capital punishment"), kidnapping (called "imprisonment"), or theft (called a "fine"). Therefore, there must be objective limits to legal coercion -- a law above the civil law to which appeal can be made to warrant encroaching upon a person's life, liberty, or property, as well as appeal made against injustice and oppression. This objective criterion is the revealed law of God as it prescribes civil penalties for misdeeds. God's law enables us to distinguish consistently and on principle between where the state may properly legislate and where it may not interfere.

Evangelicals sometimes wander from this revelational, objective and absolute criterion in favor of a humanly devised guideline which produces relativistic results. For instance, David Basinger^[21] faults the law of God as the standard for determining what the state may and may not enforce on the rather superficial ground that sincere Christians disagree in interpreting what the Bible defines as punishable crimes. (When school students disagree over an answer to their math homework, we do not usually contemplate throwing out the rules of mathematics as a remedy.) Basinger's own suggestion of a political standard is those values which all men, believers and unbelievers,

propound in common. But this criterion collapses under his own line of censure: it is surely not a "common value" among men that political power should be restrained by values that are agreed upon by everyone! As long as Atilla the Hun, Marquis de Sade, Idi Amin, and Hitler are counted in the polls, agreed-upon values will not be agreed upon as the standard of political ethics.

Dr. Sider would attempt to dodge this dilemma -- as well as taking the law of God as our political standard -- by suggesting, instead, that the principle to be used for distinguishing between social sins to be dealt with solely by the church and crimes to be punished as well by the state is the libertarian ideal: "persons should be free to harm themselves and consenting associates...as long as they do not harm others or infringe on their rights."[\[22\]](#) Such a principle is not only ambiguous, arbitrary, and inconsistently applied,[\[23\]](#) it is simply not exegetically derived from the text of the Bible. This is a fatal defect for any purported Christian position. Not surprisingly, it leads Dr. Sider to a complete reversal of the explicit teaching of God's law: he would apply to the state what is appropriate only to the church (e.g., penal redress of racial discrimination in a matter of private property), and he would restrict to the church what God's law actually requires of the state (e.g., redress of adultery and homosexuality)!

It should be observed that evangelical ethicists of both politically conservative and politically liberal varieties have transgressed the principle that God's law determines the limits of the state's authority. Those with conservative leanings have tended to promote ethically commendable goals (sobriety regarding alcoholic beverages, restriction of smoking tobacco, intervention to curtail the geopolitical spread of Communism) by less than ethical means, calling upon the state to exercise its power of compulsion where no Biblical warrant for it can be cogently adduced. Likewise, those with liberal political leanings have tended to promote ethically commendable goals (racial integration, food or medical care for the poor, public education) by less than ethical means, calling upon the state to exercise its power of compulsion where no Biblical warrant for it can be cogently adduced. No matter how ethically good these various projects may be, attempting to get the civil authorities to enforce them without warrant from God's word is to capitulate to the unprincipled position of Thrasymachus, who taught that what counts as "justice" is simply whatever happens to be in the interest of the stronger faction in society. Ironically, when the strong arm of the state is courted in the name of "public justice," as defined by some evangelical's personal opinion (whether conservative or liberal), it is usually at the cost of depriving others of their justice -- their genuine rights (e.g., to choose for what causes to contribute their lives or earnings), as revealed by the just Judge of all the earth (cf. Genesis 18:25; Deuteronomy 2:4).

The state which overextends its authority, to promote or enforce whatever aims it wishes, however otherwise commendable (e.g., sexual harmony between husbands and wives, prudent financial savings plans, regular brushing of one's teeth), is a state which has abused its power -- a power which has, after all, been delegated to it from God (Romans 13:1; John 19:11). And God clearly, explicitly forbids kings to swerve to the right or to the left from the well-defined path of His law (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Indeed, the memorable words of our Lord in Matthew 22:21 inescapably teach that there must be a defining limit upon "the things which belong to Caesar." When Caesar demands of his subjects more than what is his -- more than what is "due" to him (Romans 13:7), Caesar's government inevitably acts as a "throne of wickedness...which frames mischief by a law" (Psalm 94:20). The fact that the civil magistrate makes something a law does not confer the sanction of God upon it. When the civil magistrate (God's "minister") exceeds the limits of

delegated power, enforcing laws which are not authorized by God, he comes under God's wrath and curse: "woe to those who enact evil statutes" (Isaiah 10:1). The proper domain and divine calling of the state is that of civil justice, protecting its citizens against violence -- whether in the form of foreign aggression, criminal assault, or economic fraud. In order that men may live together in tranquility and peace (I Timothy 2:2), the state has been empowered with "the sword" for the specific purpose (note the telic construction and divine commission in I Peter 2:14) of "avenging wrath" against those who do evil (Romans 13:4). "For this cause," God says, taxes may be legitimately collected (v. 6). Beyond this the magistrate may not go. He is to establish the land by justice which is steadfastly followed in the courts (Proverbs 29:4; Amos 5:15). God's word does not, however, authorize the civil ruler to be an agent of charitable benevolence, financial welfare, education, and mercy. Scripture suggests nothing of state-enforced welfare programs or state interference in the free market. The state's way of dealing with social evils must be limited to those marked out by God's revealed law.

We conclude, then, that Dr. Sider's advocating of state-enforced, preferential economic policies for the poor overturns the distinction between grace and justice, as well as disregarding the proper separation of church and state. He has taken the ethical goal of helping the poor which is exegetically addressed to, and intended appropriately for, the church (a redemptive institution characterized by mercy and persuasion) and applied it to the state (a natural institution characterized by justice and coercion). The moral obligation of caring for the poor which God lays upon His church in light of the grace which believers themselves have experienced has been emptied of its gracious character and transferred to the civil state in general -- thus unleashing and encouraging "the Beast" to intervene in the economic marketplace contrary to God's law (Revelation 13:17; cf. Deut. 6:8; Rev. 12:17).

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[1] The word "charity" is cognate to the Greek word *charis*, meaning "grace."

[2] The expression "poverty-stricken" is valuable in reminding us that many who are poor and needy are not so because of their own choices and irresponsibility. On the other hand, those who refuse to work -- and thus should suffer the consequence of not eating (2 Thessalonians 3:10) -- are not "stricken" with their poverty, but have brought it about in a most predictable fashion. They too need our help, but of a much different kind.

[3] Cf. my lessons entitled "Imitating the Father's Tender Mercies," "The Paradox of Liberality," "Widows and Property Rights," "A Godly Attitude Toward Money," "A Righteous View of Riches," etc. available from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA, 95603.x

[4] A comparison of the beneficiaries of the tithe mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:28-29, the "third year" tithe, with those in other passages (Deuteronomy 14:27; 16:11, 14; 26:11-13) demonstrates that the uniqueness of the third year tithe was not that it supported the poor in a special way. It did aid the needy, but not distinctively or exclusively.

[5] (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977).

[6] One way to evaluate an ethical opinion is to scrutinize the factual claims which are made in support of it or to look into the practical consequences which result from it. Dr. Sider's polemic can be readily faulted for its inaccurate claims about the actual workings of economic systems -- for instance, unscientific claims about Western affluence "causing" Third- world poverty, or misunderstandings about the alleged evil effects of the "profit" motive in the marketplace. From the standpoint of consequences, the proposals of Dr. Sider compare unfavorably to the research-backed conclusions about the kind of poverty programs he advocates: e.g., George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), or Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

[7] It is characterized by vengeance (Romans 12:19; 13:3-4), not mercy (Deuteronomy 19:13, 21; 25:12; Hebrews 10:28).

[8] "The Lord is merciful and gracious...He has not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities"(Psalm 103:8, 10). "By grace you have been saved... it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

[9] Sider, *Rich Christians*, chapter 9.

[10] *Ibid*, pp. 209, 205, 295 (in each case emphasis is mine).

[11] *Ibid*, pp. 128-129.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 115.

[13] *Ibid*, p. 93.

[14] Ibid, p. 94.

[15] Ibid, pp. 205-206.

[16] See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (2nd ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1977] 1984), and *By This Standard* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985).

[17] For instance, *ibid.* pp. 129, 209. Dr. Sider also mentions the Pauline collection and the remission of debts in the sabbath-year, but the former was a voluntary offering within the church (not relevant to state-enforced redistribution) and the latter (which never did carry a penal sanction within the state) should still be practiced in our interpersonal affairs, I believe.

[18] E.g., a Chinese family living at that same time could not have learned from natural revelation that a particular plot of real estate belonged to their family by divine right.

[19] Sider, pp. 87-90, 109, cf. 115, 129, 205, 209, 213.

[20] *ibid.* pp.115-116, 130.

[21] "Voting One's Christian Conscience," *Christian Scholar's Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1986, pp.143-144.

[22] "An Evangelical Vision for Public Policy," *Transformation*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (July/September, 1985), p. 6.

[23] As I show in chapter 6 of my book, *Homosexuality: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978).