

Welfare Reformed – Biblically

By Byron Snapp

Welfare Reformed: A Compassionate Approach. Ed. by David Hall, jointly published by P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, and Legacy Communications, Franklin, TN, c. 1994. 228 pp., incl. appendix and notes, pb. \$10.99

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There is agreement among many. The American welfare system is neither well nor fair. It is not well, for it requires increasing transfusions. In his introduction, Richard J. Neuhaus reminds the reader, “According to the Census Bureau, over thirty million Americans are living in poverty. That figure is larger than in the 1960s when the war on poverty was launched, and this despite the fact that welfare spending, adjusting for inflation, rose through the 1970s and 1980s to its present all-time high.” (p. xi) Thus, not only is more money constantly needed, but also the number of poor is actually growing. Secondly, the system is not fair. Numerous able-bodied people do not work. Instead, they live off of welfare checks. Thus, money is taken (stolen?) from the paychecks of those who do work and given to welfare recipients. (I, of course, am not saying that everyone who receives welfare is able to work or does not need outside help.)

Welfare Reformed contains thoughtful essays that are the result of a conference held at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee in October of 1992. The authors look at our welfare system historically and Biblically.

Following a forward by Richard John Neuhaus, the opening article by David Hall, “Toward a Post-Statist Theological Analysis of Poverty” provides, but does not overwhelm, the reader with statistics showing that our welfare system is not working. Welfare recipients and budgets have ballooned with the greatest gains being made by government employees by means of pay increases and increased hiring. Hall closes by posing three questions on whether or not Scripture provides the basis for specific welfare reform. He rightly argues that Scripture does lay a foundation for true reform.

In later articles, “New Testament Developments: Principles into Action” and “Earlier Paradigms for Welfare Reform: The Reformation Period”, Mr. Hall clearly shows that the New Testament is consistent with and builds upon the Old Testament. In both there is a

clear distinction between spiritual impoverishment that is solvable only by God granting faith in Christ's finished work and repentance to the poor in spirit, and economic impoverishment (a good list of causes is compiled) that is corrected through self-government, honest work, and, if necessary, the help of family, friends, and, if need be, one's local church. He notes that Scripture does not provide support for welfare to be given indiscriminately. He closes this article with a questionable proposal for phasing our statist welfare. Under this proposal, over a twenty year period the federal government would phase itself out of welfare payments by passing allotted money to individual states. The states would then phase themselves out by giving the responsibility to private, value-based groups. However, I would note that there must be a change in the hearts and thinking of the American people for this to occur. Currently, groups whose values are defined by Scripture are not the most popular of organizations on the American scene.

In Mr. Hall's third essay, he looks back in history to the approach of Calvin, Luther, and the Medieval Catholic, Vives. Using Scripture as their model, they implemented helpful welfare measures while, mindful of man's depraved nature, also exercising good stewardship of available money by requiring an orderly operation and accountability among staff and donors.

In his article, "Real Welfare Reform: An Idea Whose Time has Come", Doug Bandow reminds the readers that true welfare reform will come from the private, not the public, sector. It would have been helpful if he or another writer had placed more stress on the requirement of a tithe. Only as God's people obediently tithe and, above that, give offerings as God enables will we see the church have money to be extensively involved in ministries such as welfare.

Michael Bauman's article, "What Went Wrong With Welfare: How Our Poverty Programs Injured the Poor", and R.C. Sproul's and his son's (R.C. Sproul, Jr.) article, "Statism: Land of the Free?" follow nicely in order. Bauman's article demonstrates how government welfare policies have hurt rather than helped the impoverished. Supposedly well thought out plans such as minimum wage laws, rent controls, and aid for mothers of illegitimate children actually have backfired by hurting, rather than helping, the needy. Failure to understand man's basic nature and Scripturally based economic principles (such as employer/employee agree on a wage without the mandates of government) have contributed greatly to the failure of implemented policies. Thus, Bauman writes: "Impoverished man remains poor for two reasons: first, he no longer respects either those above him or their achievement, thus making it far less likely that he will seek to emulate them; and second, he becomes blind to the path the wealthy actually take to success—hard work, sacrifice, postponed gratification and diligence." (p. 51)

In their article, the Sprouls rightly point out that statist policies greatly hinder freedom and increasingly enslave citizens to statist power and provisions. They offer no hope except the Christian's future abode in heaven. I wish they had made reference to the Biblical rôle of the state and our need to return to it as a goal for which we are to work and pray.

In his articles, “Three Essential Elements of Biblical Charity: Faith, Family and Work” and “Against the Tide: Four Alternative Movements”, George Grant takes the reader to numerous Scripture passages to show the importance of godly faith, family and work for true welfare reform. In his second article, he provides the reader with a good, but brief, look at four 19th Century movements that challenged statist ideology. He closes with encouraging words regarding the Church, even in its weakness.

Calvin Beisner's essay, “Poverty: A Problem in Need of Definition”, could well have been placed at the front of the book. He rightly shows that the civil government has wrongly defined poverty by tying it to a country's gross national product. He points us to a much better definition (that of actual destitution) that is Scripturally sound. If this definition is adopted, the truly needed can be aided. If this chapter had been first, the reader could have been confronted at the outset with a Biblical framework in which to view poverty.

Dr. Edward Payne's article, “Welfare and Medical Care”, points out the interrelationship of welfare and medical care. His thoughts on individual rights are important for our day as are his thoughts on the difference between caring and medical care. This is much needed reading in the midst of the ongoing health care discussion.

The editor contributes the concluding article, “A Non-Theological Postscript”, in which he effectively argues for a return to a Scripturally-centered approach to welfare. He writes, “Realism about depravity must be included in any successful welfare reform.” (p. 209) He points out the hopeful signs yielded by a recent survey in which welfare reform proposals in several states contain principles found in Scripture. One hopes that these reforms will receive wide support. Certainly Christians need to be in the forefront of welfare reform. Of all people they should have the necessary compassion and the tool (Scripture) to speak and minister wisely and widely in the welfare realm.

How could this fine book have become better? I would have appreciated a greater emphasis on the importance of tithing for the church to more effectively minister. Secondly, a bibliography of ideas and resources (books, organizations, etc.) that detail what churches and organizations are doing would have been helpful. For example, numerous church youth groups are organized each summer to work for a week repairing the homes of the destitute. How can the uninvolved make contact with a Christian group currently involved? Other churches provide a variety of ministries, dental care, Bible studies, tutoring, etc. to inner-city apartment units. More needs to be done in this outreach also. Again, how can contacts be made with these groups? It is encouraging to also note the many parents who are sacrificially providing their children, and through scholarships other children, with a Christian education through homeschooling and Christian schools. These youth should grow up with a better understanding of Scriptural teaching on welfare and civil government's limited rôle in daily life than our current generation has.

Christians must take the lead not just in talking about policy but in its implementation. This will involve time and effort as we help the truly destitute to find a job, to properly

budget money, to help repair leaky roofs and broken plumbing.

This book is greatly needed in our day. The chapters are short, readable, applicable and well-written. The book brings together the thinking of a variety of individuals who not only document the problem but also give us the solution, even providing historical examples proving that Biblical solutions are neither outlandish nor outdated.

Here is good reading for the individual and excellent resource material for a Sunday School class or a Bible study group that is studying Biblical principles of welfare.