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Review: Poverty and Wealth

Gary Habermas

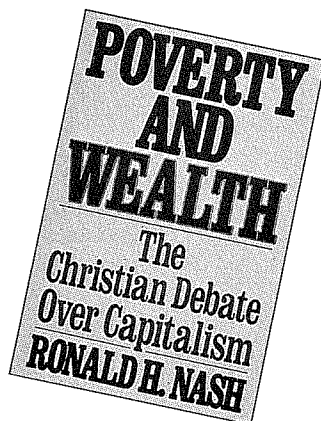
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**POVERTY AND WEALTH:
THE CHRISTIAN DEBATE
OVER CAPITALISM**
by Ronald H. Nash

This multifaceted book begins with the straightforward assertion that Christians have an obligation both to help the poor and to become informed as to the best means by which this might be done. If the former is not complemented by the latter, good intentions could be isolated from sound economic theory, actually producing damaging results (p. 9).

At the end of the volume, author Ronald Nash summarizes the twofold message of the book, providing his answer to the opening assertion. Christians who wish to assist the poor need capitalism and conversely, capitalism needs Christianity (p. 199). The first of these claims receives most of the attention throughout the book.

In between these two statements is a detailed introduction to economic theory. Nash disavows any attempt "to deduce a system of economics from the Bible" (p. 12), since he finds that Scripture contains no systematic teaching on economic theory (p. 164). But this book is an effort toward countering the numerous recent attempts to defend socialistic options (p. 12), which are said to be firmly entrenched on major Evangelical campuses (p. 11).

In order to both explain and defend capitalism, chapters are devoted to such topics as various basic economic principles, the market, capitalism, socialism, Marxism, liberation theology, interventionism, the Great Depression, Social Security, the Christian use of wealth, and poverty in the United States and abroad. End notes and a suggested reading list

provide additional data and resources for the interested reader.

Several themes in the book deserve mentioning. After noting three types of economic options—capitalism, socialism, and the hybrid called interventionism (or the mixed economy)—Nash may surprise some readers in his assertion that the U.S. economy is interventionist, not capitalist (pp. 62-63).

One of the strongest elements is Nash's discussion of how socialistic economic options require some sort of force (and usually large amounts) to ensure compliance with its principles (pp. 63-66). A related point is that practices such as voluntary sharing of goods and simple living do not really constitute socialism (p. 64).

Perhaps the most eye-opening discussion in the book is entitled "Poverty in America" (chapter 16). Details are provided regarding the extreme increase in assistance to the American poor from 1965 to 1980 and the amazing claim that, in spite of this marked increase, the percentage of poor stayed the same, raising questions about U.S. welfare programs.

Lest the reader think that Nash is simply defending current American economic policies, he should notice Nash's criticism of the Social Security system (pp. 164-155), suggestions for reform of the current welfare system (pp. 181-183), and problems with interventionism

(p. 62). In numerous other places, Nash acknowledges a few additional extravagances of the U.S. economy.

As Nash points out, most recent treatments of the capitalism-socialism issue are concerned with more narrow issues such as the Christian's use of money, especially with regard to assisting the poor (p. 57). Nash's purpose is much broader. Nonetheless, one might wish that his treatment of this subject (chapter 15) was more in depth, including a more detailed look at numerous "hard" sayings such as Luke 12:33, 14:33; James 2:14-17; and 1 John 3:17, where Christians are called to much more radical obedience than is often realized in some treatments of the subject.

However, Nash agrees throughout with those who assert that it is the Christian's duty to view all of his possessions as given by the Lord to be used in stewardship and that believers ought to share with those in need. Again, the importance of this aspect of actual giving needs to be stressed.

At any rate, this book is a major effort to defend capitalism by a noted Evangelical author and will have to be addressed by those who choose socialistic options. His challenges and citations of data deserve the attention of those who would argue otherwise. (Crossway Books, 1986, 223 pp., \$8.95)

Gary Habermas

**An excerpt from
POVERTY AND WEALTH**

But exchange can also take place by means of force and violence. In this violent means of exchange, the basic rule of thumb is: "Unless you do something good for me, I'll do something bad to you." This turns out to be the controlling principle of socialism. Socialism means far more than centralized control of the economic process. It entails the introduction of coercion into economic exchange in order to facilitate the goals of the elite who function as the central planners. One of the great ironies of Christian socialism is that its proponents in effect demand that the state get out its weapons and force people to fulfill the demands of Christian love. Even if we fail to notice any other contrast between capitalism and socialism, we already have a major difference to relate to the Biblical ethic. One system stresses voluntary peaceful exchange, while the other depends on coercion and violence. . . . Whatever else socialism is, it means a centralized control of the economy made possible by the use of force. Socialism epitomizes the violent means of exchange.