
KEYNOTE

CAPITALISM IN THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

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Many evangelical leaders today teach that the Bible does not favor the capitalist, free enterprise system. Rather, they say, the government should take care of the poor, the widows and orphans, providing for them. People who amass wealth are selfish and harmful, building their luxurious comfort on the backs of the poor and oppressed. Only the power of the state can rectify this injustice, taxing the rich and distributing to the poor. These evangelicals often prefer to word “progressive” to “socialist,” but their underlying philosophy is the same.

Indeed, the Bible does teach us to pity and help the poor, to relieve the oppressed, to bring justice to all. Is the capitalist system indeed at fault; does it need to be changed or limited? While modern socialism as a system developed later, the Westminster Assembly was aware of the concept, and in several places addressed this issue. Since everything the Assembly wrote was to be based on Scripture, the Westminster Standards provide a good summary of the biblical teaching related to capitalism.

EARLIER ATTEMPTS AT COLLECTIVISM

In most societies historically property, whether land or movable property, was directly owned either by individuals or by the ruler. The idea of common ownership of property was an idea only. The most famous classic description of such

a society was in Plato’s *Republic*.¹ While Aristotle also believed in a largely totalitarian state, he rejected the communism of Plato, allowing for private ownership of property.² As a disciple of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas favored the idea of communism as an impossible ideal, suitable only for humans in a sinless state.³ A well known later writer favoring communism was Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor under King Henry VIII, who glowingly described an imaginary communist society of four million people on an island nation.⁴ He is the one who coined the term “utopia” (from the Greek for “good place”) for such an idealized society.

While it may have been easy for philosophers to describe an imaginary ideal communist society, such communities were rare before the Westminster Assembly. The most common form of a communistic community had been groups living together with a strong religious purpose. The Jewish Essene sect was such a community. Denying both marriage and private property, they were sustained only through new disciples coming in, bringing their property to the common purse.⁵ In this regard the Essenes foreshadowed the monastic movement of the Middle Ages. These communities denied personal property to individuals and held assets in common, but they were not seeking to change the world to an ideal society, but rather were trying to escape the world. In that sense they differed from the communistic ideal of the philosophers.

Many have thought that the early Christian church practiced communism.

For instance, one writer states, “The condition of Plato’s imagined guardians was not so different from that of Jesus’ disciples as recounted in the Book of Acts.”⁶ However, careful examination of the text reveals that, rather than practicing communism, the early disciples were practicing extraordinary generosity—there is a difference!

First, it is clear that the people kept their property when they joined the church, as was stated in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in the immediate context.⁷ That same verse states that they were killed, not for keeping their property, but for lying to the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Barnabas sold his field and donated the money to the church long after he joined the church.⁸ The gifts of property for the poor in the church were just that, gifts. They came from people who still owned their own property.

Second, the giving and distributing of these gifts did not occur all at once, but rather as needs were arising. This is made clear by the Greek tense involved throughout both passages in Acts. Normally past events are related in the aorist tense, but in these accounts the much more unusual imperfect tense is used. The imperfect tense has the idea of continual or repeated action in the past. Here is a very wooden translation:

Now all the believers were together and were having all things common, and they were selling (their) possessions and (their) goods and they were distributing them to all, whoever was having need. . . . Now there was of the multitude of believers one heart and soul, and not one was saying that anything of his possessions was his own, but all things were common to

them. . . . For there was not anyone needy among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses, selling (them), were bringing the proceeds of the things sold and were laying (them) at the feet of the apostles; and they were distributing (them) according to anyone as he was having need.

All the underlined verbs are in the imperfect tense in Greek. Note that needs were arising continually, people were selling properties continually,⁹ people were bringing the prices continually, and the apostles were distributing continually. People were not required to give up their property to join the church; rather, they generously were giving property to meet ongoing needs in the church as those needs arose. Those who claim that Acts records a Christian communism are mistaken. This community provides a fine example of extraordinary charity in a unique historical situation.

Rather than practicing communism, the early disciples were practicing extraordinary generosity—there is a difference!

The Westminster divines no doubt were aware of an infamous attempt at a communist society in Protestant Europe. In 1534 the Dutch radical reformer John of Leyden took control of the nearby Ger-

man city of Münster. He sought to establish an eschatological utopia. He outlawed private property, instituted communism, introduced polygamy, and had himself proclaimed king of Münster; he lasted only about a year before being conquered by the surrounding army. His brief reign ended with his torture and death, along with widespread grief and desolation. This experiment in practical communism greatly tarnished the reputation of the radical reformation; even peaceful Anabaptists suffered for it.

Another experiment closer to the time of the Westminster Assembly took place in the Pilgrim colony in America at Plymouth. When the Pilgrims first landed in 1620, they established a communist system. However, before long that system proved itself a failure, and they switched to a free enterprise system, with excellent results. Unlike the Münster experiment, Plymouth provided an ideal test, with committed pious individuals with one united purpose. Yet even with that advantage, the system failed. The colony's governor, William Bradford later wrote his account of the colony, in which he described this experiment.

The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients applauded by some of later times; and that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much em-

ployment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. . . . I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.

At length, after much debate of things, the Governor (with the advice of the chiefest amongst them) gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves. . . . This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content.¹⁰

According to Bradford's chronology these events occurred in 1623, twenty years before the Westminster Assembly met. However, Bradford did not publish his history until 1650, several years after the close of the Assembly. It is not known whether any of the Westminster divines knew of this American experiment in Christian communism, but it is possible, since there was correspondence between the colonists and their families and friends in England. At least it is evident that such communistic notions would have been familiar to some Puritans, as they were to the Pilgrims.

WESTMINSTER VIEW OF PROPERTY

The Westminster Standards are not silent about personal or social economics. They clearly maintain the rights and responsibilities of private property ownership, and they deny a collective system. These positions favor the capitalist, free-enterprise system. Four major areas in the Standards speak to this issue: hu-

mans' place in the creation, the commands regarding killing and stealing, the duties of the civil magistrate, and the communion of the saints.

There is no indication here of a future government structure that mediated between individual humans and God in this covenant. The right of humans to own and direct property under God is part and parcel with their status as creatures in God's image and with the creation covenant.

The place of humans in the creation

In agreement with traditional Christian theology the Westminster divines considered humans as unique creatures in the creation, distinct from the angels and distinct from the animals. Unlike the angels, humans possess a material body. And, unlike the animals, humans possess an immaterial soul or spirit.

How did God create man? Ans. After God had made all other creatures, he created man male and female; formed the body of the man of the dust of the

ground, and the woman of the rib of the man, endued them with living, reasonable, and immortal souls; made them after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it, with dominion over the creatures; yet subject to fall.¹¹

Since humans are distinct from other creatures, their relation to the creation is different. All three Standards at this place describe this relation with the phrase that humans were given "dominion over the creatures." At this point the Larger Catechism provides as a proof text Gen 1:28, "have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Earlier in the same answer the Larger Catechism had stated that humans were created "after his [God's] own image," citing Gen 1:26. It can be shown that the divines linked being created in God's image with humanity's place as ruler over creation by comparing these Larger Catechism proof texts with those provided in the Confession. The Confession does not use the phrase "after his own image," but it does have the statement about dominion over the creatures. However, as its proof text for that latter statement it cites both verses, Gen 1:26 and 28. By citing verse 26 as well as verse 28, they showed that they believed that humans' being made in God's image results in human dominion over the creatures.

In order for humans to fulfill the image of God, they were to exercise dominion over the creatures. This dominion includes stewardship of the earth and its creatures, caring and increasing its productivity, regulating its use, and manag-

ing its development. God governs his creation in providence; Adam and Eve and their descendents were to govern the creation on earth as his vice regents. The Westminster Standards expand this point in their discussion of the creation covenant, the “covenant of works.”¹²

The Larger Catechism describes this covenant as follows:

Q. 20. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created? Ans. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

Note that this catechism answer makes it clear that Adam and Eve were given a full slate of duties in this covenant. Regarding the land, he was to “dress it” and to “eat of the fruit of the earth,” as well as to exercise “dominion” over the creatures. The “dressing” of the land refers to the biblical commands to “work” and “guard” the ground, to produce crops. His “eating of the fruit of the earth” refers to his enjoying the produce of the land. If Adam had kept this covenant, his descendants would have continued to enjoy this covenant. Each individual and family would have had this same relationship to the land and the animals. There is no indica-

tion here of a future government structure that mediated between individual humans and God in this covenant. The right of humans to own and direct property under God is part and parcel with their status as creatures in God’s image and with the creation covenant.

Commands regarding killing and stealing

Reformed ethics include all human moral duty under the Ten Commandments. Rightly interpreted these commandments include all sins and all duties. The rules for interpretation found in the WLC 99 are quite broad; the commandments are both positive and negative, and include all aspects of thinking and acting; they certainly include one’s concept of property.

An excellent illustration of this disregard for individuals is found in the attitude of Vladimir Lenin. In 1918 he demanded the purge of those “counterrevolutionaries and other persons” opposing or hindering the new communism, calling them “insects” and “parasites.”

The Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder,” requires “all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life and the life of others.”¹³ Jesus taught that this commandment reaches the heart, and requires one not to hate or belittle his neighbor (Matt 5:21-26). Political or economic systems, such as Communism or Nazism, which do not recognize the individual as a creature of God have broken this commandment horribly, inspiring in the people the idea that individuals are to be hated or disregarded because of their class or opinions. An excellent illustration of this disregard for individuals is found in the attitude of Vladimir Lenin. In 1918 he demanded the purge of those “counterrevolutionaries and other persons” opposing or hindering the new communism, calling them “insects” and “parasites.”¹⁴ The communistic economic and political system Lenin built was eventually to be responsible for the death of millions of people. These victims of communism were not guilty of any crime deserving death. The implementation of enforced collectivism required the breaking of the Sixth Commandment.

Likewise, the Eighth Commandment implies a free enterprise, capitalistic economic system. The command, “You shall not steal,” clearly implies private ownership of property. The biblical terms for “steal” (Hebrew *ganav* and Greek *klepto*) are defined as taking what belongs to another without his agreement or permission. The only exceptions to this commandment would be in cases of war or for punishment for crime.

Scriptural law forbids all kinds of stealing, including real property, animals, or other movable property. Thieves were to make full restitution, with additional

amounts added depending on the nature of the theft. The Bible also commands honest weights and measures, prompt payment of obligations, and all reasonable efforts to protect the property of others. Scripture commends hard work, earning money, saving and investing, and generosity. At the same time, it condemns the love of money.¹⁵

The Westminster catechisms state that this commandment requires “the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.”¹⁶ This procuring is to be done in a “lawful” and “just” manner. The book of Proverbs is an example of the Bible’s attitude toward private enterprise, encouraging people to work in a capitalistic system; the Westminster divines cited several passages in Proverbs to support their understanding of the Eighth Commandment.¹⁷

They likewise cited Eph 4:28, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” This command of Paul requires a free enterprise system. After providing “useful” labor, producing “with his hands” something that others are willing to pay for, the former thief receives his payment. He then is to “have,” that is, to possess this money. He then saves enough money so that, in addition to meeting his own and his family’s expenses, he has sufficient to “give” to those who are in need. There is no provision here for the government to step in.

Duties of the Civil Magistrate

In the socialist or communist system the government must play a huge role. The only exception would be a small, voluntary community, but even such communities must have a central authority that regulates the internal economy. When an entire country is involved, this government entity is the state, personified as the civil magistrate. Only the civil magistrate possesses the power of the state, necessary to extract property from reluctant citizens in order to distribute it to others.

The communist goal of “a community of goods” is explicitly denied, as an “error” to be “detested.” The Belgic Confession associates this communistic system with a denial of the proper authority of the civil magistrate.

The Westminster Assembly discussed at great length the duties of the civil magistrate, and devoted an entire chapter of the Confession to it.¹⁸ Throughout the entire chapter in the Confession there is no statement that the magistrate should take and distribute prop-

erty in some socialistic or communistic manner. Rather, it is his duty to “defend and encourage” them that “are good,” and to provide “punishment of evil doers.”¹⁹ The magistrate is empowered by God to enforce the outward observance of God’s commands, codified in “the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.”²⁰ These laws of God include private ownership of property, as the Eighth Commandment stipulates.

While the Westminster Confession at this point does not specify “the widow and the orphan,” its approach is the same as that found in the earlier Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which includes as a duty of the “Magistracy” the following: “Let him protect widows, fatherless children, and those that be afflicted, against wrong.”²¹ Rather than stating he must support these unfortunate people, it limits his actions to defending them against unjust actions from others. Charity here is to come from individuals and the church, not from the state. The Westminster divines doubtless shared this opinion.

The Westminster divines were familiar with the Belgic Confession of 1561, the earliest of the common Reformed confessions. In its statement on “The Magistrates” it makes the following declaration:

We detest the error of the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce a community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God hath established among men.”²²

Note that the communist goal of “a community of goods” is explicitly denied, as an “error” to be “detested.” The Belgic Confession associates this communistic system with a denial of the proper authority of the civil magistrate. They probably had in mind the disaster at Münster that took place fewer than thirty years before. While the Westminster divines did not explicitly mention communism at this point (they did in another connection), it is obvious that they agreed with the Belgic Confession in this matter, as their description of the duties of the civil magistrate agreed with that in the earlier confession.

Communion of the Saints

The only specific mention of communism in the Westminster Standards is found in the Confession’s chapter 26, “Of the Communion of Saints.” The Confession praises the communion that believers enjoy with God and with one another as one body in Christ. The final section of the chapter, however, lists two abuses of this doctrine. The first abuse is to think that believers share in the divinity of God or of Christ. The second abuse is to think that the believers own their property in common:

Nor doth their (the saints’) communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his goods and possessions.²³

The divines cited three passages from Scripture to confirm this point (Exod 20:15; Eph 4:28; and Acts 5:4). These passages deal with the command not to steal and with the ownership of property, confirming the fact that the divines held capitalism to be the biblical economic system.

Unlike the Belgic Confession, which rejected communism under the heading of the duties of the government, the Westminster Confession goes a step further, placing this rejection under the heading of the communion of the saints. One may conclude, reading the Belgic Confession, that state-sponsored communism is evil, yet that communism might be acceptable in a private voluntary association. However, by placing this rejection under the topic of the communion of the saints, the Westminster divines asserted in addition that communism is wrong even in concept, even in a totally Christian context. They thus rejected even non-governmental communistic associations.

CONCLUSION

The idea that the Bible teaches no political economic or political system had no place at the Westminster Assembly. The idea that the government is to fulfill a “progressive” role in the economy by redistributing wealth was even more abhorrent to the Westminster divines. Throughout the Standards, at the appropriate places, the Westminster divines made it clear that the Bible supports the private ownership and management of property, and the attaining of wealth (an “outward estate”) as an obligation under God. This was to be done in a “lawful” manner that also contributed to the wealth of others. Only the free enterprise system provides the freedom and legal structure to enable people to carry out these commands of God. There is a biblical system indeed, the capitalistic free-enterprise system; and the Westminster Standards concur in that judgment. 

¹ Plato, *Republic* 4:416-417; 5:464; also in his *Critias* 110-112.

² Aristotle, *Politics* 2:4-5.

³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1:98:1, rep. 3.

⁴ More, *Utopia* (1516).

⁵ Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 8:11, quoting Philo, *Apology for the Jews*.

⁶ *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 1:1049. The account of this so-called “Christian communism” is in Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35.

⁷ Acts 5:4.

⁸ Acts 4:36-37.

⁹ The Greek for “selling” in its second occurrence is a present participle, which therefore takes on the force of the main verb (“were bringing”), which is in the imperfect tense.

¹⁰ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. by Harvey Wish (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 90-91. The order of the paragraphs is reversed, as Bradford first wrote of his solution and then explained the problem behind it.

¹¹ WLC 17; the Larger Catechism is more detailed on this point than the Confession and the Shorter Catechism are (cf. WCF 4:2; WSC 10).

¹² WCF 7:2; WLC 20; WSC 12. The Confession calls it a “covenant of works,” while the Catechisms call it a “covenant of life.”

¹³ WSC 68; cf. WLC 135.

¹⁴ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*; trans. by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 1:27. Solzhenitsyn references Lenin, *Collected Works* (5th ed.), 25:68, 203-204.

¹⁵ Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13-14 (same statement on a different occasion); 1

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Tim 3:3; 6:10; 2 Tim 3:2; Heb 13:5; 1 Pet 5:2.

¹⁶ WLC 141; WSC 74.

¹⁷ Prov 6:1-6; 10:4; 11:15; 21:17, 20; 23:20-21; 27:23-27; 28:19. The importance of one’s “vocation” as not only a means of support, but as God’s calling and the means of glorifying him in life, is an important emphasis of Reformed theology. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3:10.

¹⁸ WCF 23.

¹⁹ WCF 23:1.

²⁰ WCF 23:2.

²¹ SHC 30:3.

²² BC 36.

²³ WCF 26:3.

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EXEGESIS

OLD TESTAMENT PROPERTY STEWARDSHIP: AN OPPORTUNITY AND AN OBLIGATION

Christopher K. Lensch

“It’s the economy, Stupid!” This phrase was the mantra of the 1992 presidential election that kept Bill Clinton focused in his campaign. Economic interests are always a major factor in election years. The appeal of material well-being is common to all, and even when all are prospering, the economy and compulsory redistribution of wealth to the poor have been perennial issues.

In the colonial era, Puritan ministers would preach seasonal “election sermons” to lay out the Bible’s spiritual qualifications and virtues expected in godly leaders. In our modern elections, spiritual concerns and the pursuit of God’s blessing glimmer only faintly among discerning voters who believe the Bible.

This essay first will compare the roles and success of voluntary agencies versus the government in helping its poor, followed by a survey of the OT ideal of the jubilee where every family of every generation had an opportunity to glorify God through its stewardship of the family estate.

SOCIAL BENEFITS OF RELIGION

Religion binds people together around common values and shared metaphysical interests. The word, in fact, comes

from the root *religio*, meaning “to bind together.” Religious communities are bound together horizontally by their common values, as well as bound vertically to God. Religious accountability is both horizontal and vertical.

Religious communities can be very useful in offering economic relief in the larger community. Religious altruism at the grassroots level not only is effective in meeting the short-term physical needs of the poor, but because the help is personal with a design of lifting the needy, it can lead to long-term life changes for “down-and-outers.”

Sadly, big government welfare has usurped the charitable role that local religious groups used to oversee. Before the era of state interventionism, hospitals, orphanages, and other relief agencies were managed by churches and synagogues. Today the federal government, under a loose interpretation of the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution, has become more than an economic safety net for its inhabitants—it has turned into a cash cow for welfare queens; it has locked needy families in a cycle of dependence; and it has bought votes for officials promising greater handouts.

Federal welfare is big business. Indiscriminate and routine handouts have become so entrenched that welfare recipients expect government aid and treat it as a right instead of as a briefly needed gift. That would not be the case if local charitable groups worked with individuals to assess and supply the needs of the

poor. Then economic relief would be seen for what it is—gratuitous charity.

Of course, no government is the ultimate benefactor of the poor. Government does not provide for the poor, but taxpayers do. As taxes grow with ballooning entitlements, some citizens, even with a generous heart, begin to think in terms of suffering *because of* the poor instead of suffering *with* the poor.¹ It does not help that the largesse of the state intermediary is impersonal and that bureaucratic layers disconnect the tax paying

givers from the recipients. Direct charity, on the other hand, gives immediate relief with personal encouragement that may include training in skills and opportunity for self-help.

Especially when religious charities offer a hand to the needy, it is a hand up as well as a hand out. Religious communities generally are interested in making converts as well as doing alms. Acts of mercy help quicken an interest in the values of religion. Beneficiaries may be moved by compassion. These new disciples henceforth may be prodded by community peer pressure, yet the stronger pull on them may be their newfound personal interest in godly virtue. This is something that government can never instill, for the magistrate has power to push, but not to inspire. Government can effect change only through force, or otherwise by throwing money at problems, but in matters of economic opportunity for struggling individuals or businesses, government offers the most encouragement by getting out of the way of charitable enterprises and free market forces.

With regard to the government's encouraging a general prosperity that lifts all boats, it does serve an important role in preserving certain western institutions that are rare in many parts of the world. Robert Sirico sums up the institutions that have made the United States economy the envy of the world:

When we speak of the common good, we need also to be clear-minded about the political and juridical institutions that are most likely to bring it about. These happen to be the very institutions that socialists have worked so hard to discredit. Let me list them: private property in the means of produc-

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tion; stable money to serve as a means of exchange; the freedom of enterprise that allows people to start businesses; the free association of workers that permits people to choose where they would like to work and under what conditions; the enforcement of contracts that provides institutional support for the idea that people should keep their promises; and a vibrant trade within and among nations to permit the fullest possible flowering of the division of labor. These institutions must be supported by a cultural infrastructure that respects private property, regards the human person as possessing an inherent dignity, and confers its first loyalty to transcendent authority over civil authority. This is the basis of freedom without which the common good is unreachable.²

FREEDOM AND STEWARDSHIP IN THE PROMISED LAND

The common good in ancient Israel was a covenanted goodness arranged by the God of the Mosaic covenant. When Israel took possession of the promised land, the twelve tribes were given territorial allotments based on primogeniture and the relative size of their population. Clans and families within the non-Levitical tribes were apportioned family estates that were designed to stay within the control of those families throughout succeeding generations.³ The fruitful land is a key element of the early biblical covenants; God intended the land as a means of blessing to his servants and he expected them to harvest a yield from the earth. They were stewards of God's land.⁴

Still, God allowed families to hold title to their estates to ensure rights of claim

and inheritance. However, if forced by debt or sudden poverty to sublet parcels or to mortgage all of the family estate, the loss of stewardship would not be forever. The Year of Jubilee every fifty years was the economic leveler that returned the property to the original family. Under this divine plan, everyone at some time in his life was guaranteed an opportunity to use the family estate to invest in and reap a harvest from the land.

It appears that God wanted every generation to be free to exercise an economic stewardship grounded in the family inheritance. At the same time, this system checked greed, power grabs, economic oppression, and visions of amassing large land holdings.⁵ By avoiding the possibility of large corporate farms taking over the country, the reversion of property to its original owners guaranteed a widespread, working middle class.⁶ Thus was prevented a permanent system of social classes; it gave everyone the opportunity to start over, economically and socially, and it placed all on an equal social footing.

The universal renewal in the Year of Jubilee reminds us of God's concern for human liberty. God wants his people to be free and self-determining under his law. How apropos that William Penn should choose a freedom verse from the jubilee passage when he commissioned a special bell to commemorate fifty years of religious freedom in Penn's colony! People can still read this verse on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all inhabitants thereof" (Lev 25:10).

It is important to remember the root and purpose of this economic freedom in the promised land. Leviticus 25:9 informs

us that the jubilee commenced on the Day of Atonement in the fiftieth year. Before there could be social and economic freedom, there had to be spiritual freedom. The offering on the Day of Atonement sealed a deliverance from sin and death, and it symbolized the coming final sacrifice of Christ. The real release that liberated people was deliverance from guilt that brought peace with God. Only when sinners were reconciled to their Maker could they begin to act like free men who lived in the fear of God.

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Spiritual emancipation, then, is the root of social and economic freedom. The end of our freedom is not self-indulgence, but rather the service of God, who grants opportunities of stewardship before him. With opportunity comes obligation.

One practical area of responsible stewardship before God was using personal freedom and God-given means to show mercy. Should there be any needy in the land, charitable provision was made for them. Landowners as stewards were to use their profits in honor of their Maker, remembering that their forefathers also had been poor slaves in Egypt. God's people were commanded to lend to brothers in need, and to give freely to the poor.⁷ In this way God tested the heart of his stewards with a promise of prosperity for their fidelity to him. The jubilee release kept before their minds this question: "Is the land for our use only, or for God's larger purposes?"

Since God had redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt (Lev 25:42), none of them was again to be reduced to the status of a slave (v. 39). Poverty could, even at its worst, reduce an Israelite to a status no less than that of a hired servant, and then only until the Year of Jubilee (v.40). God's chosen child was not to be oppressed (vv. 43, 46). Indeed, as citizens of God's kingdom, masters and servants had become brothers together (cf. Neh 5:7-12; Phlm 16). In its widest application, only through loyalty to God could Israel as a nation ever hope to be free and independent of other masters.

Finally, it should be noted that the restitution of Israel's property appears to have had a typical significance, for the secure possession of the land by its individual Hebrew owners served as an acted prophecy of blessings of the coming Messianic age (Isa 61:1-3). The Year of Jubilee foreshadowed the restoration of all that has been perverted by mankind's sin, the establishment of the true liberty of the children of God (Luke 4:17-21), and

the deliverance of creation from the bondage of corruption to which it was subjected on account of human depravity (Rom 8:19-23).

CONCLUSION

There is a connection between accountable stewardship and national prosperity. People need to be free to find economic opportunity while being held responsible by God in the use of their freedoms. A conscience enlightened by the Spirit of God brings a person a spirit of industry, prosperity, and charity.

For what it brought and for the future it depicted, the Jubilee in the promised land was the closest thing on earth to a realized utopia. Fortunes were restored, fraternity and unity were lived out, the bounties of the land were enjoyed before the Lord without any toil during the year of celebration. It could only get better if God himself removed the curse and dwelt in the midst of his people. And that was the portent of the year-long festival.

Jubilee means “sound of the trumpet.” The Year of Jubilee commenced with the sound of the trumpet and a joyful shout. At the end of history there will be a trumpet blast, and the land that has been groaning will rejoice, and the saints will celebrate when the curse is removed and God’s justice prevails at the glorious return of Christ. 

¹ For this thought I am indebted to Ryan Messmore’s essay, “A Moral Case Against Big Government” found in the Heritage Foundation’s *First Principles Series*.

² Robert A. Sirico, President of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, in his essay,

“Socialism, Free Enterprise, and the Common Good” as printed in *Imprimis* 36:5 (May 2007): 5.

³ Stewardship of family estates is biblical and contrary to the humanistic ideal of communism. Leading up to the French Revolution, Rousseau wanted to tear down all property lines and fences. Babeuf claimed in his “Plebian Manifesto” that “the land belongs to no one.”

⁴ “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me” (Lev 25:23).

⁵ Lev 25:17. Jezebel used force to confiscate the vineyard that Naboth insisted was a family property (1 Kgs 21:3).

⁶ Hammurabi (ca. 1800 B.C.) and the kings of other Middle Eastern countries proclaimed periodic “releases” or “clean slates” to bring a return of economic balance. Otherwise absentee creditors would have amassed large real estate holdings. But whereas these proclamations were random and by royal decree, the Mosaic Jubilee was by law scheduled to follow a generational pattern. This law reinforced the idea that God himself was owner of the land and that his people were stewards upon it, rather than allowing the king to be the deciding factor above God’s law and the land’s God (Lev 25:23).

⁷ Deut 15:7, 8, 10, 15.

**PROPERTY RIGHTS AND
RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT¹**

John A. Battle

THE IDENTIFICATION OF PROPERTY

The concept of property permeates the entire Old Testament. The Hebrew language itself provides a variety of syntactical modes expressing ownership.² While many of these forms normally refer to ownership or a related concept (as authorship, in Psalm titles), the genitive relation, as in many languages, can include a wide spectrum of meaning, from the absolute ownership to absolute subjugation, as is illustrated by the well-known progression, “my boots, my dog, my child, my wife, my country, my God.” Hence, further clarification from the context is needed in each individual case.

Many Hebrew nouns identify in an absolute sense various types of property, such as land, houses, servants, cattle, and gold; but in addition several nouns describe property as such, as being owned by someone, and thus in a subordinate position to that person. The most prominent of these words are listed here.³

Nachalah—“possession, property, inheritance” (224 occurrences). While the KJV normally translates the word “inheritance” or “heritage,” that concept actually is indicated only 45 times.⁴ Normally “possession” is best, as the possession of Canaan by Israel or by the various tribes,⁵ the Lord’s possession of Israel,⁶ the Levites’ share in the Lord and the tithes,⁷ or the possession of hostile nations.⁸

Sometimes “share” or “interest” is implied.⁹

Nouns derived from *chalaq*, “to divide, share”:

Cheleq (Aramaic *chalaq*)—“portion, tract, territory” (69 occurrences). This term normally refers to the apportionment of land or booty,¹⁰ often to God as his people’s possession;¹¹ it may also refer to one’s chosen life.¹²

Chelqah—clearly defined “portion” of ground (23 occurrences). It is always used for an individually owned field.¹³

Achuzzah—“(assigned) possession” (66 occurrences). It refers to permanent purchase or assignment of property, usually land.¹⁴

Osher—“riches” (37 occurrences). This term includes wealth and possessions, relatively more than those possessed by others.¹⁵

Rekush—“property, goods” (28 occurrences). This word always indicates movable property, normally domesticated livestock (cf. *rekesh*, “steed”).¹⁶

Nouns derived from *yarash*, “to possess, inherit”:

Yerusshah or *yereshah*—“land” possessed or inherited (15 occurrences). This term normally refers to national possession of territory.¹⁷

Morashah—“possession” (9 occurrences). This word indicates national dominion over land or people.¹⁸

Nouns derived from *qanah*, “to get, acquire”:

Miqnah—“purchase” (14 occurrences). This term can refer to the item purchased or to the purchase price; cf. *miqneh*, “cattle.”¹⁹

Qinyan—“acquisition” (10 occurrences). This word refers to property or goods owned by right of purchase or creation.²⁰

Nouns derived from *yathar*, “to remain over”:

Yithron—“advantage, profit” (10 occurrences). This term is used only in Ecclesiastes. It can be excess of anything good, advantage, or material profit.²¹

Yithrah—“riches” (2 occurrences). Both passages refer to the captured booty of Moab.²²

Segullah—“possession, property” (8 occurrences). This word normally denotes God’s ownership of Israel; it can also refer to the treasure of kings.²³

Nekasim—“riches” (5 occurrences). This word refers to vast wealth gathered by kings or armies.²⁴

Many of these terms have found their way into modern Hebrew usage, and today property is classified as being either non-movable (land) or movable, including produce, utensils, animals, coins, and deeds.²⁵ These are possessed either by direct ownership or by other proprietary rights, as seen with rents, loans, and other arrangements.²⁶

The Old Testament also provides the backdrop for several modes of property acquisition, as direct purchase by money,

purchase of a written deed, and symbolic property exchange.²⁷ These property terms have different shades of meaning, which sometimes indicate various concepts and levels of property ownership in the OT.

GOD’S RELATION TO PROPERTY

In Scripture God consistently is viewed as the owner of all the earth and everything in it. In a particular way he is the owner of Canaan and of the people of Israel. These two aspects of God’s ownership of people and property stem from his two relations to the world and Israel as Creator and Redeemer.

God’s interest as Creator

The OT uniformly views the world as God’s possession by right of his creation and sustaining providence.²⁸ God’s sovereign rights over the earth and its inhabitants are forcefully demonstrated by the Flood, the dispersement at Babel, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In these cases people and their property were drastically redistributed or destroyed by unilateral divine action. The OT acknowledges God’s continuing possession of the earth and humanity.

However, the OT also indicates that God has created humans in God’s image, thus suited for exercising a similar sovereignty over nature.²⁹ While humanity’s control over property is not absolute, it is real, placing human beings over nature as owners under God, as vice-regents. This concept opposes the ideals of the rest of the Ancient Near East, which pictured humans as merged into nature.³⁰ Moreover, this ownership is originally individualistic. Property is to be acquired and consumed on the basis of individual labor.³¹ The diverse offerings of Cain and Abel and the subsequent development

of specializations require individual ownership.³² The OT considers individual prosperity a mark of divine favor, as indicated by the concept of *shalom* as a wish for peace and material welfare, and by several examples.³³ The prosperity of wicked people is an anomaly which is viewed as temporary, certain doom awaiting them, either in this life or in the judgment.³⁴

God consistently is viewed as the owner of all the earth and everything in it. In a particular way he is the owner of Canaan and of the people of Israel. These two aspects of God's ownership of people and property stem from his two relations to the world and Israel as Creator and Redeemer.

Genesis records a most interesting transaction in Egypt during Joseph's exaltation there sometime during the nineteenth century B.C.³⁵ Having gathered, either through taxation or purchase, immense quantities of grain during the seven prosperous years, Joseph in Pharaoh's name sold it during the famine years to all buyers, including the Egyptians. Eventually

the Egyptians sold all their possessions and their land and even themselves to Pharaoh, who thereafter claimed 20% of all their produce. This account preserves the origin of Pharaoh's ownership of the people and land of Egypt, as being from a historical business transaction, not from any divine grant. Hence, the OT considers that even in Egypt property originally belonged to individuals.

Yet humans are not supreme. As Creator and Judge, God continually exercises his prerogatives over the lives, welfare, and wealth of people and nations;³⁶ and therefore all people are held accountable to him for their use of their own property.

God's interest as Redeemer

Most of the property laws in the OT are adapted particularly to the nation Israel, to which God claims a special sovereignty through the theocracy. In order to distinguish special laws from permanent ones, one must first determine God's relation to property within his elect nation.

God's initial promise of the land of Canaan to Abraham and to his seed is pictured as a purely gracious act.³⁷ However, its initial conveyance to them is conditioned on a separate act of judgment upon the native Canaanites.³⁸ Because of their extreme wickedness God declares the Canaanites and their property to be *cherem*, "devoted" to himself for destruction.³⁹ The severity of this curse is emphasized by the experience of Achan in Joshua 7. Even the private possession of a devoted object contaminates the owner.⁴⁰ By a special judgment God intervenes and claims Canaan as "devoted" to himself; he thus be-

comes its direct owner.⁴¹ The Israelites are God's appointed instruments to exterminate the Canaanites and claim the land for Yahweh.⁴² This particular ownership appears to be the theme of Lev 25:23, "The land shall not be sold forever, for the land is mine."⁴³ The OT thus emphasizes to the Israelites that they possess their land by grace, not by merit, nor by right of purchase, nor by right of labor and development.⁴⁴

In a similar fashion the people belong to Yahweh, not only as his creatures, but as the objects of his election and redemption.⁴⁵ Because of this redemption God claims the Israelites as his slaves.⁴⁶ This doubly exceptional condition—God's ownership of the land and of the people—explains a number of property concepts unique to that nation and time. It also accounts for the principle of "theocratic brotherhood," which excludes the foreigner (*nakri*), as opposed to the sojourner (*ger*), from the benefits of much of that unique legislation.⁴⁷ Some have considered these property laws as typical of the Messianic Age,⁴⁸ although it might be better to explain them as preparatory and initiatory.⁴⁹ Others have taken the poor laws to be symbolic of Israel's spiritual and physical poverty prior to the nation's redemption, which poverty was alleviated by God.⁵⁰ Certainly God wishes his people to show extra mercy in light of their former slavery;⁵¹ however, this attitude need not be symbolical or typical to be appropriate in the theocratic nation—a redeemed people in a devoted land.

THE RIGHTS OF PROPERTY

As has been shown in the previous two sections, individual property ownership is the norm throughout the OT.⁵² Normally one could purchase perpetual

ownership of land or property⁵³ or of non-Hebrew slaves.⁵⁴ People were able to keep and enjoy the fruit of their own labor and investment.⁵⁵ And heirs had the right to receive their estates intact.⁵⁶

In the OT the individual's property did not at the same time belong to the king. The money the king received through taxation was considered as his own, for his expenses and for payment for his responsibility as national chief judge and defender. Otherwise, his relation to property was equivalent to that of a private citizen.⁵⁷ Hence one sees the injunction to limit his wealth,⁵⁸ the prophetic warning of Samuel decrying excessive royal extractions from the citizens,⁵⁹ the liberty of Solomon and others to spend their wealth,⁶⁰ the sinfulness attributed to arbitrary appropriations,⁶¹ and the folly attributed to exorbitant royal claims on property.⁶²

The OT laws respecting property enforce the concept of individual ownership not only by prohibiting all forms of theft, but by commanding positive effort toward maintaining the property of others.

While there are many positive assurances for private property, the strongest arguments arise from OT prohibitions against all forms of stealing. The clearest one is the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal.”⁶³ This emphatic prohibition ensures the security of each person’s possessions, as the term *ganav* describes the taking of another’s possessions without his consent or specific legal justification.

Several particular injunctions carefully define the intent of this commandment. Israelites were forbidden to steal land by moving the stone border markers.⁶⁴ Detected theft of money or movable goods required repayment in full plus an additional percentage; if the thief could not meet this requirement, he was to be sold into slavery, the proceeds going to the person robbed.⁶⁵ The added percentage varied with the nature of the theft. Malicious refusal to return property held in trust required an additional one-fifth retribution.⁶⁶ If stolen property was recoverable, the thief was required to repay double.⁶⁷ If livestock was stolen and then sold, lost, or killed, the thief had to repay four sheep per sheep or five oxen per ox;⁶⁸ this more severe penalty reflects the Israelites’ dependence upon their domestic animals. It should also be noted that the OT’s penal enforcement is eminently fair, with the punishments suited to the crimes.

In addition to standard enforceable regulation, the OT often appeals to the people to be honest in all dealing in property. It enjoins honest and true weights and measures.⁶⁹ It demands prompt payment of wages or other financial obligations.⁷⁰ It condemns as morally reprehensible artificial market manipulations that

take advantage of extreme necessity.⁷¹ In many of these cases, God himself assumes responsibility for enforcement, through providential judgment for disobedience or blessing for obedience. This nonhuman enforcement is even more striking in the property laws respecting the theocracy as such.⁷²

The OT laws respecting property enforce the concept of individual ownership not only by prohibiting all forms of theft, but by commanding positive effort toward maintaining the property of others. Damage caused to another’s property is to be made good. Carelessness leading to another’s property loss requires equal compensation.⁷³ Precautions are required to ensure the safety of employees.⁷⁴ Loss, damage, injury, or death caused by one’s own livestock likewise requires equal or equivalent compensation, especially if caused by negligence.⁷⁵ Furthermore, if one finds lost property belonging to another, he is obligated to return it to its rightful owner, and in the case of an animal, to relieve any suffering it may experience in the interim.⁷⁶ This requirement is emphasized by its expressed applicability even to one’s personal “enemy.”⁷⁷

These laws, injunctions, and exhortations respecting the rights of property are based on permanent principles inherent in the relation humans sustain to each other as created in the image of God. However, along with these rights, the OT recognizes corresponding responsibilities and limitations. While some of these appear to be likewise permanent, others are dependent on the particular relation Israel sustained to Yahweh as Redeemer.

Limitations on property and its uses are imposed throughout the OT. These can be divided into categories reflecting the various relations people sustained to God.

General humanitarianism

The OT requires a general attitude of kindness and civility to others.⁷⁸ Along with this attitude God expects justice toward the defenseless members of society,⁷⁹ and even humane treatment for animals.⁸⁰ In short, these laws, along with the spirit of those following, enjoin a spirit of kindness and love to others. Jesus' Golden Rule provides an elegant summary of the OT attitude: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."⁸¹

Special laws for God's land

As demonstrated above, God in the OT considers his ownership of Canaan to be more direct than that of the rest of the earth.⁸² To emphasize his sovereignty to the nation of Israel and to maintain a distinct separation of the twelve tribes, thus insuring the fulfillment of his prophetic and redemptive purposes,⁸³ God determines that each tribe and family should receive a specific allotment of territory in Canaan. They are to hold this property as stewards, working it and managing it for their own sustenance and profit.

Israel's peculiar real estate laws can be traced to these two principles: God's ownership and tribal perpetuation. God's ownership of the land comes to the fore in the assignment of the sacred dues and in the land-rest regulations. Every Israelite is required to bring to Yahweh the first-fruits of the harvest⁸⁴ and the tithe of all

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his produce or income.⁸⁵ Voluntary offerings also are required.⁸⁶ Of special interest are the land-rest laws, which are unique to Israel. Every seventh year and every fiftieth year the Israelites are to allow their land to lie fallow; and the poor, the strangers, and the animals are to be allowed to eat whatever voluntary crops appear. The seventh year is the Sabbath year and the fiftieth the year of jubilee.⁸⁷ This commandment apparently was observed at least partially until the time of the later judges, for seventy years of Sabbath years had been ignored by the time of the third Babylonian Captivity in 586 B.C.⁸⁸ The Sabbath land-rest apparently was resumed after the Captivity, for Josephus mentions its observance in the time of Alexander, and the Maccabees had to take it into account in their battle with Lysius, about 162 B.C.⁸⁹ In the legislation God promises that he will providentially

make up for any lack, through extra bountiful crops in the sixth year.⁹⁰

Other real estate laws are designed to maintain tribal identification and function in the theocracy. Each tribe is allotted its particular inheritance or possession (*nachalah*, *cheleq*, or *achuzzah*) in Canaan. Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh receive their portions through Moses east of the Jordan;⁹¹ the other tribes, excluding Levi, are granted their sections west of the Jordan through Joshua;⁹² the Levites receive “the Lord” as their possession, with particular material privileges in place of a defined territory.⁹³ Particular laws maintaining these tribal and family distinctions are numerous. Female heirs are to marry within their own tribe, thus preserving their property for the tribe.⁹⁴ If land should be sold to another outside the family, the purchaser or his kinsman has the option of buying back the land at any time, or city houses within one year.⁹⁵ If the land is not redeemed, it automatically reverts to the original owner or his family in the jubilee year.⁹⁶ The sale price of land is thus to be adjusted according to the number of years the buyer will own the land.⁹⁷ This uniquely Israelite form of ownership is evident in Lev 27:22, “a field of his purchase (*miqnah*) which is not of the fields of his possession (*achuzzah*),” which shows the two layers of ownership, that of divine apportionment and that of purchase; normally in the OT purchase of movable property represents transfer of all claim to ownership.⁹⁸

Special laws for God’s people

Just as Yahweh claims special interest in Canaan,⁹⁹ so he considers the Israelites as his special possession (*segullah*) and his slaves by redemption

from Egypt,¹⁰⁰ with the first born of each family originally devoted to himself by the Passover miracle.¹⁰¹ The people recognize this obligation through several of their sacred dues, including the double substitution of the Levites, the redemption price for each first-born son,¹⁰² and the offering of the first born of the flock or herd.¹⁰³ Other ways this obligation is shown are the annual tax of half a shekel per person,¹⁰⁴ as well as voluntarily vowed or devoted offerings.¹⁰⁵ In addition, Israelites are to recognize God’s sovereignty over them by offering 1.1% of all war spoils to him, the congregation giving up 2% of their half and the soldiers 0.2% of theirs.¹⁰⁶

The Israelites’ consequent relation to each other is a close “theocratic brotherhood,”¹⁰⁷ which includes the Israelite and the resident alien who honors Yahweh (the *ger*).¹⁰⁸ This unique bond accounts for many OT injunctions concerning the relationship of superiors to inferiors in society.

The OT, while approving slavery, elevates and modifies its conception far above that of other cultures. A Hebrew slave is to be treated as a hired servant,¹⁰⁹ and is to be released after six years’ service or on the year of jubilee.¹¹⁰ He also is to be released for sustaining permanent injury.¹¹¹ His explicit consent is required before his servitude becomes permanent,¹¹² and slave concubines cannot be sold.¹¹³ The OT demands that foreign owners of Hebrew slaves treat them well, and permit their redemption at any time.¹¹⁴ A uniquely OT law requires that escaped fugitive slaves be protected and allowed their freedom.¹¹⁵ This humane legislation directly opposes that of other nations.¹¹⁶ The explanation for this especially gen-

erous treatment is found in God's ownership of his people and his redemption of them from the slavery of Egypt.¹¹⁷ Slaves are considered part of the household,¹¹⁸ and as such they participate in the material and spiritual life and welfare of the family.¹¹⁹ Slaves are permitted to rise to honorable positions, some even marrying into the family.¹²⁰

Having enough, each person is to be content; yet he is to labor in order to enjoy prosperity from God. Labor, prosperity, contentment, and generosity are all compatible in a godly man, as they are in God himself, as he is pictured throughout the OT.

Another peculiar feature is the prohibition against loaning on usury,¹²¹ consistently viewed as evil.¹²² The terms for this forbidden "interest" are *neshek* and *tarbith*; they probably refer to interest on loans for money for general purposes and to interest on loans for food, respectively.¹²³ Interest loans are approved and regulated in other Ancient Near Eastern literature.¹²⁴ Rates were high, Babylonian rates varying from 20% to 100%, and Assyrian rates reaching 140% for over-

due payments.¹²⁵ Egyptian standard rates were 30% for money loans and 33.3% for food loans.¹²⁶ Since the prohibitions in Exodus and Leviticus mention loans necessitated by poverty, and the one in Deuteronomy approves such loans to foreigners, it appears that commercial business loans are not in view—rather, "charitable" loans to the poor.¹²⁷ The debated significance of Neh 5:11 can likewise be clarified by the plausible suggestion that the term *m't* ("hundredth") represents the term *msh'th* ("loan, pledge"), thus restoring to the people their mortgaged property and the paying of interest.¹²⁸ All such debts are to be cancelled every Sabbath year; yet loans are not to be refused to the poor, even though they soon will be cancelled.¹²⁹ The OT demands mercy from the loaner, returning pledges when needed and respecting the debtor's privacy and dignity.¹³⁰

Along with mercy for debtors, the OT enjoins many practical ways for helping all poor people in Israel, including the orphans and the widows. They are to be respected and helped;¹³¹ Hebrew farmers are to leave them the corner crops, the gleanings, and the Sabbath year crops.¹³² In addition, the poor are to share in sacrificial meals;¹³³ and every three years the annual tithe is earmarked for the poor.¹³⁴ While other nations claimed to honor the poor, the orphan, the widow,¹³⁵ the OT makes Yahweh the supreme patron of these dependent people.¹³⁶ They are protected by precept and persuasion.¹³⁷

THE PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARD PROPERTY

Perhaps the simplest description of the proper attitude would be *diligence of labor and enterprise complemented by contentment and generosity*. The OT

assumes and approves of a society in which rich and poor dwell together.¹³⁸

Without overturning the basic economic system which brought about the existence of rich and poor, Hebrew law sought to raise the needy from the deepest and most severe type of economic distress.¹³⁹

Or, as the Jewish scholar Harry Orlinsky has described the prophets (he assumes they helped formulate Hebrew law),

(They) were nevertheless reformers within, rather than of, their social system. . . . Thus it was not social inequality but social injustice which they denounced, not the existence of rich and poor within the same society but the abuse of the poor by their richer brethren which they decried, not the creation of a new society but the infusion of the Israel they knew with a new spirit which they demanded.¹⁴⁰

Thus property rights and responsibilities are viewed as inseparable from the Hebrew's dignity as a human created in God's image and as a member of God's chosen nation.¹⁴¹

The importance of this fact is evidenced by the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet."¹⁴² While other cultures also express such sentiments,¹⁴³ the OT is much more consistent in its treatment. Some have attempted to redefine coveting (*chamad* in Exodus) or its prototype as an outward crime.¹⁴⁴ But the traditional understanding of mental coveting is best, as shown in the use of the synonymous term *awah* for coveting in Deut 5:21b (*awah* consistently means mental coveting).¹⁴⁵

While the godly attitude with its resulting actions is not always enforceable by men, God declares that he will enforce it by other means, either individually,¹⁴⁶ or collectively within the theocracy.¹⁴⁷ Having enough, each person is to be content;¹⁴⁸ yet he is to labor in order to enjoy prosperity from God.¹⁴⁹ Cyrus Gordon is mistaken to think that these motives are contradictory.¹⁵⁰ Labor, prosperity, contentment, and generosity are all compatible in a godly man, as they are in God himself, as he is pictured throughout the OT. 

¹ This article was originally published in *The Reformation Review* 26:1 (January 1981): 6-20. I have made some changes and additions to that article.

² As a "construct state" genitive construction with a noun ("the house of the king"), or a noun with a pronominal suffix ("his horse"), or a circumlocution using the preposition *le* with the owner (Ruth 2:3, "the portion of the field belonging to Boaz"), or with an addition of *asher* (Gen. 29:9, "the sheep which were her father's"); *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. by E. Kautzsch, trans. and rev. by A. E. Cowley (2nd Ed.; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910), 108, 247, 381, 416, 419-420.

³ Lexical and statistical information concerning these words was taken from the appropriate references in BDB and in Mandl.

⁴ E.g., Num 27:7-11; Prov 19:14.

⁵ Deut 4:21; Josh 19:51.

⁶ Deut 4:20.

⁷ Num 18:20-26.

⁸ Ps 2:8.

⁹ 1 Kgs 12:16.

¹⁰ Gen 14:24; Josh 18:5-9.

¹¹ Ps 16:5.

- ¹² Ps 17:14.
- ¹³ Ruth 2:3; Amos 4:7.
- ¹⁴ Gen 23:4; Lev 27:22.
- ¹⁵ Gen 31:16; Prov 14:24.
- ¹⁶ Gen 14:11-21; 31:18.
- ¹⁷ Num 24:18; Deut 2:5, 9, 19; 3:20.
- ¹⁸ Exod 6:8; Ezek 25:4.
- ¹⁹ Item purchased in Gen 23:18; Jer 32:11-16; purchase price in Lev 25:16.
- ²⁰ Lev 22:11; Ps 104:24; Prov 4:7.
- ²¹ Eccl 2:13; 1:3; 5:9 (5:8 in Hebrew).
- ²² Isa 15:7; Jer 48:36.
- ²³ Exod 19:5; 1 Chr 29:3.
- ²⁴ Josh 22:8; 2 Chr 1:11-12.
- ²⁵ Shalom Albeck, "Property," *EncJud* (1971) 17:1146.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1147-1148.
- ²⁷ Gen 23:16; Jer 32:11; and Ruth 4:7, respectively.
- ²⁸ Gen 1:31; Job 38-41; Ps 33:1-10; 50:10-12; 104; 135:6; Isa 40:12-31; Jer 10:10-16; Dan 4:34-35.
- ²⁹ Gen 1:26-28; Ps 8:4-8.
- ³⁰ Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 6, 342-344.
- ³¹ Gen 3:19.
- ³² Gen 4:2-4, 20-22.
- ³³ Job in Job 42:10-13; Abraham in Gen 24:1; Solomon in 1 Kgs 3:13.
- ³⁴ Esth 6:13; Job 8, 24; Ps 37, 73.
- ³⁵ Gen 41:47-57; 47:13-26.
- ³⁶ E.g., Deut 32:8-9.
- ³⁷ Gen 12:7; 15:16; 17:8; 28:13; 35:12; 46:4; Exod 3:8, 17; Deut 7:1-8.
- ³⁸ Gen 15:16; Deut 18:24-28.
- ³⁹ Cf. Deut 7:2; 20:17; Josh 10:40.
- ⁴⁰ Deut 7:26.
- ⁴¹ Cf. Lev 27:21, 28; Num 18:14; Josh 6:19; Ezek 44:29.
- ⁴² Exod 23:31-33; 34:12-16; Deut 7:1-4.
- ⁴³ Cf. Ps 68:16; 132:13-14; Isa 8:8; Ezek 38:16; Joel 2:18.
- ⁴⁴ Deut 6:10-11.
- ⁴⁵ Deut 7:6-8; Ezek 16:6-8; Amos 3:1-2.
- ⁴⁶ Lev 25:55; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 335.
- ⁴⁷ Exod 12:43; Lev 22:25; Deut 17:15; 23:20; see Edward Neufeld, "The Prohibition Against Loans at Interest in Ancient Hebrew Laws" (hereinafter referred to as "Prohibition"), *HUCA* 26 (1955): 383-387; cf. the critical approach of David Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1969), 45-62.
- ⁴⁸ Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament*, 332.
- ⁴⁹ Lev 26:1-13; Deut 30-33; see George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (3 vols.; reprinted; Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1952), 1:216-225.
- ⁵⁰ Richard D. Patterson, "The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature" (hereinafter referred to as "The Widow"), *BSac* 130:519 (July-September 1973): 232-233.
- ⁵¹ Deut 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22.
- ⁵² Cf. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, 332.
- ⁵³ As Abraham did in Gen 23 and Jeremiah did in Jer 32.
- ⁵⁴ Lev 25:44-46.
- ⁵⁵ Gen 31:38-42; Prov 13:11.
- ⁵⁶ The general inheritance laws were well established, with special legislation dealing with exceptional cases; Num 27:1-11; 36:1-12; Deut 21:15-17; 25:5-6; Josh 17:3-6; cf. Job 42:15; see Charles Foster Kent, *Israel's Laws and Legal Precedents* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 72.
- ⁵⁷ E.g., 2 Sam 9:7.
- ⁵⁸ Deut 17:14-20.
- ⁵⁹ 1 Sam 8:11-17.
- ⁶⁰ Eccl 2:1-10.
- ⁶¹ 1 Kgs 21:19; cf. 2 Sam 12:1-9.

- ⁶² 1 Kgs 12:14-15.
- ⁶³ *Lo tignov*; Exod 20:15; cf. Lev 19:11. The force of *lo* plus the imperfect has been emphasized by the study of John Bright, "The Apodictic Prohibition: Some Observations," *JBL* 92:2 (June 1973): 186-198.
- ⁶⁴ Deut 19:14; 27:17; Job 24:2; Prov 22:28; 23:10; Hos 5:10.
- ⁶⁵ Exod 22:3.
- ⁶⁶ Lev 6:2-5.
- ⁶⁷ Exod 22:4, 7-9.
- ⁶⁸ Exod 22:1; cf. 2 Sam 12:6.
- ⁶⁹ Lev 19:35-37; Deut 25:13-16; Prov 11:1; 16:11; 20:14, 23; Ezek 45:10; Amos 8:5-7; Mic 6:10. Similar passages may be found in other ANE literature, as the Assyrian "Hymn to Shamesh," 2:51-56, trans. by Ferris J. Stephens, in *ANET*, 388; C. M. Carmichael, "Deuteronomic Laws, Wisdom, and Historical Traditions," *JSS* 12:2 (Autumn 1967): 201-206, tenuously ties the origin of these Hebrew laws to the dishonesty and cruelty of the Amalekites related in Exod 17 and Deut 25.
- ⁷⁰ Lev 19:13; Prov 3:27-28.
- ⁷¹ Prov 11:26.
- ⁷² Cf. Hag 1:2-11.
- ⁷³ Exod 21:33-36; 22:10-15; cf. Lev 24:18.
- ⁷⁴ Deut 22:8.
- ⁷⁵ Exod 21:28-32. The relative guilt of master to animal increases with subsequent incidents. For comparisons with other ANE laws, see Reuven Yaron, "The Goring Ox in Near Eastern Laws," *Jewish Law in Ancient and Modern Israel*, ed. by Haim H. Cohn (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1971), 50-60.
- ⁷⁶ Exod 23:4-5; Deut 22:1-4.
- ⁷⁷ Neufeld, "Prohibition," 396.
- ⁷⁸ Lev 19:17-18, 32; Deut 10:18-19; Prov 18:24; cf. the good relations of David and Solomon with foreign kings, and the behavior of Daniel in Babylon.
- ⁷⁹ Exod 22:21-24; Lev 19:14, 33; Deut 24:14; 27:18-19.
- ⁸⁰ Deut 25:4; cf. Num 22:28-33.
- ⁸¹ Matt 7:12.
- ⁸² Lev 25:23. This verse appears to rest on more than God's right as Creator, as advanced by Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, 332.
- ⁸³ Gen 49; Ezek 37.
- ⁸⁴ Exod 23:19; 34:26; Lev 2:14-16; 19:24; 23:10-11; Num 15:17-21; Deut 18:4; 26:1-11.
- ⁸⁵ Lev 27:30-33; Num 18:25-32; Deut 14:22-27; 26:12-15; Mal 3:8-9. The tithe itself may be more extensive than Mosaic legislation; cf. Gen 14:20; 28:22.
- ⁸⁶ Exod 22:29; 34:20; Lev 22:17-20; Deut 12:5-8; 16:10, 16-17.
- ⁸⁷ Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:2-9, 11-12, 20-22.
- ⁸⁸ 2 Chr 36:21; Lev 26:27-35, 43.
- ⁸⁹ Josephus, *Ant.* 9:8:5-6; 1 Macc 6:48-54.
- ⁹⁰ Lev 25:21.
- ⁹¹ Num 32:33.
- ⁹² Josh 15-19.
- ⁹³ Deut 10:9; 18:1-2. Kent, *Israel's Laws and Legal Precedents*, 175-177, 191-192, 198-202, has collected the following items contributing to the material support of the Levites and the priests. For the Levites: parts of the offerings (Deut 18:1-5), traveling privileges (Deut 18:6-8), nine tenths of the annual tithe (Num 18:21-24; Deut 12:19; 14:22-27; cf. Neh 13:10-13), a share in the feast of weeks (Deut 16:10-12), a share in the feast of tabernacles (Deut 16:13-14), part of the triennial poor tithe (Deut 14:28-29), a share in the spoils of war (Num 31:28-30, 47), forty-eight cities with their suburbs (Num 35:1-8; includes six cities of refuge), and a

perpetual right to inherited possessions, including city-houses (Lev 25:29-34). For the priests: offerings at the feast of weeks (Lev 23:15-20), parts of peace offerings (Lev 7:11-14, 28-36), private contributions (Exod 29:27-28; Lev 10:14-15; Num 18:9-10), parts of grain offerings (Lev 6:14-18; 10:12-13; 7:9-10), parts of Nazirite offerings (Num 6:19-20), one tenth of the annual tithes (Num 5:9-10; 18:25-32), all special contributions (Num 15:20-21; 18:11, 14, 19), first fruits of the ground, family, herd, flock (Num 18:11-18), the showbread (Lev 24:5-9), guilt offerings (Num 5:5-8; 150% if no one available), the hides of burnt offerings (Lev 7:8), and part of the spoils of war (Num 31:25).

⁹⁴ Num 36:1-12.

⁹⁵ Lev 25:24-27, 29-31; cf. Ahab's wickedness in 1 Kgs 21.

⁹⁶ Lev 25:13, 23, 28, 31; cf. Num 36:3-4.

⁹⁷ Lev 25:14-17.

⁹⁸ Cf. city houses after one year, Lev 25:29-30.

⁹⁹ Lev 25:23.

¹⁰⁰ Lev 25:55.

¹⁰¹ Exod 13:2.

¹⁰² Exod 13:1-2; 22:19; 34:10-20; Num 3:11-13, 33-51; 8:16-18.

¹⁰³ Exod 13:11-13; 22:30; 34:19; Lev 27:26-27; Num 18:15-18; Deut 14:23-27; 15:19-22.

¹⁰⁴ Exod 30:11-16; cf. Neh 10:32.

¹⁰⁵ Lev 27; Num 6:13-21; 30:2-15; Deut 12:26; 23:21-23.

¹⁰⁶ Num 31:25-31. Cf. Muhammad, who declared that 20% of war spoils "belongs to God and to the Apostle and to the near of kin and to orphans, and to the poor and to the wayfarer," evidently reserving 80% for the soldiers (Qur'an 8:2).

¹⁰⁷ Neufeld, "Prohibition," 383-387.

¹⁰⁸ E.g., Exod 12:49; 23:9; Lev 19:33-34; Deut 10:18-19; 24:17-18; Lev 25:35; see Hillel Gamoran, "The Biblical Law Against Loans on Interest" (hereinafter referred to as "Interest"), *JNES* 30:3 (April 1971): 130.

¹⁰⁹ Lev 25:39-46.

¹¹⁰ Exod 21:2-4; Lev 25:10; Deut 15:12-18; cf. Jer 34 8-22.

¹¹¹ Exod 21:26-27.

¹¹² Exod 21:5-6; Deut 15:16-17.

¹¹³ Exod 21:7-8; cf. Gen 25:1-6.

¹¹⁴ Lev 25:47-55.

¹¹⁵ Deut 23:15-16; cf. 1 Kgs 2:36-46.

¹¹⁶ E.g., the Code of Hammurabi requires death for assisting a fugitive slave; as trans. by Theophile J. Meek, *ANET*, 166-167, #15-20.

¹¹⁷ Lev 25:42.

¹¹⁸ Gen 17:12-13; Exod 20:10, 17.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Exod 12:43-44; Deut 12:17; 16:10-11.

¹²⁰ Gen 24:2; Job 31:13-15; 1 Chr 2:35.

¹²¹ Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-38; Deut 23:19-20.

¹²² Ps 15:5; Prov 28:8; Ezek 18:8, 13, 17.

¹²³ Samuel Loewenstamm, "Neshek and M/Tarbit," *JBL* 88:1 (March 1969): 78-80.

¹²⁴ Laws of Eshnuna, #14, 20-21 (trans. by Albrecht Goetze, *ANET*, 161-162); Code of Hammurabi, #48-51, 66, 88-91, 94-95, 99-101 (*ANET*, 168-170); cf. Hymn to Shamesh, 2:47-49 (*ANET*, 388).

¹²⁵ Edward Neufeld, "The Rate of Interest and the Text of Nehemiah 5:11" (hereinafter referred to as "Nehemiah 5:11"), *JQR* 44:3 (February 1954): 194-195.

¹²⁶ Kent, *Israel's Laws and Legal Precedents*, 130.

¹²⁷ Gamoran lists sixteen relevant OT passages, thirteen of which are clearly non-commercial, the remaining three being unclear, "Interest," 131; he also lists several Egyptian Jewish papyri

which demonstrate interest on business loans in the intertestament period, pp. 133-134; cf. Neufeld, "Prohibition," 371-372, 398.

¹²⁸ Neufeld, "Nehemiah 5:11," 200-201.

¹²⁹ Deut 15:1-11.

¹³⁰ Deut 24:6-13.

¹³¹ Exod 23:6; Lev 25:35.

¹³² Exod 23:10-11; Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19-22.

¹³³ Deut 16:11-14; 26:11.

¹³⁴ Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-13.

¹³⁵ The Ugaritic "Tale of Aqhat, A," 5:9 (trans. by H. L. Ginsberg, *ANET*, 151); this was commonly boasted also in Mesopotamia and Egypt; cf. F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *JNES* 21:2 (April 1962): 130-134; and Patterson, "The Widow," 223-228.

¹³⁶ Ps 82:3-4; for a defense of this Psalm from an unusual critical perspective, see Roger T. O'Callaghan, "A Note on the Canaanite Background of Psalm 82," *CBQ* 15:3 (July 1953): 314.

¹³⁷ E.g., Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17; 10:18; 16:18; 24:17; 27:19; Job 5:15-16; 24:1-10, 14; 29:12-16; Prov 14:31; 15:25; 17:15; 19:17; 22:9, 22; Isa 1:17; 5:23; 10:1-2; Jer. 22:3; Amos 2:6-7; 5:11.

¹³⁸ E.g., Judg 6:15; 2 Sam 12:1.

¹³⁹ Gamoran, "Interest," 128.

¹⁴⁰ Harry M. Orlinsky, *Understanding the Bible through History and Archaeology* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1972), 259-260.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁴² Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21.

¹⁴³ Egyptian "Protestation of Guiltlessness," B3 (trans. by John A. Wilson, *ANET*, 35); "Instruction of Amen-empet," ch. 7 (trans. by John A. Wilson, *ANET*, 422-423); Assyrian "Hymn to Shamash," 2:32 (*ANET*, 388).

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¹⁴⁴ "Depriving an elder of his status," is suggested by Anthony Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law, A New Approach to the Decalogue* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 149-152; or "attempting to forcibly appropriate" is suggested by Eduard Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective*, trans. by David J. Bourke, in *Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series: 7* Naperville, Illinois: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1968), 84-85, 91-92, 104-105; this latter view is promoted also by J. J. Stamm and M. E. Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, in *Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series: 2* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1967), 101-107.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. the good discussion by Bernard S. Jackson, "Liability for Mere Intention in Early Jewish Law," *HUCA* 42 (1971): 198-207.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Ps 73; Hag 1:2-11.

¹⁴⁷ Exod 19:4-8; Deut 5:33.

¹⁴⁸ 1 Kgs 4:25; Prov 30:8.

¹⁴⁹ Prov 13:11; 31:13-22, 27).

¹⁵⁰ Gordon concludes that the tenth commandment is only a reaction against Baal's covetousness as illustrated by two Ugaritic texts: Cyrus H. Gordon, "A Note on the Tenth Commandment," *JBR* 31:3 (July 1963): 208-209; and "The Ten Commandments," *Christianity Today* 8:14 (April 10, 1964): 628.

APPLICATION

GOD'S STATE¹

Carl McIntire

The State is related directly and in the most specific manner to the Ten Commandments. The State has no right or authority to encroach upon the liberties of the individual which God guarantees under His law. The State, in other words, must respect and honor the law of God as it concerns the individual, and only in honoring and maintaining this law can it serve its true function and be truly free. In doing this there are certain things the State must do and certain things it must not do. In both of these spheres, one of action, the other of inaction, the State becomes an agent for liberty. In this task it receives its authority and instruction from the Author of liberty. Just as God made the creation for Himself, and created man in His own image, so He has insisted in His Word that the State serve the ends of God and be a champion of freedom for man. When men see this, they want this kind of State; when the State sees it, it will labor only for free men.

Let us ask ourselves first, What are some of the laws that the State, as we speak of it in the United States of America, has enacted? Are not these laws taken from, and based upon, the moral law, the Ten Commandments? We have laws to protect life. Murder is an offense, according to the law of the land. When it is committed, men are tried and condemned. All the various infractions of this law are, in one form or another, transgressions of the command, "Thou shalt not kill." Thus

in a very clear sense the laws of society are based upon the law of God. God would have it so. We likewise have laws against impurity and indecency. Adultery is a crime against the State; fornication likewise. These and similar offenses are transgressions of the command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Again, the law of God as revealed in Scripture is being recognized in the State.

Then we have laws, a multiplicity of them, dealing with property, the property rights of individuals and corporations. No one will deny that these are based upon the command of God's law, "Thou shalt not steal." Every man must recognize the property rights of his neighbor as well as his own.

There are also statutes dealing with slander, libel, and perjury. All of these are based upon the commands of the

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moral law that we should not bear false witness against our neighbor.

We practice monogamy. Our laws are against polygamy and bigamy. Our statutes regulating marriage and providing for divorce are based upon the requirement of God's commandment that a man have only one wife. The State recognizes the necessity for these demands, and endeavors to maintain them for its own security and prosperity.

The family, too, is protected. The right of a man to teach and train his own child is guaranteed by the laws of the land. And these statutes relate to the fifth commandment.

These basic fundamental laws, and many, many others, of our society are directly related to God's law, and they are, therefore, directly related to freedom. This brief summary illustrates what we mean by the common expression, "Our society is built on the Ten Commandments." We should note, however, that the laws of the State deal with the outward acts of the relations of man to man in the State. The State cannot deal with the inward thoughts of men. Thus the command, "Thou shalt not covet," dealing primarily with the heart, the State cannot enforce or minister. The State must desist from action in this sphere in order to ensure freedom of thought and freedom of the individual to honor that commandment. Likewise, the commandments that relate to the inner and direct relation of men to God, the State must leave to God and the individual. The State must desist from action in this sphere in order to honor the commands dealing with the worship and service of God. Thus the State is limited. It cannot go into the heart of man—God alone can do that—and it

cannot attempt to legislate God for the individual. God alone must guide and control there.

For the State to attempt to enter these spheres is to destroy freedom for the individual. When the State attempts to legislate in the matter of man's heart and thought, it can do so, only by limiting man's speech and controlling what he hears and sees—thus free speech, free press, free radio, and all related freedoms go out the window. God has kept the heart of man for Himself, not for the State. When the State attempts to legislate in the matter of a man's relation to God, it can do so, or attempt to do so, only by circumscribing man's freedom in matters of religion. On both of these matters, the framers of the United States Constitution absolutely limited the State and protected the freedom of man as the Ten Commandments require. The only reason the State can have for regulating the relation of man to man is the same reason it has for refusing to regulate in the matters of heart, thought, and religion—and that is that men may be free, each man separately, individually. Thus, by refusing to act, the State protects liberty just as when, by law, the State keeps one man from destroying the life, property, and liberty of another.

God is the One who made the laws for the liberty of His creatures, and the State must bow before them. If it does, we shall have freedom; but if it does not, we shall have slavery, in one form or another, and in varying degrees, depending upon the degree of the departure from the law. This, of course, puts limitations upon the State of the most stringent and binding kind. In administering the affairs of men, the State must be guided by the laws that

God has made for man. Thus the State literally becomes a servant of God, and this is exactly what is taught in the Bible. The concept of the State, which is presented there, sets forth the idea of liberty and guarantees us freedom. The concept of the State, in other words, should be in complete harmony with the concept of freedom. The law of God, which protects and exalts the individual, prohibits the State from tampering with that individual in the spheres where God has so clearly protected him. This is only another way of expressing our premise that the State must be the servant of man and not the ruler of man. The Bible clearly teaches that there must be a society for the preservation of law and order in which man is to live. Law and order are for the purpose of preserving life and liberty.

If the State will recognize its place under God, it will have the blessing and favor of the Almighty. If it does not, God's favor will be taken away, and there will be disaster and tyranny.

Back in the days of Noah, God declared, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen 9:6). The right of the State, therefore, to punish offenders and destroyers of free so-

ciety was divinely decreed. Likewise, Jesus Christ said, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). "Caesar" has certain God-given powers, and in the exercise of these he must render an account to God. Thus the State is bound just as much by God in its responsibility to Him as the individual is bound. Representatives, Senators, governors, judges, the President—all public officials—should know this and acknowledge it. This is all involved when the oath of office is taken with the hand on the Bible. If the State will recognize its place under God, it will have the blessing and favor of the Almighty. If it does not, God's favor will be taken away, and there will be disaster and tyranny. One of the finest expositions of this doctrine, as taught in the Bible, is found in the thirteenth chapter of Romans.

The New Testament with its teaching of the separation of Church and State also gives us a description of the place and power of the State. This is exceedingly important today, for it was on the foundation of this truth that our American concept of the State and of freedom was erected by our forefathers.

The Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Romans says, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (ch. 13:1). He was speaking about the State. The State has no power except what is given to it by God, it being, therefore, responsible to God, as we have just noted. The power, given by God, the State exercises by His permission. "The powers that be are ordained of God." God in his providence has brought into being each State in or-

der that He might use it; and governments, if they would please Him and serve His purposes, must operate under His law. Paul is telling Christians that they should submit to the power of the government, and he means lawful government. “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation (judgment). For rulers,” he declares, “are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.” Now we are approaching the heart of the issue. A distinction is being made between good and evil. “Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good.” Here we have reached the dividing line between freedom under democracy and tyranny under communism, socialism, and other totalitarian systems.

What is the standard of good? That is the sixty-four dollar question! Here is where the conflict centers in the U.S.A.—in the battle between freedom and the left-wing element, whose ideology would take it from us. “Good,” in a free society, is one thing, while “good,” in a controlled economy—socialist and communist State—is the opposite.

If the State is to be the “minister of God to thee for good,” is the State to determine that standard, or is God to determine it? The answer is in the phrase “the minister *of God*.” It is the task of the State to minister as God would have it minister. That means that the standard of good, in the judgment of the State, must be what God has ordained. This immediately brings us back face to face with all the Ten Commandments. We cannot get away from them, neither can we let our

State get away from them, so long as we recognize God’s sovereignty over man. This is the reason the State has written into its laws protection for property, life, limb, and truth.

When we observe these commandments and do that which is good, we have no need to be afraid. In fact, we receive praise, as Paul says, of the same. When, on the other hand, we steal, rob, kill, deceive, lie, bear false witness, and do other evil things, then, of course, it is the task of the State to be the minister of God. And so Paul goes on, “But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (v. 4). The State is here given the power to use the sword, on the authority of God. This, of course, means police power, and it also involves the whole concept of the nation’s going to war. So it is that we teach that on just and necessary occasions the Lord’s people may take part in such conflicts. In this the “sword” must be used for “good.”

In ministering this standard of good, what does the State accomplish? The answer is, Liberty. The greatest good the State can possibly furnish its citizens is freedom. This should be repeated again and again. If the standard of good is God’s law, and this law spells freedom under law for man, the State is the provider, the guardian, and the protector of man’s freedom. The supreme good God wants the State to give man is the liberty that God’s law offers. The State cannot create life, or give eternal life, but it can guarantee freedom for man to live and serve God. This is its supreme function.

When we say, “The ‘sword’ must be used for ‘good,’” we express in another way the purpose for which we fought World War II. We fought for freedom. The one service, the true function of the State, is not to provide food, clothing, and shelter for its servants, but to provide freedom for its citizens to rule. That our founding fathers placed liberty above life itself, and thus confirmed this teaching of Scripture, is evidenced also by their popular acceptance of the beloved American text, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” The greatest blessing and good in this whole notion of liberty is seen when we observe that Paul’s statement indicates good for the individual. He says, “To *thee* for good.” This is singular; the one must be protected against the many. The one must have his freedom with or without the many. It is not a case of the greatest good for the greatest number, as we so frequently hear today—such is a false, totalitarian slogan—but it is the greatest good for the one—each one—and this will therefore mean for all. This is liberty. Liberty is indivisible. To divide it is to destroy it; to add to it is to kill it.

It is here also that we come into conflict with the whole concept of the State as involved in communism, fascism, and other totalitarian systems. In communism and its various sisters, the State determines that which is good. The State thus makes “the standard of good” by which it is to exercise its police power. The communist State ignores, in the social relations of men, all that God has taught concerning the rights of property. It destroys these rights, gives us a community of property, or communism, and turns away from God’s law to enforce its own self-made standards. The State, instead of

being the minister of God, becomes a minister of itself. Instead of being a minister of God for good, it becomes a minister of itself for its own idea—evil. Of course, its own idea it calls good. And, in order to establish the “good,” it must control the thought of men so as to receive an apparent voluntary submission, and in so doing, as in Russia,² the civil liberty demanded by God’s law vanishes.

The good in a free society is liberty; the good in the communist or collectivist society is so-called security. The good in a free society produces free men before God; the good in the communistic society produces slaves under the State. It is in the conflict between freedom and security that these two systems clash today on many battlefronts, and in varying degrees. To every God-fearing man and State the greatest security is liberty itself, and to those who forget God the greatest freedom is security itself. How clearly it all stands out! Both sides use the same two words, “liberty” and “security,” but they mean the exact opposite in their use of them. If the State is going to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and charity for the people, and thus control or plan their economic life, it must control the people to these ends. To control man’s economy, man’s life must be controlled; and to control man’s life, his thought must be controlled—and this is tyranny. This is one reason there is no essential difference between the principles of socialism and communism.

It is exceedingly difficult for us to see how—in fact, we cannot see it—under such teaching as the Bible so clearly gives, a communistic setup could even be considered a “minister of God.” It is a wicked, sinful system. Any State that

attempts to control man's thought, and that makes itself a god-State is wicked and sinful. So complete is this contrast and so real the conflict between the ideas of freedom and communism that the communistic State calls the free State sinful and wicked, and in maintaining what it calls good—its slavery—it is thoroughgoing in the destruction of all freedom. It is the battle between God and anti-God,

between God and the god-State. The god-State becomes not the “minister of God” but the defier, the usurper of God.

The summary of the teaching of Scripture with regard to the power of the State is given, in one of its finest expressions, in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory and the public good; and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.³

The historic Christian church has been the custodian of this glorious doctrine of the power and limitation of the State. The expression, “the public good,” is in complete harmony with the encouragement of them that are good and for the punishment of evildoers. The spheres of “general welfare” and public good are predicated upon the right of property and freedom of men, and since these are essential to a free society's existence, therefore, when the State takes property for the “general welfare” the individual is fully compensated.

The whole sphere of “general welfare”—public good—a large field of activity for the State, is limited by the demands of God's law for the freedom of the individual. In this field the State is always the servant of the individual, protecting and providing for his freedom and such common interests which promote the general welfare consonant with true freedom.

Today we are being told that the public good involves the destruction of our

If the State is going to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and charity for the people, and thus control or plan their economic life, it must control the people to these ends. To control man's economy, man's life must be controlled; and to control man's life, his thought must be controlled—and this is tyranny. This is one reason there is no essential difference between the principles of socialism and communism.

property system, the private enterprise way of doing things, and the substituting of the communal or collectivistic social structure.

All of this applies most directly to the situation we are facing at present in America. In fact, unless these truths are recognized, America is headed for a State which will not be the “minister of God” but will take on the nature of the Russian way of life. America’s mightiest hour of decision has been reached. The transition from one concept to another is just upon us. Shall we stand by the Author of liberty or shall we leave Him? That is the one question involved.

If it is the task of the State to administer good “to thee,” and maintain freedom, then the State itself must stay out of the sphere of the individual. It must not enter and become a party to the free competitive struggle of free men. It must stay out of business, completely out of business. It must protect the individual in this sphere of his activity. It must not, therefore, compete with him and thus hinder or defeat him. Anything, therefore, which the State does to destroy man’s freedom the State must turn away from. Thus the State, instead of encouraging its own strength, or bureaucratic development and control, must despise such thoughts and turn from them. A bureaucratic and cumbersome State cannot help but jeopardize the freedom of its citizens. The State should keep taxes from destroying the people and their property. The way to do this is for the State to refuse to enter into activities and undertake responsibilities that would involve this. It is just here that the State, in perilous fashion, is encroaching on the rights of free men today. If this continues, free-

dom will be destroyed by financial and economic restraint. A sound financial government, not spending more than it receives, is an asset to freedom. The present situation in America, with our overwhelming debt and increased bureaucracy, is a menace on the part of the government to every free citizen. For the same reason, the government should not arbitrarily alter or change the true value of property, savings, and incomes. It should guard and protect these evidences of wealth acquired fairly before the law. 

¹ “God’s State” is Chapter 7 of *Author of Liberty* (2nd ed.; Collingswood, N.J.: 20th Century Reformation Hour, 1963). The first edition was published in 1946, just after the end of World War II; the text quoted here is identical to that in the original edition. Portions of the chapter have been omitted in this reprinting.

² Russia in this article refers to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which Stalin was ruling at the time.

³ WCF 23:1.

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

Thomas Watson

“Thou shalt not steal” (Exod 20:15)

As the holiness of God sets him against uncleanness in the command “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” so the justice of God sets him against rapine and robbery in the command “Thou shalt not steal.” The thing forbidden in this commandment is meddling with another man’s property. The civil lawyers define *furtum*, stealth, or theft to be “the laying hands unjustly on that which is another’s,” the invading another’s right.

1. THE CAUSES OF THEFT

[1] The internal causes are these: (1) Unbelief. A man has a high distrust of God’s providence. “Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?” (Ps 78:19). “Can God spread a table for me?” says the unbeliever. “No, he cannot.” Therefore he is resolved he will spread a table for himself, but it shall be at other men’s cost, and both first and second course shall be served in with stolen goods. (2) Covetousness. The Greek word for covetousness signifies “an immoderate desire of getting,” which is the root of theft. A man covets more than his own, and this itch of covetousness makes him scratch what he can from another. Achan’s covetous humour made him steal the wedge of gold, a wedge which cleaved asunder his soul from God (Josh 7:21).

[2] The external cause of theft is Satan’s solicitation. Judas was a thief (John 12:6). How came he to be a thief? “Satan entered into him” (John 13:27). The

devil is the great master-thief: he robbed us of our coat of innocence, and he persuades men to take up his trade; he tells men how bravely they shall live by thieving, and how they may catch an estate. As Eve listened to the serpent’s voice, so do they. As birds of prey, they live upon spoil and plunder.

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2. THE KINDS OF THEFT

There is stealing from God.

They are thieves who rob God of any part of his day. “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.” Not a part of the day only, but the whole day must be dedicated to God. And, lest any should forget this, the Lord has prefixed a memento, “remember.” Therefore, after morning sacrifice, to spend the other part of the Sabbath in vanity and pleasure, is spiritual theft. It robs God of his due, and the very heathen will rise up in judgment against such Christians; for the heathen,

as Macrobius notes, observed a whole day to their false gods.

There is stealing from others.

A stealing away souls, as heretics, by robbing men of the truth, rob them of their souls. Stealing money and goods. There are these thieves:

(1) The highway thief, who takes a purse, contrary to the letter of the commandment, "Thou shalt not rob thy neighbor" (Lev 19:13). "Do not steal" (Mark 10:19). This is not the violence which takes the "kingdom of heaven by force" (Matt 11:12).

(2) The house-thief, who purloins and filches out of his master's cash, or steals his wares and drugs. The apostle says, "Some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb 13:2), but many masters have entertained thieves in their houses unawares. The house-thief is a hypocrite as well as a thief, for he has demure looks and pretends to be helping his master, when he only helps himself.

(3) The thief that shrouds himself under law, as the unjust attorney or lawyer, who prevaricates and deals falsely with his client. This is to steal from the client. By deceit and prevarication, the lawyer robs the client of his land, and may be the means of ruining his family, and is no better than a thief in God's account.

(4) The church-thief or pluralist, who holds several benefices, but seldom or never preaches to the people. He gets the golden fleece, but lets the flock starve. "Woe be to the shepherds of Israel" (Ezek 34:2). They "fed themselves, and fed not my flock" (v. 8). These ministers will be indicted for thieves at God's bar.

(5) The shop-thief, who steals in selling. He who uses false weights and measures steals from others what is their due. "Making the ephah small" (Amos 8:5). The ephah was a measure the Jews used in selling. Some made the ephah small, and gave scant measure, which was plainly stealing. "The balances of deceit are in his hand" (Hos 12:7). By making their weights lighter, men make their accounts heavier. He steals in selling who puts excessive prices on his commodities. He takes thrice as much for an article as it cost him, or as it is worth. To overreach others in selling, is to steal money from them. "Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbor, neither rob him" (Lev 19:13). To defraud him is to rob him; to overreach others in selling is a cunning way of stealing, and is against both law and gospel. It is against the law of God. "If thou sell ought to thy neighbor, ye shall not oppress one another" (Lev 25:14). It is against the gospel. "That no man go beyond, and defraud his brother" (1 Thess 4:6).

(6) The usurer, who takes by extortion from others. He seems to help another by letting him have money in his necessity, but gets him into bonds, and sucks out his very blood and marrow. I read of a woman whom Satan had bound (Luke 13:16), and truly he is almost in as bad a condition whom the usurer has bound. The usurer is a robber. A usurer once asked a prodigal when he would leave off spending? The prodigal replied, "I will leave off spending what is my own, when thou leanest off stealing from others." Zacchaeus was an extortioner who, after his conversion, made restitution (Luke 19:8). He thought all he got by extortion was theft.

(7) The trustee, who has the orphan's estate committed to him, is deputed to be his guardian, and manages his estate for him; if he curtails the estate, and gets a fleece out of it for himself, and wrongs the orphan, he is a thief. This is worse than taking a purse by violence, because he betrays his trust, which is the highest piece of treachery and injustice.

(8) The borrower, who borrows money from others, with an intention never to pay them again. "The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again" (Ps 37:21). What is it but thievery to take money and goods from others, and not restore them again? The prophet Elisha bade the widow sell her oil, and pay her debts, and then live upon the rest (2 Kgs 4:7).

(9) The last sort of theft is, the receiver of stolen goods. The receiver, if he be not the principal, yet is accessory to the theft, and the law makes him guilty. The thief steals the money, and the receiver holds the sack to put it in. The root would die if it were not watered, and thieving would cease if it were not encouraged by the receiver. I am apt to think that he who does not scruple to take stolen goods into his house, would as little scruple to have stolen them.

What are the aggravations of this sin?

(a) To steal when there is no need, to be a rich thief.

(b) To steal sacrilegiously, to devour things set apart to holy uses. "It is a snare to the man who devoureth that which is holy" (Prov 20:25). Such a one was Dionysius, who robbed the temple and took away the silver vessels.

(c) To commit the sin of theft against checks of conscience, and examples of

God's justice, which, like the dye to the wool, dyes the sin of a crimson color.

(d) To rob the widow and orphan. "Ye shall not afflict the widow or fatherless." *Peccatum clamans* [This sin shrieks aloud]. "If they cry unto me, I will surely hear them" (Exod 22:23).

(3) To rob the poor. How angry was David that the rich man should take away the poor man's lamb! "As the Lord lives, he shall surely die" (2 Sam 12:5). What is inclosing of commons but robbing the poor!

There is a stealing from a man's self.

A man may be a thief to himself. How so?

(1) By niggardliness. The niggard is a thief; he steals from himself in not allowing himself what is needful. He thinks that lost which is bestowed upon himself; he robs himself of necessaries. "A man to whom God has given riches, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof" (Eccl 6:2). He gluts his chest and starves his belly; he is like the ass that is loaded with gold, but feeds upon thistles; he robs himself of what God allows him. This is to be punished with riches; to have an estate and want a heart to take the comfort of it.

(2) A man may rob himself by foolishly wasting his estate. The prodigal lavishes gold out of the bag; he is like Crates, the philosopher, who threw his gold into the sea. The prodigal boils a great estate to nothing. He is a thief to himself who spends away that estate which might conduce to the comfort of life.

(3) He is a thief to himself, by idleness, when he misspends his time. He who spends his hours in pleasure and vanity

robs himself of that precious time which God has given him to work out salvation in. Time is a rich commodity, because on well spending present time a happy eternity depends. He that spends his time idly and vainly, is a thief to himself; he robs himself of golden seasons, and by consequence, of salvation.

(4) A man may be a thief to himself by suretiship. "Be not thou one of them that are sureties for debts" (Prov 22:26). The creditor comes upon the surety for debt; and so, by paying another's debt, he is a thief to himself. Let not any man say he would have been counted unkind if he had not entered into a bond for his friend. Better thy friend should count thee unkind than all men count thee unwise. Lend another what you can spare; nay, give him if he needs, but never be a surety. It is no wisdom for a man so to help another as to undo himself. It is to rob himself and his family.

APPLICATIONS

Use one. For confutation of the doctrine of community, that all things are common, and one man has a right to another's estate. This is confuted by Scripture. "When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor's corn" (Deut 23:25). Property must be respected; God has set this eighth commandment as a hedge about a man's estate, and this hedge cannot be broken without sin. If all things be common, there can be no theft, and so this commandment would be in vain.

Use two. For reproof of such as live by stealing. Instead of living by faith, they live by their shifts. The apostle exhorts that "every man eat his own bread" (2

Thess 3:12). The thief does not eat his own bread, but another's. If there be any who are guilty of this sin, let them labor to recover out of the snare of the devil, by repentance, and let them show their repentance by restitution. *Non remittitur peccatum nisi restituatur ablatum* (Augustine: "Without restitution, no remission"). "If I have taken away any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Ill-gotten things may be restored by one's own hand, or by proxy. Better a thousand times restore goods unlawfully gotten, than stuff your pillow with thorns, and have guilt trouble your conscience upon a death-bed.

Use three. For exhortation to all to take heed of the sin of thieving; which is against the light of nature. Some may endeavor to excuse this sin. It is a coarse wool that will take no dye, and a bad sin that has no excuse. "I am," says one, "grown low in the world, and trading is bad, and I have no other way to a livelihood." (1) This shows great distrust in God, as if he could not provide for thee without thy sin. (2) It shows sin to be at a great height, that, because a man is grown low in the world, therefore he will *acheronta movere* [knock at hell's door], go to the devil for a livelihood. Abraham would not have it said, that "the king of Sodom had made him rich" (Gen 14:22). O let it never be said, that the devil has made thee rich! (3) Thou oughtest not to undertake any action upon which thou canst not pray for a blessing, but thou canst not pray for a blessing upon stolen goods. Therefore, take heed of this sin. *Lucrum in arca, damnum in conscientia* [Augustine: "You gain materially, but your conscience suffers loss"]. Take

heed of getting the world with the loss of heaven.

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Use four. To dissuade all from this horrid sin, consider — (1) Thieves are the caterpillars of the earth, enemies to civil society. (2) God hates them. In the law, the cormorant was unclean, because a thievish, devouring creature, a bird of prey—by which God showed his hatred of this sin (Lev 11:17). (3) The thief is a terror to himself, he is always in fear. “There were they in great fear” is true of the thief (Ps 53:5). Guilt breeds fear; if he hears but the shaking of a tree, his heart shakes. It is said of Catiline, he was afraid of every noise. If a briar does but take hold of a thief's garment, he is afraid it is the officer to apprehend him; and fear has torment in it (1 John 4:18). (4) The judgments that follow this sin. Achan the thief was stoned to death (Josh 7:25). “What

sees thou? And I answered, ‘A flying roll.’ . . . This is the curse that goes forth over the face of the whole earth; I will bring it forth, saith the Lord, and it shall enter into the house of the thief” (Zech 5:2-4). Fabius, a Roman censor, condemned his own son to die for theft. Thieves die with ignominy; the ladder is their preferment. And there is a worse thing than death, for while they rob others of money, they rob themselves of salvation.

What is to be done to avoid stealing?

(1) Live in a calling. “Let him that stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands” (Eph 4:28). The devil hires such as stand idle, and puts them to the pilfering trade. An idle person tempts the devil to tempt him.

(2) Be content with the estate that God has given you. “Be content with such things as ye have” (Heb 13:5). Theft is the daughter of avarice. Study contentment. Believe that condition best which God has carved out to you. He can bless the little meal in the barrel. We shall not need these things long; we shall carry nothing out of the world with us but our winding sheet. If we have but enough to bear out our charges to heaven, it is sufficient.

BOOKS

Harold Lindsell, *Free Enterprise, A Judeo-Christian Defense* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982). Pp 180. Reviewed by James E. Huff.

Harold Lindsell points out that free enterprise is “a concept dating back to Old Testament days” and that it is based

on the intrinsic right of citizens to the ownership, control, and use of private property. . . . Marx and socialism (of any variety) must invalidate the Mosaic Law. Once they do away with the Decalogue and its God they can seize property at will and claim the propriety of what they have done solely on the basis of their own dictum. . . . This dictum of socialism is clearly and intentionally incompatible with the Judeo-Christian world and life view.

He divides the book into four major sections following a very useful introduction. The sections are “The Right to Private Property,” “Economics,” “Freedom and Human Rights,” and “Socialist Ethics and Morality.”

In the introduction the author speaks of two forms of socialism, communism and utopian socialism. He says that the latter may start from certain Christian presuppositions. It is the former with which he primarily deals. Lindsell points out that nowhere in the world does this latter form find itself in control of any government. In his dealing with the nature of man and thus his sin nature, he notes there is no place for the concept of sin in the Marxist system, but that Marxism allows there is something “wrong” with man and that is he must be made a “new man” by Marx-

ism. As the author traces man’s drift away from his religious foundation to secularism (particularly in western culture whose foundation is the “Judeo-Christian faith”), he points out that we find ourselves now with a free enterprise system which has abandoned its biblical foundation. Accompanying this “drift,” our culture is increasingly dominated by egalitarianism; and this is found in churches and denominations throughout Western culture. He cites examples of this in both liberal and “evangelical” circles (*Sojourners* magazine led by Jim Wallis) and within Roman Catholicism. As a result of this drift, free enterprise is attacked and socialism is embraced.

In chapter two, “The Right to Private Property,” Lindsell writes of a professor of political science at Boston University who, in advocating socialism, wrote,

Let’s hasten to say: I don’t mean the “socialism” of [the former] Soviet Russia or any other repressive regime claiming to be socialist. Rather, a genuine socialism which not only distributes the wealth but maintains [sic] liberty.

The professor apparently fails to see the oxymoronic nature of his statement. Lindsell points out that socialism, i.e., communism, is atheistic. Thus, its source of authority is contrary to the source of authority for a free enterprise system, which finds its source in God’s revelation to man, i.e., the Bible. Socialism, while proclaiming ownership of private property is wrong, fails to see that “giving” ownership of that property to government (the proletariat) is theft.

In chapter three, "Economics," he points out that in all countries there is the exchange of goods and services. The question is, should there be a profit in this exchange? If there is no profit, a socialist system cannot sustain itself. Its collapse is thus inevitable. Once again we see what happens when a free enterprise system divorces itself from a biblical foundation. We then move into an unbiblical socialist system. Lindsell writes,

When the Judeo-Christian value system is eliminated from free enterprise it will produce and has produced a rising tide of antagonism against it in favor of socialism, which makes promises it cannot possibly fulfill.

In chapter four, "Freedom and Human Rights," the contrast between free enterprise and socialism is further demonstrated. As freedom and free enterprise are integrally related, so, too, is lack of freedom integrally related to socialism. Socialism leads to slavery. Lindsell writes that within a socialist system there is a loss of economic freedom, religious freedom, freedom of the mind, personal freedom, and political freedom. The author says,

People who hold to the Judeo-Christian tradition and those who may hold to that tradition [socialism] without an understanding of its soteriological aspects must make their choice: human freedom and free enterprise or slavery and state ownership of the means of production. Which will it be?

The book closes with a look at "Socialist Ethics and Morality." The ethics and morality of socialism is strongly opposed to the underlying principles of the Christian faith. As Lindsell says, "Social-

ism is not amoral; it is immoral. Its very nature, that is, its basic philosophy, makes it that way."

This reviewer strongly recommends this book for a good biblical defense of free enterprise versus socialism. 

Franky Schaeffer, editor; *Is Capitalism Christian?* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 1985). Pp. 461. Reviewed by James E. Huff.

Included in the book are articles by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Warren T. Brookes, Michael Novak, Paul Johnson, P. T. Bauer, Jean-Francois Revel, Humberto Belli, Thomas Sowell, Michael Levin, Paul W. Weaver, Peter Berger, Charles Maurice, Charles W. Smithson, Rael and Erich Isaac, Richard John Neuhaus, Lloyd Billingsley, Julian L. Simon, Herman Kahn, and Nick Eberstadt.

This book was written in response to the "rising tide of evangelical Christian radicalism" during the decade leading up to its publication. Such radicalism was demonstrated by *Sojourners*, *The Other Side*, and *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. This radicalism "argues that America is fundamentally unjust, that the West is responsible for Third World poverty, that forced redistribution of money, goods, and services will bring about increased equality, and that socialism is more compassionate than capitalism." The premise of the book is that

democratic capitalism [in this country we have a republic, not a democracy—*reviewer's note*] allows man more

freedom to achieve his rightful place in the universe as a creature of dignity made in the image of God than any other socio-economic system.

The book consists of five main parts, plus several appendices. The five parts are “In Defense of Free Enterprise: How Freedom Produces Prosperity,” “Death of the Socialist Experiment,” “The Socialist Solution in America,” “The Uninformed Hysteria of the Doomsayers,” and “Liberating the Church from Marxism.” Not all the writers are Christian, but “each one writes from within and with a profound respect for the Judeo-Christian world view that is America’s heritage.”

Schaeffer writes in the introduction that the lesson of the twentieth century is

that those whom we should fear most are those with the best intentions. Dictators come and go, but utopian theology grows more and more virulent and destructive. Capitalism is no better or worse than the citizens who employ it as a system of commerce. Socialism, on the other hand is always worse as a system than the collective sum of its people. Human beings deserve better than the endless gray and dreary grindstone to which Socialist systems harness people.

Of particular note is the theme of part five, “Liberating the Church from Marxism”. One of the essays covers such topics as “liberation theology,” “eschatology and Marxism,” and “Marxists doing God’s work?” The thinking in some liberal and evangelical socialist circles is that of Gustavo Gutierrez, who thinks that

by making political liberation a necessary part of the salvational process, Gutierrez is able to bring Marxism into the drama of Christian salvation. As a result, it is obvious that Marxists are *really* doing God’s work. Furthermore, by liberating man, Marxists are *quite literally* freeing God’s hands so he can usher in the kingdom. Hence, Marxists are really Christians incognito.”

Such is “torturous theologizing” by Gutierrez.

The book *Is Capitalism Christian?* is very worthwhile. It contains a wealth of information that is very useful in answering the false claims of “Christian socialism.” 

NOTES

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