

From the Desk of David Lantz

God's Welfare Plan

No one is happy with the welfare system in America. Those in need distrust the wealthy in our society and blame their problems on the greediness of the affluent. Those who hold down a steady job and pay their taxes view welfare recipients as lazy ner-do-wells who take from society, yet give nothing in return. After four decades of government programs, one cannot help but believe that the war on poverty of the 1960's has resulted in a poverty of the spirit today.

For the Christian who honestly wants to see the needy helped, the current system fails to provide true help for two reasons. First, it needs stronger incentives provided to those on welfare to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." Second - and of more direct significance to Christians - the current system severs the ties between the haves and the have-nots. Unless these ties are re-established, the rich and the poor will view each other with increasing mistrust, and even hatred.

What, then, does the Bible have to say about this issue? Has God designed a better system upon which we can model modern day public policy? A careful study of the Book of Ruth demonstrates that the answer to both questions is yes.

The Book of Ruth is set in the time of the Judges. Ruth returns to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi. Naomi has a relative named Boaz, and it is to his "plantation" that they return. When Ruth arrives and goes into the barley fields, we read (Ruth 2:3): "So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers."

Through the account of Ruth, we are presented with a practical system of providing a means for the poor to take care of themselves. Known as the Law of Gleaning, this law instructs the landowner not to pick up every scrap of corn, wheat, or other crop which is harvested. Rather, when the reapers go through the fields, anything they miss is to not be "gleaned" by the landowner, but left on the ground.

"Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:9-10)

Can you imagine telling a modern-day businessman to not be "economically efficient"? Businessmen are taught to cut waste, be efficient, focus on the bottom line. And yet, here was a system which said if some of the harvest falls by the wayside, leave it. Don't harvest to the edge of the field - let the poor reap the wild grain that grows there. Clearly, God had a plan for dealing with the needy.

What do we see in a welfare system designed by God? We see a system in which the haves and the have-nots must be in touch with each other! Not long after Ruth begins to glean in his field, Boaz sees her and asks one of his servants who she is. He knows she's a new comer because he is familiar with all who glean in his field. This was true workfare - yes, landowners like Boaz left the grain to be gleaned - but the poor wouldn't eat unless they first harvested that grain. As long as Israel followed this law, a government welfare bureaucracy wasn't necessary.

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God's "welfare plan" also extended to the law of the kinsman redeemer. To be sure, the theological implications of this law are central to understanding the Christian faith. However, we miss much if we do not also see that the daily application of this law was central to sustaining ancient Hebrew culture by providing for one of the largest groups of disenfranchised people - widowed women.

God gave Moses a plan to guarantee that widowed women would be cared for. In Deuteronomy 25:5-6, we read:

"When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And it shall be that the first-born whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out from Israel."

Again, as in the law of gleaning, the law of the kinsman redeemer provided a way for the have-nots to be cared for by the haves of society. Make no mistake, there was a cost to the person of wealth to continue the line of his relative. The price was that your own children would now have to share their inheritance with their half-brother that came from this new union. But balanced against this personal cost was the opportunity to influence the life of this person who would carry on the relative's name, and provide the woman with a son who would care for her in her old age.

The alternative was to see this widow quite likely turn to prostitution to support herself - and in the process, contribute to the increase in illegitimate births.

Contrast the Biblical system of welfare with today's system. Ruth had to take the initiative both in terms of gleaning and claiming kinship with Boaz - and the system provided that her needs would be met if she acted. Today, once you qualify for benefits, you simply show up and receive them. Boaz was involved with the lives of the needy. Today, we pay our taxes and leave the dirty work to someone else - and then complain about the waste in government.

God has given us a model of how to meet the physical needs of those around us so that we may then meet their spiritual needs. The challenge to Christians today is that we have grown complacent, abdicating our calling to minister to those in need to a faceless, government bureaucracy. While the times have changed, people have not, and neither has Christ's commandment in Matthew 10:8: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely have you received, freely give."

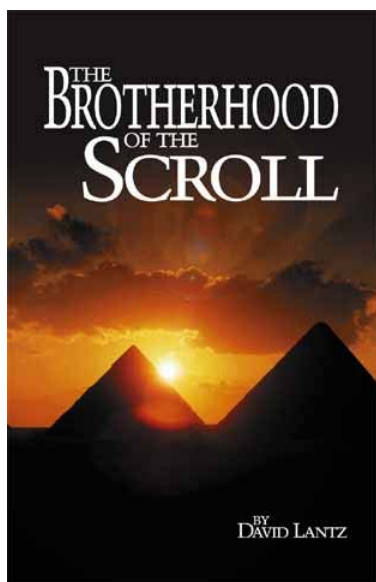
Conclusion

Years ago, God placed on my heart the need to care more about people. Through a series of events, that led me to volunteer with the Wheeler Rescue Mission where I live in Indianapolis, Indiana. Through a program called the David and Jonathon Program, I met once a week with a homeless man named Richard. We maintained that relationship for about five years, as I helped him study for his GED, housed him in my home for a period of time, and served with him at a camp for inner city kids maintained by the mission. Ultimately, what Richard needed was not housing but hope. Not cash but a sense that someone cared. When he gained these things, he gained the courage to take care of his own needs.

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I know that many who read this article have done similar things, and many have done much more than I. Key to this is that God has placed the desire to do so upon your heart, and you have given – freely.

The challenge for the church and society at large is to create a culture of giving freely – but not demanding such sacrifice. There are those who would require giving out of compulsion – through government programs which seek to transfer wealth. Doing so destroys the one thing that God seeks to build through the service of giving – relationship. As we struggle with the issue of the haves and the have-nots, this is the key: If we build relationships, material needs will be met because the concept of what a need is will be changed. If we seek only to meet material needs, not only will relationships be damaged, but the material needs will turn to greeds – and those we will never be satisfy.



David Lantz is the author of *The Brotherhood of the Scroll*. For information about his book, including how to order *Brotherhood*, please visit us on the web at www.brotherhoodscroll.net

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