



Center on
FAITH IN COMMUNITIES

Putting the Poor on the National Agenda: Ron Sider's Timely Proposals

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Ron Sider loves scripture, embraces traditional values, and puts his money where his mouth is in terms of Christian responsibility for the poor: he lives in a low-income urban community and has ministered face-to-face among needy individuals for years. He is also the most tireless statement-monger in evangelicaldom. From the “Chicago Statement” to the “Oxford Declaration” to the “Generous Christians Pledge,” Sider has labored endlessly to get liberal and conservative Christians to agree on what’s to be done about the poor. His latest book, *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America* (Baker), is the most balanced and practical effort he has offered to date on that subject. Though not without weaknesses and some controversial proposals, the book is worth reading and could be a starting point for achieving Sider’s long-sought consensus among evangelicals.

In his signature style, Sider starts with biblical analysis and develops a set of general principles around which he orders his policy prescriptions. *Just Generosity’s* “foundational framework” includes several assertions that Christians from across the political spectrum ought to be able to affirm: the sovereignty of God over all things; the worth of the material creation; the holistic nature of human beings (we are physical, emotional, and spiritual beings); and the reality of sin. Christians enthusiastic about the free market will cheer Sider’s embrace of the importance of human creativity (and the resulting ability to create new wealth); his affirmation of economic freedom; and his emphasis on the dignity of work.

Sider’s familiar explication of biblical justice is more controversial. For him, biblical justice is not only about procedural fairness, but includes a “dynamic, restorative character.” Biblical justice “also includes positive rights, which are the responsibility of the community to guarantee” (positive rights include such things as the right to food and health care). Sider interprets the Jubilee of Leviticus 25 as condemning extreme inequalities in wealth and affirming limits on private property. He is more comfortable than many conservatives, as a result, with government intervention in the market economy to assure equitable distributions of resources.

Certainly there is room for debate on these questions. E. Calvin Beisner and others have long argued that biblical justice is primarily about conformity to God’s standards and rendering each his due – in a word, fairness. Beisner’s lengthy analysis of Leviticus 25 (in his book *Prosperity and Poverty*) concludes that the Jubilee is about the limits God’s

law set on the debt families could accumulate (and the length of time loans could be extended), not about equalizing land ownership every 50 years. Moreover, Sider draws too sharp a distinction between the “justice-as-fairness” view and his own emphasis on restorative justice; after all, correcting unfair procedures is encompassed by the notion of justice-as-fairness.

A wholesale rejection of Sider’s interpretations of the relevant Old Testament passages, though, would be wrong-headed. His detailed analysis of the Old Testament’s “welfare system” reminds us of crucially relevant principles for today that welfare’s goal is a liberal sufficiency for need; that both government and civil society have responsibilities in welfare provision; and that distinctive approaches should be taken for the able-bodied poor and those unable to take care of themselves. Sider’s observation that God judges all society (importantly, not just Israel but pagan nations as well) on how they treat their most vulnerable members is also valuable.

Following the exploration of biblical norms, Sider moves to specific policy discussions. In an ambitious attempt to forge a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy, he addresses at length five topics – wages/tax policies; broken families; education; health care; and welfare reform – and then briefly covers other related questions such as crime and social security reform.

Overall, Sider’s treatment of these issues is careful and reasonably balanced. Not all evangelicals will agree with prescriptions, but his proposals are a good starting point for healthy discussion. Consider, for example, the section on work and family income. Sider acknowledges both the issue of non-work among the poor (a favorite topic of conservative Lawrence Mead) and the Left’s complaints that minimum wage jobs often fail to lift the poor above poverty. Sider makes a persuasive case that too often middle- and upper-middle Americans get all the benefit of certain tax breaks while the poor get none.

For example, often the working poor are uninsured because their employers do not offer health plans and they cannot afford to buy their own. Meanwhile, better-off Americans not only enjoy employer-sponsored health insurance, they also get a tax break on their part of the premiums. Wouldn’t it be more just to reduce that tax break for the well-off, and use the savings to provide basic health insurance for the working poor? Similarly, the Dependent Care Tax Credit is non-refundable. This means that better-off families receive this government benefit (a tax deduction of up to \$1440 for families with two children) while poor working families, who do not pay income tax, get no government help with the costs of their child care. Sider’s discussion of increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit is also judicious, carefully detailing the pros and cons of this idea and noting its superiority to minimum wage increases.

Admittedly, Sider’s whole discussion of tax issues would be stronger if he adopted a big-picture view that assessed the overall distribution of the tax burden in American society, rather than honing in microscopically on particular pieces of the tax code. Nonetheless,

he has targeted some areas that need improvement, and Christians ought to be aware of these specific examples of bias in our current system.

Throughout the book, Sider honors the traditional Christian views on marriage and family structure, encourages public policies to reduce divorce and end the marriage penalty in the tax code, lauds abstinence initiatives like “True Love Waits,” and exhorts his liberal friends to realize that “being pro-family is not a conservative agenda; it is a crucial component of any rational search for justice for the poor.” His chapter on education draws heavily on the excellent work of Boston University’s Charles Glenn (a favorite of conservatives and moderates) and applauds the ideas of diversity, competition, and parental choice. He acknowledges the Left’s concern that sufficient funding is necessary for quality education, but rejects the notion that money is the answer.

Sider cannot be called an avid supporter of educational vouchers, but he does propose that America at least try a significant pilot program to test them. He is enthusiastic about Individual Development Accounts; thinks teen moms on welfare should finish school and live under the authority of a responsible adult, asserts that the able-bodied poor who refuse to work don’t have much claim on society for help; and is excited about the potential of Charitable Choice to foster healthy government-religious partnerships to serve the poor that respect the spiritual character of faith-based ministries.

In short, there is plenty in *Just Generosity* around which Christians interested in “what works” can rally – regardless of what side of the spectrum the idea comes from. That’s not to say that there aren’t some ideas in the book to continue debating about. Some of Sider’s proposals are not carefully defended. For example, he buys in too quickly to President Clinton’s assertion that modest increases in the minimum wage will not increase unemployment. This view is based on merely a few recent studies from economics professors at Princeton whose research methodology is being challenged in several quarters, with most scholars sticking to the long-accepted position that minimum wage hikes increase unemployment. In addition, Sider comes out against Social Security privatization and medical savings accounts. Both proposals, he worries, will endanger the most vulnerable people in society. But other folks of good will are making persuasive cases that these policies can be crafted to benefit society’s poorest workers. He is critical of the “work-first” emphasis of the 1994 federal welfare reforms, but does not discuss the long sorry history of “training-first” programs that never moved people into jobs.

Sider is also too sanguine about labor unions, encouraging Christians to act vigorously to strengthen unions but saying almost nothing about the harm unions can do to the poor (at home, unions sometimes shut out new workers from good employment opportunities; abroad, through their support of protectionist trade policies, unions contribute to the impoverishment of third world textile and agricultural workers).

On these issues and others addressed briefly in *Just Generosity*, such as crime and metropolitan governance, consensus may take a while. And even where many Christians may agree on an outcome – such as universal health coverage – there is likely to be much debate on the means for achieving that outcome. Thankfully, with very few exceptions,

Sider does a good job of guarding his rhetoric on these sticky issues so as not to alienate readers with contrary views by accusing them of hardheartedness towards the poor.

The most unfortunate thing about the book is that its weak start threatens to lose conservative readers right off the bat. *Just Generosity's* introductory section describing the poverty faced by an alleged 36 million Americans is meant to stimulate the reader's sympathy. But those desiring a precise, dispassionate analysis of the facts will quickly note that Sider here relies on income data exclusively when identifying the poor (instead of including facts about consumption) and fails to count the poor's non-cash income (such as housing subsidies, food stamps, and Medicaid) when detailing their conditions. These shortcomings immediately endanger Sider's credibility. He fixes these problems after page 30, but by then those predisposed to skepticism may have stopped reading.

Just Generosity does an admirable job of covering a wide territory in about 250 pages. The book would be improved, though, by a deeper engagement with two key topics: (1) the value, as well as the shortcomings, of the free market, and (2) the Church's appropriate role in serving the poor. Sider's critics often worry that he is too eager to promote government solutions. Heartening, then is his forthright statement: "When a social problem emerges, the first question should be, 'What can government do?' The first question should be, 'What institutions in society have primary responsibility for and are best able to correct this problem?'"

Since the fall of communism (and the publication of Hernando de Soto's seminar work on poverty in statist Peru, *The Other Path*), Sider has been more market-friendly in his economic views. He agrees with evangelical conservatives that "completely equal economic outcomes are not compatible with human freedom" and that "a biblical view of persons and sin leads to the conclusion that market economies offer a better framework than present alternatives."

While that sounds like more than mere lukewarm support for the market economy, much more could be said about the implicit merits of the free market. And it should get said, especially by Christians who want to lift up the poor and affirm human liberty and dignity. No other economic system has done as much to raise poor people out of poverty. Moreover, societies loudest in their proclamation of "economic rights" have rarely actually secured such "rights" as well as market societies have.

But beyond this, there is an inherent "other-regardingness" in the market economy that can be celebrated by Christians sober in their knowledge of human selfishness but active in their call for individuals to pursue the common good. As Michael Novak argues in *Free Persons and the Common Good*:

[A] market order... positively reinforces certain social virtues, for its dependence Upon them is very high... So basic are the common social virtues – courtesy, good service, quality, helpfulness, "satisfaction guaranteed" – that managers sometimes sound insufferably like preachers and moralists, reciting entire libraries of Sunday School proverbs. That is boring to hear about such habits

means that they have a daily provenance; they are as unexciting as they are of quotidian necessity.

The market economy is far from perfect, and Christians should be in the forefront of spotlighting (and attempting to correct) its shortcomings. But Sider rails against the “unacceptable levels of agony and injustice” he believes the American economy produces, without much attention to the non-economic means of addressing such problems. He is particularly outraged, for example, by the dramatic gap between salaries at the top and bottom of the economic totem pole. The stark inequality now present in some major companies is indeed unsettling, but inequality per se is not injustice (as Sider himself acknowledges) and drawing the line between acceptable inequalities and unacceptable ones is no straightforward task. Is the answer for government to intervene in the market and set a cap on CEO salaries, or would that bring about too many negatives, unintended distortions? These kinds of questions are not answered in *Just Generosity*.

More important, the book presents these thorny issues as economic problems, when in fact they are better understood as moral-cultural problems. As classical liberals in the Adam Smith/Lord Acton tradition understand, a well-functioning market economy relies in part on a strong moral-cultural sphere that embraces such virtues as temperance, delayed gratification, thrift, hard work, and “ordered liberty” (freedom to do as one ought) as against license.

I was discussing the CEO compensation question the other day with an older friend. Her remark was that when she was growing up, such salaries would have been considered “shameless.” And that’s just the point. In a different era, CEOs even if offered salaries fifty times what their workers made, would have rejected them, knowing they would have been embarrassed if the fact ever became public. A different set of values predominated in the culture, and “checked” what happened in the economy. The solution to today’s problem, then, must be sought primarily in the realm of culture, not economics.

Despite its claim to balance, *Just Generosity* focuses more on structural causes of poverty (and public policy remedies to address them) than on behavioral causes of poverty, and the non-governmental means of addressing these. Sider does applaud faith-based organizations for the contributions they are currently making in the nation’s distressed neighborhoods, and very briefly highlights several particularly successful models. And he ends the book with a very appropriate, personal call to action.

What’s missing is more elaborate discussion of what the faith communities can do, practically to fight poverty (beyond advocating policy reforms). Since six chapters are given over to what needs to happen in terms of public policy, it seems there should have been at least one that offered churches some practical advice about establishing, or strengthening, their own community ministries.

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The imbalance, though, is not severe; Sider is very sincere concerning the need for attention to the cultural/behavioral contributors to persistent poverty. The book includes, for example, a solid chapter on the relationship between poverty and family breakdown that begins with this candid assertion:

Not even the best mix of effective, essential economic policy changes... can by themselves solve the problem of poverty in America today. Unless we can heal our broken families, it is simply impossible to end poverty.

Moreover, in this book more than any other, Sider forthrightly embraces civil society's indispensable role in leading us to the common good. And he helpfully expands in the discussion of "civil society" (sometimes defined too narrowly as the faith communities and non-profits) by suggesting the contributions needed from business, the media, and the universities.

Just Generosity is a hopeful book, built on the recognition that today, in the post-welfare reform period, there is already a growing convergence between conservatives and liberals on the poverty question. By largely eschewing an alienating "my way or the highway" tone, and by offering several policy proposals rooted not in ideological extremes but in a practical, "what's working" philosophy, Ron Sider has made an important and timely contribution to that growing convergence.