

A Cure for Government Welfare Blues?

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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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Abounding in the world today, as it always has, is hunger, sickness, and ignorance. Also abounding are prescriptions for the alleviation of this suffering. Within Christian and non-Christian circles the debate continues over the causes and solutions to these economic problems. *Welfare Reformed: A Compassionate Approach* (P & R, 1994) addresses these issues from a pragmatic, philosophical, and theological perspective. The book is more focused on finding solutions to our welfare dilemma but in this process uncovers the causes of our inability to reduce poverty despite the billions of dollars spent by government. The book is edited by David W. Hall, senior pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oak Ridge, TN, and he has written 4 of the 11 chapters. He has assigned the remaining 7 chapters to leading Christian scholars. In many ways, this book is a condensation of many books written in the last 10 years on this subject. If you do not have the time to read the books of Bandow, Beisner, Bennett, Chilton, Grant, Nash, Olasky, et.al., addressing the topic of economics and the Bible then *Welfare Reformed* is for you.

The foreword is given by Richard J. Neuhaus. He accurately denotes that a proper definition of the "poor" must be given. He suggests that our government's definition is too generous: 38% of the poor own their own homes, 62% own their own automobiles, 31% own their own ovens, and 50% have air conditioning - characteristics that would make them wealthy in the rest of the world. In fact, after adjusting for inflation, the per capita expenditures of the lowest quintile today exceeds that of the median consumer of 1955. Sadly, the recent increase in voluntarism and charity is viewed negatively by the Catholic Bishops and groups like Evangelicals for Social Action. Neuhaus quotes the monsignor of Catholic Charities: "This reflects a failure of government. In a more just society, these needs would be handled through government programs." (p. xix) We must change the mindset of Christians before we can even think of changing our cultures.

In Chapter One, entitled “Toward a Post-statist Theological Analysis of Poverty”, Rev. Hall asks three questions. The first is: “Could the Bible's revealed set of religious norms on the subject of welfare and its proper structure be a primary source for the reformation of welfare in our own times?” The second is: “Does the Bible actually address this subject?” And finally: “On the supposition that the Bible does and should speak to this societal issue, just what are the specifics of the Biblical teaching on the proper administration of welfare?” The first two questions are answered in the affirmative. It is to the last question which most of the remainder of the book is addressed.

In Chapter Two, Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, examines the recent history of government welfare programs and their utter failure. He is not optimistic about current proposals from politicians for welfare reform—it must come from the private sector. There must be a return to traditional charity (help from individuals for family and friends) and mutual aid (help from fraternal societies, churches, service institutions, etc.) of the 19th Century. “The existence of so many private aid institutions also played what many observers believe to be a major rôle in the 'moralization' process in Britain and the U.S. during the 19th Century, a process that produced a 40- year decline in crime rates.” (p. 38)

Michael Bauman, an associate professor of theology and culture at Hillsdale college, examines three particular government programs in Chapter Three. Without the technical terms and confusing graphs that economists are prone to use, he excellently explains the unintended bad effects of minimum wage laws, rent control and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). These programs do not address the cause of poverty. Most of the reasons why a person is poor is within their control yet what we do is blame society. Bauman argues forcefully that we have enslaved many to the state:

Impoverished man remains poor for two reasons: first, he no longer respects either those above him or their achievements, thus making it far less likely that they 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)

He argues that Christian love demands charity for either diligent workers or disabled but not to the unwilling or slothful.

Chapter Four is, by and large, a reprint of an article that appeared in the September 1992 issue of *Tabletalk*. This powerful essay sent chills up my spine just as much during my second reading of it as it did with my first. R.C. Sproul begins the chapter by sharing a conversation he had with the late Francis Schaeffer. He asked Dr. Schaeffer what was his greatest concern for the future of America. Without a pause for reflection that would come with such a question, Dr. Schaeffer responded: “Statism”. I tell my students that statism is the belief that any social or economic problem can be solved by a government program. However, Dr. Sproul provides a better definition: “Statism involves a philosophy of government by which the state, or government, is viewed not only as the

final authority but the ultimate agency of redemption.” (p. 57) Ironically, as Dr. Sproul notes, recipients of statism initially are appreciative of their provisions, then come to expect them, and finally demand them (which if not met legitimizes rioting for them). Not surprisingly, since we have abandoned a biblical world view, statism results not only in lost freedom but a loss in security which we were attempting to find.

During the recession, the nation faced high unemployment. Those unemployed demanded more unemployment benefits, which placed more strain on the budget, more tax burden on the people and on businesses, and resulted in more unemployment...and the beat goes on as the myth refuses to die. Meanwhile, Francis Schaeffer enjoys the final refuge from statism as he beholds the reality of his own redemption. (p. 63) In Chapter Five, George Grant, executive director of the Christian Worldview Institute, addresses the essential elements of biblical charity: faith, family, and work. Christian faith is essential for liberty and prosperity for it 1) reorients fallen men to reality, 2) counteracts the destructive effects of sin, 3) establishes a future orientation in men, 4) provokes men to exercise responsibility, and 5) empowers men with confidence in the promises of God. Family is essential because it provides men with 1) a proper sense of identity, 2) a genuine social security, and 3) the accountability and discipline they need. Finally, work is an essential element because the Bible teaches that 1) all honorable work is holy, 2) God calls each person to his work, 3) work is intended for the benefit of the community, and 4) the high ideals of the work ethic can be attained only through Christ's restoration and through the ministry of the Church. Using this guideline, Grant examines the life of Ruth; first, she had faith, then the apparatus she used was rooted in family life, and, finally, she worked.

In Chapter Six, David Hall examines New Testament developments. Hall notes that motives for giving are important; they can be out of true obedience or greed. Also, Jesus taught that the poor would always exist. Therefore, obedience to Jesus and His teachings is more important than poverty relief. However, relieving poverty is a task for Christian involvement; involvement beginning with the individual, the family, and the church (if individual and family help is not enough). One area of potential disagreement with Rev. Hall is on page 104. He is willing to allow state aid if a moral person is willing to work (or disabled and unable to work) and has no family and no church that can assume the pentultimate responsibility. I believe state aid is always immoral but if true biblical principles are followed the state will never have to be the ultimate provider.

In Chapter Seven, Cal Beisner, author and lecturer at covenant College, attempts to define poverty. (Note: The interested reader should consult chapter 14 of Mr. Beisner's *Prosperity and Poverty* for further expounding.) Beisner argues that much of the policy that is enacted around the world is an attempt to redress relative poverty; relative poverty being defined as having a sufficiently low income relative to the national average. Would the reader rather have twice the national average when average income is \$20,000 or half the national average when the average income is \$100,000? Beisner believes the reliable definition is deficient on four counts: 1) it is arbitrary, 2) it is self-contradictory, 3) it makes eliminating poverty impossible, and 4) it relies on unreliable data. Beisner argues that a biblical definition of poverty is needed and he offers one: People who are so

destitute that they must depend on charity for survival.

Beisner proceeds to offer some implications of this definition. First, it lowers the estimates of those in need or charity and, thus, makes the task of alleviating poverty less insurmountable. Second, it leads to a new understanding of what aid to the poor should target. Third, it carries a risk; a risk that you will be labeled a miser. Fourth, it is crucial in targeting the truly poor who are in need of aid. And fifth, it allows us to bring back an important biblical incentive to responsible work in order to counteract the tendency of many people to adopt counterproductive mentalities of immediate gratification, short time horizons, failure to save, low priority of work, and so on.

Chapters Eight through Ten focus on models for private welfare. In Chapter Eight, David Hall examines the welfare practices of the medieval churches; the Calvinist, the Lutheran, and the Romist. Key to these were a belief in responsible charity. As Martin Luther quipped: "Do not spoon-feed the masses. If we were to support Mr. Everybody, he would turn too wanton and go dancing on the ice." Also, most of the relief agencies did not believe they could eradicate all poverty; yet that did not immobilize them in their efforts.

In Chapter Nine, George Grant takes a look at more recent attempts at private welfare. In particular, he examines the writings of Abraham Kuyper, Leo xiii, Alexander Lyle Stuart, and Henry Cabot Lodge. Though writing from different theological backgrounds, all shared a distrust of central government to solve society's problems, a commitment to private property ownership, a healthy understanding of human nature, an unwavering commitment to the family, and the certainty that the Church was central to any and all efforts to mete out mercy, justice, and truth.

In Chapter Ten, Edward Payne, as associate professor of family medicine at the Medical College of Georgia and founder of the *Journal of Biblical Ethics in Medicine*, examines the relationship between medical care and welfare. He excellently explains why medical care is not a right; for if it is then other rights must be seized and controlled to guarantee this right to medical care. He goes on to explain how the proper and compassionate form of medical assistance to the needy must be accomplished through voluntary service.

David Hall concludes the book in Chapter Eleven with a summary statistics on the failure of government welfare and recent attempts by states to reform their systems. Quoting Ron Nash, Hall writes: "No economic or political system that assumes the essential goodness of human nature or holds out the dream of a perfect earthly society can possibly be consistent with the Biblical world view. Realism about depravity must be included in any successful welfare reform." In closing, I find very little to fault in this book. The reader will be able to glean the pragmatic and philosophical arguments against government welfare that should enable him to adequately debate a non-Christian statist. But more importantly, the reader will be able to glean the biblical and theological arguments that will allow him to hold his own in debates with Christian statist. And most importantly, it will allow the sincere reader to understand the appropriate form of welfare that needs to be striven for by the body of believers.

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