

# Charity OR Justice?

## MOVING FROM ALMS FOR THE POOR TO JUSTICE FOR THE OPPRESSED

BY TODD LAKE

**W**hen Jesus was 8 days old, his parents took him to be dedicated at the temple, where they bought doves and special coins from businesspeople who had near monopolies on these special offerings prescribed for the poor. At the end of his life, Jesus again entered the temple and found dove sellers and bankers still overcharging the poor. This time he made a whip and began turning over the tables of the moneychangers and releasing the doves from those who were selling them.

Since Jesus is the same “yesterday, today, and always,” it should not be difficult to imagine his attitude toward super-market chains that charge higher prices in poor neighborhoods where people have little choice about where to shop. Nor is it difficult to imagine his reaction to the business practices of huge retailers whose boast of “Always Low Prices” in practice means “Always Low Wages and Always No Unions.” And it does not take any exegetical finesse to discern how Jesus would view moving factories from regions with decent wages, child

labor laws, and environmental legislation to areas of the world with no restrictions save those on workers’ right to organize. One can easily imagine Christ’s attitude toward U.S. agribusiness, which receives tens of billions in government subsidies and contributes to the failure of untold numbers of farmers in the Third World who cannot compete with the economic might of the U.S. government.

The barriers to creating a more just economic order are formidable, but Christians have at various times and places allowed themselves to be guided more by biblical injunctions than the exigencies of the economic system under which they live. Indeed, in the 19th and 20th centuries virtually every major movement for progressive economic change was in large part initiated and sustained by Christians who explicitly drew upon biblical principles.

The story of John Newton, the British slave ship captain, and later composer of “Amazing Grace,” helps illuminate the salient issues. On one voyage between West Africa and the

slaveholding lands that Britain ruled, a storm arose. As Newton sought to calm his nerves, he uncharacteristically read the Bible. As he read, he became convinced of his own sinfulness and his need for a Savior. Upon returning to England, he announced that he was a professing Christian. On his next voyage to transport captive Africans to lifelong slavery, he treated his human cargo with gentleness and did his best to alleviate their physical suffering, but it finally became apparent to him that he could not reconcile slave trading with his Christian faith. He became a minister of the gospel and began preaching on and lobbying for the eradication of the slave trade.

The story is inspiring, but also cautionary. Newton's initial inclination as a Christian was to ameliorate the condition of the slaves he carried aboard ship. Neither he nor his contemporaries could envision a world without slavery: The economic might of the nation depended upon it. Moreover, slavery had a noble pedigree. Brilliant thinkers and sensitive souls from antiquity to Newton's own day accepted slavery as a necessary part of the economic system in which they lived. Private diaries of many Christian slaveholders evince a distinct uneasiness with the practice, but since a future economic system without slavery was unimaginable, they took no steps to eradicate it in the present. The only path that seemed open was that of charitable acts toward individual slaves (see the story on St. Peter Claver on page 3).

It was only as John Newton matured as a Christian that he saw that charity toward slaves missed the point of the "good news for the poor" that Jesus came to bring. Economic oppression could not simply be repented of like the sins of pride or sloth or anger. Sins committed by individuals can be repented of by individuals, but economic injustice is embedded in socioeconomic systems that have the sanction of law. There is no meaningful way for an individual to repent of such a sinful state of affairs. The only way for an individual to repent of unjust and oppressive economic structures is to work to change them. Newton, along with the M.P. William Wilberforce, formed part of a group of believers who worked for decades to eradicate the British slave trade.

Perhaps the most successful political lobbying organization in the history of the United States was the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, led in its heyday in the late 19th century by Francis Willard. The WCTU is remembered for its advocacy of the Prohibition Amendment, but this was but one part of its social reform agenda. In fact Willard, a genteel Methodist, was bold enough to call their program "gospel socialism." The WCTU called for labor legislation to protect workers and put an end to child labor. These measures were resisted by the business community, which prophesied the end of profitability if children could no longer

be employed or if workers could sue for injuries incurred on the job or get overtime pay. But Willard knew that in order to protect the American family—her stated goal—economic exploitation of its members would have to end. She knew that an embrace of the gospel meant an embrace of the interests of the common man and woman over the claims of an economic system constructed by and for the benefit of the moneyed class.

William Jennings Bryan, a leading Presbyterian layman, was known as "The Great Commoner" for his steadfast championing of the interests of the farmer and the laborer against the dominant business and financial interests. A three-time presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, he gave his most notable speech at the 1896 Democratic convention (quoted in Ronald F. Reid's *Three Centuries of American Rhetorical Discourse* [Waveland Press, 1988]. In it, he champions a liberal economic policy including silver money instead of the more restrictive gold standard:

Upon which side will the Democratic party fight—upon the side of "the idle holders of idle capital" or upon the side of the "struggling masses"?... There are only two ideas of government. There are those who believe that, if you will only make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests upon them... Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon this cross of gold.

Bryan took sides in the major debates regarding American economic policy because he believed that the gospel demanded that those on the bottom of the economic system be given every advantage.

Bryan brought the full weight of his oratorical and political skills to bear on systemic economic issues as part of his calling as a Christian politician. In his speech he did not call for charity for those in need, but for changes in U.S. policies that would benefit workers. Unlike most Christian leaders today, he believed that you must "legislate to make the masses prosperous." In that same "Cross of Gold" speech, he called for a graduated income tax. This was a radical departure from how the U.S. government had raised revenues. Bryan argued that a graduated income tax was no real burden on the rich, while a flat tax and fees were a heavy burden on

the poor. He realized that changes in economic policy were the only viable solution to the needs of the poor. The 16th Amendment, instituting a national income tax on the wealthy, was one result of his efforts.

Unfortunately, the name William Jennings Bryan has become synonymous in the popular mind with conservative obscurantism and anti-progressive trends in American life. Yet Bryan was literally part of the Progressive Movement in American political life. Oddly enough, his famous stand against evolution at the courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., was not a betrayal of his progressive values. He once quipped that he did not care about the age of rocks so much as about the Rock of Ages. Bryan had fought for decades to reshape the political and economic order that favored the wealthy over the needy. He had seen how the tycoons of industry would benefit from *social Darwinism*, which taught “the survival of the fittest.” The upshot of this thinking was that those with wealth and power deserved it, while “toilers everywhere” deserved nothing more than their meager lot in life. This was a popular, wholly unscientific application of Darwin’s theories to the realm of economic life, but it had the support of leading academics and business leaders in Europe and the United States. Bryan fought against *scientific Darwinism* as one way to undermine social Darwinism. His science was wrong, but not his lifelong efforts to ensure that economic life be governed by biblical principles and not the bottom line.

British and American evangelical activists from Newton to Willard to Bryan did not have a sophisticated academic theology. Their straightforward reading of the biblical texts led them to consider how the demands of Christ could best be lived out in the modern world. It was clear to them that oppression and injustice as manifested in political and economic life consigned the poor to a future without hope. But they knew that Jesus had come to preach good news to the poor. This inspired them to fight the systemic evils of the economic systems of their day.

Martin Luther King, Jr., brought the same prophetic critique of economics and politics into the second half of the 20th century. He knew that poverty among blacks could never be remedied by the charity of whites or by Booker-T.-Washington-esque attempts to lift themselves up by their own efforts. King understood that blacks did not form a permanent underclass because of their moral failings. Instead, they had been oppressed by the unjust legal and economic restraints of chattel slavery and then a brutal regime of Jim Crow segregation backed by terrorist acts of lynching and bombing committed against blacks with widespread governmental acquiescence and even support.

Programs that treated blacks as a social problem could never alleviate black poverty, because they ignored the real issues.

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The biblical approach adopted by King was to challenge the white oppressors to repent of their unjust practices. He knew that the legal restrictions that prevented equal access to education must change; the denial of black political rights must end; the exclusion of blacks from certain neighborhoods and professions must end; in short, he fought for an end to oppression and injustice so that blacks might be liberated from poverty. The almost exclusive public focus on his “I Have a Dream” speech has obscured the fact that economic justice was a centerpiece of his work at the time he was gunned down.

Public policy recommendations which assume that business-as-usual plus the moral reform of the poor will equal a diminishing of poverty in the world are doomed to failure. While measures to alleviate self-inflicted poverty are needed, they can by their very nature only benefit a small fraction of the poor. Adopting a biblical understanding of oppression and injustice as the causes of poverty will lead to radically different courses of action on the part of churches and individuals. If one accepts the biblical account, the majority of the poor are made that way or kept that way by systemic forces beyond their control. Instead of focusing attention on the personal failing of the victims, we must address the actual causes of poverty. A biblical understanding of poverty requires us to follow in the footsteps of Newton, Willard, Bryan, and King and work toward significant changes in the legal and economic systems that perpetuate an underclass. ■

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