



# Thoughts on Government and Worldwide Poverty<sup>1</sup>

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What should we assume the issue to be? Whether or not government is necessary? Of course it is necessary. Further, it is mandated within a Christian understanding of society. Whether or not government policies make any difference in the problem of worldwide poverty? Of course government policies relate to the problem—sometimes helping, sometimes hurting. Whether or not Christians are wasting their time or going beyond their spiritual ministry by trying to influence government policy? We may not agree on this one, but the importance of the issue is at least partly a matter of Christians becoming increasingly outspoken and involved in issues of public policy, ethics, and justice.

What is new is the acknowledgment of the inadequacy of an essentially verbal approach to worldwide poverty. Statements that reflect this shift are, on the one hand, more humble in that they acknowledge the limits of our knowledge, leverage, and rights as North Americans. On the other hand, they are more bold to speak to secular powers—to government and the non-religious sector. In short, they represent an emerging third posture of the Kingdom of God—neither triumphal nor defeatist.

Whether or not government is the whole answer to the problem is not likely to generate a lively debate. Does anyone seriously believe that government alone holds the solutions for abject human poverty? I have never encountered a person making such a claim. But I do encounter people who are fervently asserting that government alone cannot provide an adequate answer. I wonder who it is that such a person sees as the adversary in the debate?

An emphasis on “modernization” through the exportation of material technologies and the ideological commitment to free enterprise as the most promising contributions of free societies of the West toward alleviation of poverty is misguided. Perhaps most disturbing is the discrediting of present operations of assistance by international agencies and governments on the grounds that help rarely gets to the right people, while at the same time arguing a mercantile model of modernization on the faith-claim that it will likely benefit the poor as it trickles down from the rich who will control the new wealth. Further, the view that missionaries are sent to model this economic expansionism demands criticism. Such a view of the motives of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is becoming threadbare. A truly Christian analysis must offer a more promising basis for hope—over against a faith in capitalism, mercantile exportation, and the use of missionary efforts to pave the way for value changes and modifications of culture-based behaviors as needed for technological and material modernization.

I am encouraged to read about the affirmation of human dignity, basic rights, the special social claim of the poor, the responsibility of fulfilling basic human needs, the responsibility of government for promoting national and international economic justice, including the moderation of radical economic inequalities, and that Christians will bear a moral responsibility to care for those in need.

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Capitalism cannot be claimed as a godly panacea. The same consequences of the fall of humankind into sin that blight socialism—greed, self-centeredness, and grasping for power, just to start the list—also blight capitalism. While I agree that history makes a fairly good case for the pragmatic values of capitalism, I cannot abide its being ascribed high honor or accept its being recommended on the basis of its inherent goodness. Whether the private sector or the public sector; whether first world, second world, or third world, sin is a reality. Thus, any assessment that is truly Christian must come to grips with its theological grounding. Social science can shed light on certain issues, but it cannot provide the values needed to make moral choices.



But of this I am quite certain: greed and misuse of power infects the whole of human society—government, individuals, business corporations, institutions, and international agencies. What can a Christian in political science or economics offer us that holds out hope in reference to this most basic problem of poverty?