

## *Toward a Biblical Perspective on Equality* *Steps on the Way Toward Christian Political Engagement*

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Professor Ronald Sider addressed the August SCEG meeting in the third talk of the series based on the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics. Professor Sider's talk was largely based on an article entitled, 'Toward a Biblical Perspective on Equality: Steps on the Way Toward Christian Political Engagement', previously published in the journal *Interpretation*, Volume 43 (1989), No.2.

If one's political engagement is to be shaped fundamentally by the Scriptures, it means developing a biblical understanding on a given issue by means of a process vastly more complex than selecting a few isolated proof-texts related to it.

**I**T IS LEGITIMATE for citizens who are also Christians to want to help shape the public policy of their society in a way that is genuinely biblical. That does not mean that they claim their specific public policy proposals have direct divine authority; nor does it mean that they suppose that those who oppose their concrete proposals are in league with Satan, Hitler, or Stalin. Equally devout, equally serious Christians do arrive at mutually contradictory conclusions about the particular direction society should go. Yet that does not mean that biblical revelation is irrelevant to how Christians vote and lobby their representatives. It merely means that Christians must pay more attention to all the diverse elements that go into any specific conclusion about public policy and the specific reasons for their disagreements.

At least three crucial factors contribute to specific public policy choices: fundamental value judgments; analysis of "the facts" (this includes everything from very concrete, specific factual items to broader analyses grounded in the work of the social and natural sciences to very broad historical generalizations, about, for example, the general impact of colonialism); carefully examined generalizations (some would call a system of such generalizations an ideology) derived from the above and from unconscious personal preconceptions. One reason Christians find it so diffi-

cult to resolve their disagreements about specific political proposals is that they fail to pay sufficient attention to the precise sources of their disagreement. Obviously, it is unhelpful to confuse a disagreement over the exegesis of Matthew 25 or Amos 2 with a disagreement over the extent of Marxist-Leninist influence in the upper levels of the Sandinista party or the overall positive and negative impact of Western colonialism.

I have no commitment to ideology of left or right. My only absolute commitment is to Jesus Christ and the revealed Word of God. So I want my political engagement to be shaped fundamentally by the Scriptures. Yet developing a biblical understanding on any issue (welfare reform, for instance) is not an easy, simple process. It is vastly more complex than selecting a few isolated proof-texts related to a given topic.

First, one needs to reach clarity on the relevant ethical values and norms. For me, that means trying to listen with as little bias as possible to what the Scriptures say with reference to any area of concern.

If the entire biblical canon is God's Word, then one must carefully trace the treatment of a given issue throughout the entire development of biblical history, paying attention to the unique socio-economic historical context of each scriptural passage, and carefully weighing the different emphases in all strands of biblical literature. Rigorous exegesis of each particular text using the best biblical scholarship is essential. Placing each passage within the broad sweep of biblical history is also important in order to understand the direction of development and the full complexity of the biblical revelation.

Yet even after all the detailed exegesis has been done, and one has developed a comprehensive, synthetic overview (a biblical paradigm) of the different, complementary perspectives on, say, economic justice in all strands of biblical literature, the task is only partly finished. One must also have sophisticated understanding of the contemporary problem. Concrete factual analysis and careful social studies by relevant experts are crucial. The biblical paradigm must be applied to the contemporary problem.

Patriarchal society differed enormously from Roman Palestine, and both differ even more from the present global economy viewed from Wall Street, Tokyo, or Moscow. Any attempt naïvely to transplant this or that specific aspect of biblical economic life into the twentieth century ignores the vast differences between the past and the present. The biblical paradigm must be faithfully applied, not blindly copied.

It is assumed that cases and circumstances will differ, but if the principle is being properly applied, then it will be possible to recognize the pattern of the paradigm. In this sense, the social life of Israel [and the early church]—their laws and institutions—are to be taken as paradigmatic. We know that our

circumstances and context differ greatly from those of ancient Israel [and the early church]. But as we study them we are able to form objectives and policies and to initiate action in our day which recognizably display the shape of the [biblical] paradigm.<sup>1</sup>

That does not mean that I neglect the difference between theocratic Israel or the church as a voluntary community of believers on the one hand and modern secular, pluralistic society on the other. I assume that the first application of the biblical teaching on any issue is to the church, and I expect the church to be well ahead of the rest of society in implementing shalom.

Yet I also believe there is a secondary application of the biblical social vision to secular society. God's revelation to Israel about how to structure society for the sake of shalom was not arbitrary. Rather, it is the Creator's communication about how people live together in social harmony. To the extent that a modern society approximates the biblical paradigm in any area (say, economic justice), to that extent it will experience greater wholeness.

That is not to say I expect fallen people fully to adopt biblical norms, nor do I want to force them upon others. Yet in a democratic society it is appropriate for every citizen to develop policy proposals that are, of necessity, grounded in one's deepest beliefs. Those proposals will become law only if a majority agree. Even if one succeeds beyond one's wildest expectations, society will remain dreadfully imperfect. Fallen humanity will, at best, approximate biblical norms only very imperfectly. To the extent that they do, however, human society will experience greater shalom.

In this essay, I want to do some preliminary work on one aspect of the biblical paradigm on economic justice, namely, the issue of equality. Obviously the Bible does not contain a careful philosophical treatise on the nature of equality. One can go, however, through relevant biblical material and ask: What understanding of equality does this material presuppose and/or promote, whether directly or indirectly?

The word equality, of course, has many different connotations so a brief word on some distinctions is essential.<sup>2</sup> For example, some basic distinction between metaphysical equality and practical, day-by-day equality is neces-

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1. Christopher J.H. Wright, "The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics," *Transformation* 1 (January/March 1984), 10.

2. The literature on the notion of equality is vast, and I make no pretense to summarize it. One helpful overview is by Hugo Adam Bewer, "Egalitarianism and the Idea of Equality," in *Equality*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. Chapman (New York: Atherton Press, 1967), pp. 3-27. In Chap. 4 of his excellent book, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), Stephen Charles Mott has a very good analysis of biblical material with reference to the notion of equality.

sary. Most religions argue in some way or another that king and pauper are both ultimately equal. In Christian terms, both are created in the divine image and loved so much that the Son of God died for them. Yet this ultimate equality may not result in practical equality in real life.

At the second, day-by-day, level, there are a number of crucial distinctions. Equality before the law means that every person, whether rich or poor, should receive equal, unbiased treatment in the courts. Political equality means that every person has one vote in a free selection of political leaders and is free to run for any office. Equality of educational opportunity means that all persons have an equal opportunity for developing their talents through education. Equality of economic opportunity would mean things like equal access to jobs and capital, and equal pay for equal work. A more limited but still significant form of equality of economic opportunity would be equal access to the resources needed to earn the necessities for a decent life (food, clothing, housing, etc.). Equality of income would mean that regardless of work or "merit" of any kind, each person would receive the same income. Total equality in every sense would mean identity. In L. P. Hartley's novel, *Facial Justice*, a dictator requires both the very lovely and the very ugly to have corrective surgery so all have equal beauty.<sup>3</sup>

Which, if any, of these definitions of equality correspond to the social ideas depicted in the Scriptures? Obviously, there is no simple answer to that question. This is a question which the text does not ask in this fashion.

In the following pages, however, I want to present an outline of some of the more important material relevant to developing one part of a biblical paradigm on economic justice, namely, a biblical perspective on equality. Clearly, an adequate treatment of the issue would demand vastly more space. I cannot begin to do the detailed exegesis on each text that, in principle, my approach demands. Here I can only sketch an overview of what my limited research suggests is the basic direction suggested by the diverse biblical materials.

In creation, God freely provides for everyone the basic necessities of water, sun, food. Does this mean that basic necessities should be freely available to everyone regardless of any activity on their part? The creation story does not answer that question in any detail, although the mandate to exercise dominion over the earth as a co-worker with the Creator certainly affirms the goodness of work.<sup>4</sup>

The story of the fall shows that in a fallen world we must eat by the sweat of our brow (Gen. 3:17-19). Even the basic necessity of food is not something that people automatically deserve merely because they are

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3. L. P. Hartley, *Facial Justice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1960).

4. John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* is an excellent statement on this point. See *The Priority of Labor*, ed. Gregory Baum (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

human. People are to work for their food if they can. Even in the redeemed community where the effects of the fall are in the process of being transcended, Paul still assumes that if one can work and refuses to do so, then others do not owe that person food (II Thess. 3:10). One would not conclude from these texts that equality means equal access to basic necessities if persons refuse to exercise responsibility in doing what they can to acquire such things.

Equal access to basic necessities, however, as long as one does act responsibly, is a central part of the story of the manna in Exodus 16. Unable to provide for themselves, the people of Israel depended solely on God's free gift of food. To be sure, they still had to work for it. They had to gather the manna every day, but God provided only what each person needed. The story suggests that some tried to gather more than they needed, but discovered that they only had "enough." Hoarding would not work.

Paul quoted from this passage in his long discourse on the inter-continental offering for poor Christians in Jerusalem in II Corinthians 8—9. Using Exodus 16:18, he argued that "as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want . . . that there may be equality" (8:14). In one of the few places where the word equality is actually used in the Bible, Paul clearly argues that there ought to be at least equality of basic necessities among Christians in Asia (Jerusalem) and Europe (Greece).

Certainly responsible personal effort is required. Yet when external circumstances prevent people from providing for their own needs, then not just equality of opportunity but equality of outcome up to the point of basic necessities seems to be the norm.

Equality before the law is a clear demand in the Torah. "And I charge your judges, . . . you shall not be partial in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike; you shall not be afraid of the face of man, for the judgment is God's" (Deut. 1:16—18; also Prov. 24:23 and 28:21). More than once the texts reject a bias toward anyone, even the poor, in the courts: "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor" (Lev. 19:15; also Exod. 23:3). Equality before the law is a clear biblical demand.

Central to our whole discussion is the extensive, complex material on Israel and the land. That the land was central to Israel's own self-understanding is clear from the fact that all strands of Old Testament literature—law, prophets, and writings—deal with the topic.

The contrast between early Israel and surrounding societies is striking.<sup>5</sup>

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5. See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), I, 164.

In Egypt most of the land belonged to Pharaoh or the temples. In most other near-Eastern contexts a feudal system of landholding prevailed. The king granted large tracts of land worked by landless laborers to a small number of royal vassals. Only at the theological level does this feudal system pertain to early Israel. Yahweh the King owns all the land and makes important demands on those to whom he gives use of the land. Yet under Yahweh, Israel's ideal is decentralized, family "ownership" understood as stewardship under Yahweh's absolute ownership. In the period of the Judges, the pattern in Israel was "free peasants on small land holdings of equal size and apportioned by the clans."<sup>6</sup>

Land was the basic capital in early Israel's agricultural economy, and the land seems to have been divided somewhat equally. Consequently, each extended family had the resources to acquire those things needed for a decent life in that society.

We need not settle here the date or historical accuracy of the two major accounts of the division of the land (Josh. 18 and Num. 26). What is important for our purposes is that they do represent Israel's social ideal with regard to the land. In Joshua 18:1-10, the people come before God in an act of worship and then proceed to measure the land and share it (by casting lots) among the various tribes. In Numbers 26:52-56, it is clearly stated that the land was allocated according to the size of each tribe. Some loose equality of land ownership seems implied. Albrecht Alt goes so far as to say that the prophets understood Yahweh's ancient regulation on property to be "one man-one house-one allotment of land."<sup>7</sup>

Decentralized land ownership by extended families was the economic base for a relatively egalitarian society of small landowners and vine-dressers in the time of the Judges. In his study of early Israel, Norman Gottwald concluded that Israel was "an egalitarian, extended-family, segmentary tribal society with an agricultural-pastoral economic base . . . characterized by profound resistance and opposition to the forms of political domination and social stratification that had become normative in the chief cultural and political centers of the one ancient Near East."<sup>8</sup>

The story of Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21) demonstrates how important each family's ancestral land was. Frequent references throughout the Old Testament not to move ancient landmarks marking land boundaries (e.g., Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Job 24:2; Prov. 22:28; Hos. 15:10) underline the

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6. H. Eberhard von Waldow, "Social Responsibility and Social Structure in Early Israel," *CBQ* 32 (1970), 195.

7. Albrecht Alt, "Micah 2, 1-5 Ges Anadasmus in Juda," *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1959), III, 374.

8. *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 BCE* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 10.

fact that Israel's social ideal called for each extended family to have the land needed to supply at least the necessities of life. A basic equality of economic opportunity at least to the extent that each family could earn basic necessities was the norm.

We should not understand "basic necessities" in a minimal fashion that would connote merely the ability to keep from starving. If the picture of a nonhierarchical, relatively egalitarian society of small farmers depicted above is essentially accurate, then families possessed the resources to earn a living that would have been socially understood to be reasonable and acceptable rather than embarrassingly minimal. That is not to suggest that everyone had exactly the same income. It does mean, however, that everyone had the resources to earn a standard of living that would enable them not only to meet minimal needs for food, clothing, and housing but also to be a respected participant in the community. Possessing their own land enabled each extended family to acquire the necessities for a decent life through responsible work.

Both the sabbatical release of debts (Deut. 15) and the Jubilee (Lev. 25) would, if practiced, have served to maintain this basic equality of opportunity. Again, we need not be concerned here with historical questions about date and implementation. What matters for our purposes is that these passages represent Israel's social ideal and, for those who accept the biblical canon as in some sense authoritative, constitute part of God's Word for us.

Deuteronomy 15 commanded the forgiveness of debts and the freeing of slaves every seven years.<sup>9</sup> When temporarily enslaved Hebrews went free in the sabbatical release, the master was to furnish them liberally with the things (cattle, grain, and wine) that would help them earn their own way (v. 14).

Interestingly, this provision for short-term Hebrew slavery does not presuppose that everyone should automatically be guaranteed the necessities of life free of charge without any effort. Rather it assumes that people should suffer the consequences of wrong choices. Yet even this temporary life as "indentured servants" is a kind of safety net which provides basic necessities, and it lasts only for a maximum of seven years. After that, they go free and again receive at least some of what they need (e.g., cattle) to meet their basic necessities.

Leviticus 25 provides for the return of ancestral land every fifty years.<sup>10</sup>

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9. The provision applies only to fellow Israelites. Here and at many other points one cannot but struggle with the ethnic limitations of the concern for neighbor. The clear concern that each family have their own land did not extend to the Canaanites, who were annihilated.

10. For a recent survey of the literature on Lev. 25, see R. Gnuse, "Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel's Vision of Social Reform," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1985), 43-48.

The theological presupposition is that Yahweh alone is the absolute owner of all land (v. 23). Therefore, he has the right to place limitations on the use made of the land by the temporary owners or stewards of the crops. If one assumes a setting of decentralized ownership by extended families of small farmers and vinedressers, then this Jubilee provision would guarantee that families not permanently lose the means to provide for a decent life. Economic equality of opportunity to earn a reasonable living is the norm.

To be sure, that does not preclude suffering the consequences of wrong choices. A whole generation or more could suffer the loss of ancestral land, but every fifty years the basic source of wealth would be returned so that each family had an equal opportunity to provide for its basic needs.

Verses 25–28 have an interesting provision that implies that this equality of opportunity is a higher value than some notion of absolute property rights. If a person fell into poverty and sold his land to a more prosperous neighbor and then, subsequently, recovered financially to the degree that he had the resources to buy back his land before the Jubilee, then the new owner had to return the land. The original owner's right to have his ancestral land to earn his own way is a higher right than the second owner's right to maximize profits.

The implications of verses 29–31 are less clear for our discussion. After one year houses in walled cities, unlike the land, cannot be redeemed and do not return to original owners at the Jubilee. Why this difference? Land as the basic capital in a predominantly agricultural society represented the basic means for equality of economic opportunity as far as necessities for a decent life are concerned. With that basic level guaranteed, houses in walled cities could function as an economic incentive for those who cared to do extra work to obtain them.

The cities of the Levites, on the other hand, were subject to the same laws as the agricultural land (vs. 32–34). These cities constituted the Levites' economic base and economic share in the people of God (Josh. 21:1–3). In order for the Levites to retain their equality of economic opportunity for acquiring a decent standard of living, their cities had to be subject to the Jubilee release.

In the tenth to the eighth centuries, a major centralization of landholding occurred. Poorer farmers lost their land, becoming landless laborers or slaves. The prophets regularly denounced the bribery, political assassination, and economic oppression that destroyed the earlier economic equality described above. Elijah harshly condemned Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21). Isaiah attacked rich landowners for adding field to field until they dwell alone in the countryside because the smaller farmers had been destroyed (Isa. 15:5–8).

The prophets, however, did not merely condemn. They also expressed a powerful eschatological hope for a new day of justice when all would

have their own land again. In the "latter days," the future day of justice and shalom, "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (Mic. 4:4; cf. also Zech. 3:10). No longer will the leaders oppress the people; instead they will guarantee that everyone again enjoys their ancestral land (Ezek. 45:1-9, esp. vs. 8-9).

From the giving of the land, through the prophetic denunciation of oppressors who seized the land of the poor, to the eschatological vision of a new day when all would again delight in the fruits of their own land and labor, we see depicted a social ideal in which families possess the economic means to earn their own way. A basic equality of economic opportunity so that all can at least provide for their own basic needs through responsible work is the norm. Failure to act responsibly has economic consequences. Therefore, there is no assumption of equality of income regardless of personal choices. Hints of economic incentive for extra effort are also present. Centrally important, however, is the demand that each family have the necessary capital (land) so that responsible activity will result in an economically decent life.<sup>11</sup>

The Wisdom Literature underlines the theme of responsibility and work. A number of proverbs insist that poverty sometimes results from laziness (e.g., 6:6-11; 10:4-5) or ignoring advice (13:18). Hard work, on the other hand, earns material abundance (e.g., 12:11, 24, 27). Such texts obviously assume an unequal income and an unequal share of material things. Depending on the level of labor and wisdom of choices, some rightly have more than others.

Such inequality even extends to subsequent generations: "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous" (13:22). Apparently some inequality of economic opportunity based on the obedience and diligence of parents and grandparents is appropriate. That is not to justify a vast degree of inequality of economic opportunity based on inheritance from ancestors, but it does exclude any notion of absolute equality of economic opportunity.

One turns expectantly to Jesus for insight on the nature of economic equality, and there is a great deal in Jesus' teaching that deals with economics and poverty. Wealth is dangerous, although not innately evil. The rich must share in costly ways with the poor. Scores of passages underline Jesus' concern for the poor, but there is no explicit material on

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11. My understanding of the centrality of the land in Israel's self-understanding owes a good deal to Christopher J.H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), esp. Chaps. 3 and 4. Walter Brueggemann's *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), is also a particularly important work on this topic.

what equality might mean in the realm of economics. Only indirectly do we get some clues.

A central biblical theme which runs throughout the Scriptures reaches its apex in Jesus' life and teaching. God had a special concern for the poor. Jesus goes out of his way to associate with and empower the poor, weak, and marginalized. Prostitutes, lepers, and women receive particular attention. It is not that Jesus is biased toward the poor. Jesus would not have disagreed with the explicit Old Testament assertion that we should not be biased toward the poor. Jesus also cared for the wealthy and powerful. Yet it is also very clear that Jesus had a special concern for the poor. He went out of his way to underline the fact that his Good News was for them. Most rich and powerful people care a lot more about themselves than they do about the poor and marginalized. Precisely because Jesus cared equally, his unbiased concern for the poor demands fundamental change in distorted values and systems that favor the rich and powerful. Jesus' and the whole Bible's "preferential option for the poor" call us to overturn poverty and correct injustice. It summons us to a fundamental reversal of distorted views and practices. Stephen Mott puts it well:

If we are to fulfil the obligation to seek for all persons security of life and well-being, some individuals will need more care than others. If a threat of violence is made on any citizen's life, that person is entitled to special police protection to bring his or her security level nearer to the norm. This "unequal" treatment ensures equal distribution of the right to security. The equal provision of basic rights requires unequal response to unequal needs. Justice must be partial in order to be impartial. Only by giving special attention to the poor and downtrodden can one be said to be following "the principle of equal consideration of human interest."<sup>12</sup>

This special concern for the poor is important, but it does not provide a definition of economic justice or equality, nor does Jesus' command to love the neighbor as oneself. One might conclude that this definition of love for neighbor would demand equality at every level—equal income, equal wealth, and so forth. Yet that would contradict the clear teaching in both Testaments that economic choices have consequences that people must live with. Loving the neighbor as oneself means willing and seeking for the neighbor exactly what God wants for him or her because that is the best for the neighbor, but that is not a definition of what God wills. One must return to the rest of Scripture for that.

Does Jesus' teaching on God's unconditional grace toward sinners pertain to our topic? Earlier we saw that when poverty results from sinful choices like laziness, people must live with the consequence of their

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12. *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 66.

actions. The doctrine of grace says that people are forgiven and need not live with the consequences (at least not the eternal ones) of their sin. Does that mean that we should provide everyone with material things, even equal shares of material things, regardless of their choices?

Perhaps one clue lies in the link between unconditional grace and the demands of discipleship at any moment. God stands ready to forgive sinners—but they must forsake sin and submit to the Savior's Lordship. Perhaps our economic structure should work in an analogous fashion. At any moment, society should be ready to provide new economic opportunity to those who have fallen into poverty because of sinful choices. Yet that unconditional offer is inseparable from the expectation of new responsibility. Expecting repeated economic opportunity without accompanying responsibility would be like asking for perpetual forgiveness without obedience and discipleship.

The dramatic economic sharing in the earliest church at Jerusalem is certainly another significant strand of the biblical material.<sup>13</sup> "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). Everywhere in the early chapters of Acts, the evidence is abundant and unambiguous (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37; 5:1–11; 6:1–7).

Economic sharing in the Jerusalem church started in the earliest period. Immediately after reporting the three thousand conversions at Pentecost, Acts notes that "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (2:44). Whenever anyone was in need, they shared. Giving surplus income to needy brothers and sisters was not enough. They regularly dipped into capital reserves, selling property to aid the needy. Barnabas sold a field he owned (4:36–37). Ananias and Sapphira sold property, although they lied about the price. God's promise to Israel that faithful obedience would eliminate poverty among his people came true (Deut. 15:4)! "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them; . . . and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34–35).

What was the precise nature of the Jerusalem church's costly sharing? The earliest church did not insist on absolute economic equality, nor did they abolish private property. Peter reminded Ananias that he had been under no obligation either to sell his property or to donate the proceeds to the church (Acts 5:4). Sharing was voluntary, not compulsory; but love for brothers and sisters was so overwhelming that many freely abandoned legitimate claims to private possessions. "No one said that any of the things

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13. The following section is taken in part from my *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), pp. 88–90.

which he possessed was his own" (4:32). That does not mean that everyone donated everything. Later in Acts we see that John Mark's mother, Mary, still owned her own house (12:12). Others also undoubtedly retained some private property.

The tense of the Greek words confirms this interpretation. In both Acts 2:45 and 4:34 the verbs are in the imperfect tense, so they point to continued, repeated action over an extended period of time. Thus the meaning is, "They often sold possessions," or "They were in the habit of regularly bringing the proceeds of what was being sold."<sup>14</sup> The text does not suggest that the community decided to abolish all private property or that everyone instantly sold everything. Rather, it suggests that over a period of time, whenever there was need, believers regularly sold lands and houses to aid the needy.

It is not only anachronistic but also misleading to apply the label "Communist" to this early Christian community. There was no central authority that owned everything, but there was dramatic economic sharing. Equality of income up to the point of meeting the basic necessities for everyone ("There was no poor among them") was the norm.

The same concern is clear in Paul's great intercontinental collection for the Jerusalem church. For several years Paul devoted a great deal of time and energy to his great collection.<sup>15</sup> II Corinthians 8—9 contains the most extensive discussion.

In his instructions on this voluntary offering, Paul gives three guidelines. First, he suggests that the Corinthians imitate Christ who gave up so much for others that he became poor. Second, giving should be according to ability. Paul's third guideline is the most startling. The norm, he suggests, is something like economic equality among the people of God. "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality." To support his principle, Paul quotes from the biblical story of the manna: "As it is written, 'He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack'" (II Cor. 8:13—15).

What does Paul mean? The key word is the Greek word *isotes* which clearly means equality.<sup>16</sup> But equality in what sense? The Corinthian church apparently had a current abundance and the Jerusalem church

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14. The key verbs are *epipraskon* and *diemerizon* (Acts 2:45) and *epheron* (Acts 4:34). See *The Interpreters' Bible*, IX, 52, and Richard Batey, *Jesus and the Poor: The Poverty Program of the First Christians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1972), pp. 33, 103, n. 9.

15. See Rom. 15:22—28; I Cor. 16:1—4; and II Cor. 7—9. Also Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study of Paul's Strategy* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1966).

16. See, for instance, C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1973), pp. 226—27.

lacked basic necessities. Paul was urging the kind of sharing that would result in an equality of income at least to the level where everyone enjoyed the basic necessities.

What, if anything, can one conclude from this sketchy survey of some of the important biblical material relevant to developing a biblically informed perspective on equality? That the biblical social vision demands equality before the law is beyond dispute. Equality of economic opportunity at least to the point of equal opportunity to earn basic necessities for a decent life is also a clear implication. The Israelite understanding of the land is especially crucial. In Israel's social vision, land, the basic capital in that agricultural economy, was shared with everyone in such a way that every family had the resources to earn the means to be an active participant in the community. To be sure, misguided decisions, oppression by the powerful, or even unavoidable accidents might mean the temporary loss of this basic capital; and when one was responsible for that loss, one needed to suffer the consequences. Yet important mechanisms were provided to prevent this temporary loss from becoming permanent, and the prophets' condemnation of powerful oppressors who often seized this basic capital from the weak, and their eschatological vision for the coming day of justice and shalom, underline the point. God wanted all people to have the means to meet their own basic needs, and in the eschatological day of shalom that would again be a reality.

Finally, when circumstances beyond one's control prevent one from earning one's own way, equality of outcome up to the point of satisfying basic necessities is also a part of the biblical social vision.<sup>17</sup> In both creation and the giving of the manna, God freely provided basic necessities for everyone. Again and again God commanded his people to do the same for the poor. When redemption broke into history powerfully in the early church, everyone's necessities were met, and poverty vanished for a time from the new people of God. There is, of course, an important qualification. Those who are able must engage in responsible work. If they do not, then they must suffer the consequences, but equality of income up to the point of satisfying basic necessities seems to be part of the biblical demand.

The task of applying this paradigm to contemporary society is not possible in this brief essay. Yet a few comments to suggest the direction I think the paradigm points may be in order. One must apply the paradigm, of course, not repeat the specific mechanisms. It would be silly to try to adopt the specific model of sabbatical release of debts or a Jubilarly return

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17. John Mason has written a provocative piece on the assistance programs in the Pentateuch, "Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor," *Transformation* IV/2 (April/June 1987), pp. 1-14.

of property to those who owned it fifty years ago.

What would equality of economic opportunity, at least for the resources necessary to be an active participant in one's community, mean in our contemporary world? Surely it would mean that the basic resources (capital) needed to create at least enough wealth for a decent life would be available to all. In some contexts that is still land. Far more often it is education. Knowledge is the most basic capital in an information society. If we were to decide within American society or global society that all children should be able to receive a quality education so that they could maximize their natural abilities in order to earn a decent livelihood, fundamental change would be necessary. Yet that, it seems to me, is the minimal requirement demanded by the biblical paradigm.

A safety net of "welfare" programs designed to provide necessities for those unable to work for them would be necessary to apply the biblical concern for equality of outcome at least to the level of necessities. As in the biblical framework, individual responsibility and strong families would be essential related concerns that good welfare measures would strengthen rather than destroy. Fortunately, I need not try here to develop practical concrete measures to balance those diverse concerns!

It may be that the biblical perspective demands a more radical understanding of equality than I have argued here. In order not to overstate the case, I have presented what I believe is its minimal demand. Yet even that modest understanding of equality would, if implemented in contemporary society, produce radical change.

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