

## Defining Economic Justice: A Christian Perspective

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**Abstract:** The pursuit of economic justice has been confused with the pursuit of economic equality. As income and wealth inequality continue to rise in the United States, the issue of economic justice continues to come up in the public discourse as policy decisions are made. Evangelical Christians are called to stand up for justice, care for the poor, and support public policy based on a Biblical worldview. This paper looks at the concepts of economic justice and economic inequality from the perspective of secular theorists as well as Christian economists and theologians to try to find out what economic justice means, and how it is related to the concept of economic equality. A look at what scripture has to say leads to a conclusion with a personal challenge for those who live with a Biblical worldview.

**Keywords:** economic justice, economic inequality, poverty



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### **Introduction: What is Economic Justice?**

*“The King is mighty, he loves justice,  
You have established equity, in Jacob  
you have done what is just and right”  
Psalm 99:4 (NIV)*

God is a God of justice! Christian activists use this undisputed proclamation, found throughout scripture, to declare that God is not only a God of justice, but often implied in that statement is a call for economic equality among all people. Income inequality is higher in the United States than in any other capitalist democracy, and has been growing for decades. Our country is in a long expansion phase of

the business cycle, enjoying positive GDP growth, but how that economic growth is distributed among the population is an issue that needs to be considered. The rich are getting richer, but the poor are falling further behind. Thomas Piketty's (2014) publication of *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* has recently brought the discussion of income and wealth inequality back into the public discourse.

The research question addressed in this paper is whether or not the concept of economic justice implies economic equality from a Biblical perspective. A review of the literature on economic justice and economic equality will be analyzed from both a secular as well as Christian perspective to unravel the nuances of these two economic concepts. The paper will conclude with a look directly at what scripture has to say about economic justice and economic equality.

The term "economic justice" in the evangelical Christian arena continues to have diverse meanings today, even though Christians have debated the concepts of economic justice and economic equality through the ages. This paper summarizes the search for the meaning of economic justice in the evangelical Christian community, and concludes that "economic justice" and "economic equality" are not synonymous. There can be justice without economic equality as shown in many of the theories presented here. Also, economic equality is much more complicated than a mere leveling of income or wealth.

Thirty years ago, Ronald H. Nash, professor of Philosophy and Religion at Western Kentucky University, wrote that "Christians have an obligation to seek justice both on a personal level, and on

the level of the structure of society...God's people are to rectify instances of economic injustice." He then goes on to explain that some Christians "twist this Biblical call for justice in an attempt to use it as a justification for political and economic views that have no basis in scripture" (Nash, 1986: 167). The concept of economic equality is one such issue that has become entangled with the notions of social, economic and distributive justice. This discussion will attempt to unravel and define these terms as the concepts are explored at the theoretical level and from a biblical perspective.

### **God's Call for Justice**

James Skillen, the executive director of The Center for Public Justice, has written extensively on the biblical theme of justice during his tenure in the Christian academic community. He sees justice primarily as a political function to be administered by men under the authority of God. Justice is a necessary part of the redemptive process of creation. In his work, Skillen lays out an overarching view of justice on the macro level as a necessary part of God's plan to redeem His people (Skillen, 2000).

Charles Colson, Christian lawyer and author, has addressed how the Christian community has become divided over what the priorities of justice are from a liberal versus a conservative perspective, and then claims that neither is the correct Biblical view (Colson, 2005). Christian liberals are concerned with social justice which they define as concern for the poor, implying a more equitable distribution of resources, but not explicitly calling for economic equality. Christian conservatives such as Colson focus on righting the wrongs of society

by making the purveyors of injustice “pay” for the harm they caused -- what Colson calls “retributive justice.” The biblical view removes this ideological divide by calling for a restoration of “shalom”, or the reconciliation of creation as intended before the fall. Colson claims that the idea of economic justice, meaning the care for the least advantaged, is only part of God’s total picture of justice in restoring His kingdom on earth. In other words, God’s picture of justice is much more inclusive than an equalization of economic resources, but brings both conservative and liberal definitions of justice together on a spiritual level (Colson, 2005).

### **A Christian Perspective on the Market System**

Albert Pennybacker, director of the *Clergy and Laity Network United for Justice*, claims that Adam Smith, original author of market capitalism, included many moral implications in *Wealth of Nations* (1776) that have been lost in the textbook renderings of Smith’s ideas. Pennybacker claims that Smith recommends policies that make the growing economic opportunity and wealth more accessible to everyone, even the poor. (Colson, 2005). Smith claimed that even the most basic of his ideas, the division of labor, actually helped the least advantaged. This is not surprising when one looks at the intellectual foundation of Smith in theology and philosophy in his first work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published nearly twenty years before *Wealth of Nations*.

Rebecca Blank, former member of the Council of Economic Advisors under the first President Bush as well as Clinton, claims that Christian

theologians have strongly criticized the capitalist market system while taking the market system out of pure economic theory where it belongs. An MIT trained economist, Blank addresses the issue of the inequity of markets from a perspective grounded in scripture. The problem with the market, according to Blank, is that it depends on one behaving according to one’s self-interest for it to work properly (Blank & McGurn, 2003).

In our increasingly complex world global economy, Blank claims that we need to be “other-centered” rather than “self-centered.” One important aspect of being “other-centered” is to care for those who have a greater need than we do, according to Blank’s interpretation of the scriptures on poverty. The capitalist market system is not evil itself, but it ignores the poor in that they do not have the means (capital) to participate in such a system (Blank & McGurn, 2003).

In Blank’s analysis, she does not call for economic equality, but proper attitude toward others. The only injustice in the system comes from our sinful nature or our lack of “other-centeredness” in dealing with the needs of the least advantaged who cannot adequately participate in the economic system of society (Blank & McGurn, 2003).

### **Our Economy’s Central Organizing Principle**

Jacob Neusner claims that the problem with our present economic system, and the economic injustice within that system, is a result of using the market as the central organizing principle of our society. In the Old Testament, the temple and the priesthood were the central organizing principles of society which led to an outcome of the

distribution of material resources that contrasts sharply with our modern consumer culture. He brings to light the conflicts between the role of the economic system in biblical times when the economic system was embedded in the traditional culture, whereas in modern times, the economy system is disembedded from the traditions of society, taking on a life and power of its own. The poor are no longer protected by the traditions of the social structure, but are very vulnerable in the modern marketplace (Neusner, 1990).

Peter Hill and John Lunn claim that injustice in the economic system is a result of the lack of biblical ethics applicable to the impersonal, macroeconomic system. They claim that all of the instructions on economic issues in the Bible are personal, and cannot be applied to our modern impersonal market economies. These current Christian economists based their thinking on that of F.A. Hayek who also addressed the issue of different ethical systems, claiming that personal economic ethics do not work on a macro level, and vice versa (Hayek, 1988). Hill and Lunn claim that theologians and biblical ethicists constantly confuse the application of economic principles between the personal and the impersonal sphere (Hill & Lunn, 2004).

Douglas Meeks, author of *God the Economist*, claims that injustice and inequality in the economic system stem from the market in that those with capital, including human capital, are able to dominate such a system. Along the lines of Hill and Lunn, as well as Hayek, Meeks claims that the economic principles in the Bible were written for the level of “household.” The term “oikos” in the Greek (from which we derive the term “economics”) is the

platform for biblical instruction on the subject. The problem is that the modern capitalist system is no longer defined as a household, therefore the economic reasoning in scripture becomes inadequate when applied at the societal level (Meeks, 1989).

Allen Verhey uses the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate this conflict between the personal and the impersonal, the micro and the macro levels of biblical ethics. He explains how through the story, Jesus moves us to behave unselfishly and generously, but that the economic principle of scarcity limits our ability to be a “good Samaritan” on the macro level. In his work *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life*, Verhey argues that “Scripture is, frankly, silent on the questions of ‘political economy’ and economic policy” (Verhey, 2002: 318).

Does this mean that in today’s economic system there are no biblical grounds for the Christian’s call to justice in terms of economic equality? How can we reconcile what scripture has to say about markets in light of the economic society in which we live?

Before going further in the Christian approach to economic equality and distributive justice, it is both valuable and enlightening to take the time to explore the historical as well as the leading secular approaches to inequality and social justice. This will provide a theoretical framework to challenge our presuppositions on economic equality, and provide a foundation on which to build and compare the Christian perspective. The next section reviews the current debates in the secular literature on inequality, and specifically economic inequality, beginning with a general perspective and then followed by a

focused look at three of the leading theorists in the egalitarian school of thought: Amartya Sen, Robert Nozick, and John Rawls.

### **Current Debate on Economic Equality**

Governments depend on capital accumulation as the source of jobs, income, and growth, therefore must ensure that the policies they pursue do not undermine the ambitions of the private sector. The current debate is about the balance between private and public ownership of the means of production rather than the relationships between the rich and the poor (Gilpin, 1996). The questions concern not only the distribution of income and wealth, but also the distribution of life's chances or opportunities.

Equalizing economic resources does not deal with the "natural" inequalities derived from differences in natural abilities, God-given gifts and talents, social standing, or other arbitrary criteria. Equalizing economic resources also ignores the "values" that different people assign to different resources. For example, one person may value leisure time with his family while his neighbor may value overtime pay to accumulate material possessions. In a perfectly equal division of economic resources, each person would end up with many resources he didn't appreciate and too little of what was truly valuable to him. As David Miller phrased this ridiculous question "A third of a cow, but no share of a beautiful landscape—is this really what equality implies?" (Miller, 1990: 86).

The goal of equalizing economic resources is to ensure the welfare of the people, but a strict division of economic goods is a poor and ineffective way to do

this. Amartya Sen points out that it is not the economic resources themselves that achieve the goal of social equality, but what they "do" for each person (Sen, 1999). Some people may need more of one type of resource than another to achieve an "equal" level of well-being.

An undeniable case would be that of children with disabilities needing extra resources to attain an "equal" level of education as their classmates (Sen, 1982). It may be possible and justifiable to modify a strict division of economic resources to accommodate such needs so that these children may develop their educational potentials, but then the argument can be taken a step further to address whether or not gifted children should receive more resources to develop their educational potential, or should they receive significant less resources so that they end up at an "equal" level of educational attainment? What is a fair distribution of educational resources? This example shows the inadequacies of using a strict division of economic and social resources as a method of attaining equality.

The next step in the theoretical argument is to shift the focus from "equality of resources" to "equality of welfare." Here resources become a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. The ultimate goal is to equalize welfare, or a sense of well-being. This brings up the second recurring argument in the theoretical literature, that the concept of equalizing welfare is too nebulous because what makes people "contented" varies for each individual. There is no one coherent definition of "well-being." Therefore, trying to equalize well-being ends up making a mockery of equality. For example, should those who feel they "need" bigger houses, faster cars, and

more clothing to attain a sense of well-being be given a larger share of the economic resources? What about Sen's person with a disability whose "heart leaps whenever he sees a rainbow in the sky" (Sen, 1982; 367)? Should the "jolly cripple" who delights in simple pleasures receive so much less?

### **Are All Humans Created Equal?**

John Stapleford, author of *Bulls, Bears, & Golden Calves*, addresses the issue that God has created people with different natural abilities, or different "gifts" as described in scripture. Our equality comes in the notion that all people are created in the image of God, but not that "all men are created equal" or exactly the same. In Romans 12 and in I Corinthians 12, scripture describes the different gifts and abilities given to different people. However, these different gifts may yield extremely different outcomes such as differences in levels of wealth and income, and even differences in social standing and power. Today's market economy attributes unequal market value for those gifts and abilities, leading to very unequal outcomes when measured in economic terms.

It is the responsibility of the individual to develop these gifts and abilities in order to participate fully in the economic system. Donald Hay, a Christian economist from Oxford who has written extensively on the capitalist market system, claims that the development of our God-given gifts, talents, and other personal characteristics is actually a form of stewardship. God provides individuals with gifts and abilities in order for us to provide for our families. When we exercise good stewardship over our gifts as well as our

resources through the process of work, the productive outcome becomes the goods and services needed by the community for its well-being (Hay, 1989). Everyone has an equal opportunity to share in God's provision through work, yet "If a man will not work, he will not eat" (II Thessalonians 3:10). Because man was created with free will, it is his choice to participate in the market system and thus work as a means of stewardship of the gifts, abilities, and resources bestowed upon him (Hay 1989).

### **Equality of Opportunity**

A theory of equality and social justice that leaves room for individual responsibility may justify certain inequalities, but cannot work for those who have no real choices or opportunities. The arguments for equality, based on an initial equality of resources, plus equal opportunity of choice, fail to satisfy the requirements of equality (Phillips, 1999). The discussion of equality "gets stuck" trying to distinguish between "legitimate" inequalities that are a result of individual choice and "illegitimate" inequalities that result from unfair advantages or natural endowment. From a Christian perspective, these "legitimate" inequalities are a result of the sinful choices of man, while the "illegitimate" inequalities are a result of living in a fallen world. This is where the arguments for equality are challenged by what it is about inequality that is truly disturbing. Is it the injustice of true suffering by our fellow human beings, or is the argument too focused on comparison between individuals? Injustice is a moral statement about differences.

Ron Sider is perhaps the leading contemporary voice in the Christian arena calling for “equality of opportunity” in the pursuit for economic justice. “God demands that all people have the opportunity to earn a reasonable living” (Sider, 1997:63). He uses the agrarian society of the Old Testament to show how God set up a system to provide a distribution of land, the economic capital of that era, that gave each extended family an equal opportunity to provide not just a subsistence level of resources, but the amount that would be socially acceptable as a respected member of the community. The important premise of this system of distribution is that Yahweh is the true owner of the land/capital and that He makes demands on those to whom it is allocated under an agreement of stewardship. Both Joshua 18 and Numbers 26 contain accounts of the division of land. Numbers 26:52-56 discusses how the land was allocated according to the size of the tribe, implying that the per capita distribution was taken into account to ensure relative equality. Sider claims that the Bible implies an approximation of equality of land ownership and that this “decentralized land ownership by extended families was the economic base for a relatively egalitarian society” (Sider, 1997; 68).

Sider goes on to discuss how the concept of the Jubilee in Leviticus 25 confirms the notion of a basic equality of opportunity. Families could not accumulate wealth over time as the land was supposed to be returned to the original “owner” or steward every fifty years. Another equalizing outcome of the Jubilee was to prevent the poor from totally losing access to the resources necessary to provide for a respectable

livelihood. Once again, the presupposition is that it is Yahweh who truly owns the land. The Jubilee was a law, given by God, not an option, nor a “charitable courtesy” (Sider’s phrase) of the rich!

According to Sider, equality of opportunity has a higher value than property rights, a notion confirmed by the law of the Jubilee. This Old Testament model of equal distribution of the economic capital of the time challenges both communism and capitalism. In communism, there is state ownership of the means of production, including all land and resources. In capitalism, private property is the mechanism to create wealth, yet the Old Testament model reminds us that we are but stewards for a time, with a fifty year limit on wealth accumulation.

The Sabbath year is another Old Testament structure put in place by God to reduce both wealth accumulation and poverty, and thereby maintaining equality of opportunity. According to Deuteronomy 15, debts were cancelled in the seventh year, and slaves set free. The “slaves” discussed here were those who had sold themselves to another to raise capital to pay debts and meet subsistence needs. In the seventh year, their obligation of service was over—they were set free to work for their own families’ livelihoods once again. When one set a slave free, he was to do it with generosity, providing livestock and resources so that the freed slave had the means to start life anew.

Another aspect of the Sabbath year is found in Leviticus 25 and Exodus 23 where the law explains that the land was to lay fallow every seventh year. During that Sabbath year, the poor were allowed to glean whatever was left in the fields or whatever grew without intended

cultivation. Families needed to plan for a year without a harvest, perhaps with savings or sharing, both positive economic values (Sider, 1997, Stapleford, 2002).

Along the lines of the Old Testament model discussed by Sider, Harry Frankfurt, in his article "Equality as a Moral Ideal" proposes reformulating the equality argument to focus on what human beings need for a decent quality of life, then to give those with less the priority in the distribution of social resources. His proposal thus becomes an argument for sufficiency rather than equality. What matters "is not that everyone should have the same but that each should have enough" (Frankfurt, 1987; 21). This notion brings the argument back to one of poverty and deprivation rather than one of inequality. Poverty and deprivation are central to the argument for economic justice in the Christian perspective.

### **Egalitarian Voices**

The following section will discuss three contending voices in the challenge to use economic equality as a measure of economic justice. When John Rawls published his famous *Theory of Justice* in 1971, the academic world hailed him as the greatest political philosopher of his time. Robert Nozick, political philosopher at Harvard, attacked Rawls in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Along with Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, Nozick's book became a modern classic of political thought. The other leading voice in the egalitarian school, Amartya Sen, was the 1998 Nobel Prize winner in the field of economics for his sensitivity to the notion of economic justice in the field of international development. Sen admits that he has great respect for

Rawls, but that Rawls' *Theory of Justice* was not sufficient for a complete analysis of the economic justice issue in the context of inequality. The following section provides an in-depth look at the ideas of Nozick, Rawls, and Sen.

### **The Restless Voice of Nozick**

Nozick was a self-proclaimed socialist while growing up in Brooklyn. Brilliant, yet restless, he had a distrust of authority, but concluded that the political left's case against capitalism did not work. He claimed that Marxist exploitation was merely the exploitation of people's ignorance of economics (Nozick, 1974).

Nozick believed in the equality of basic liberties. His theoretical perspective restored confidence among conservatives, including conservative Christians, and established a voice in favor of the free-market. However, he criticized conservatives for not taking individual rights seriously enough. Although he was labeled a libertarian, he shunned the label. Nozick published *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* just three years after Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in response to Rawls' redistribution schemes.

The overall theme of Nozick's work was that a "just" distribution of property need not be fair or equal. Nozick challenged Rawls' notion that the state should take any role to decrease material inequalities in the name of social and economic justice. He claimed that to stabilize any imposed pattern of material property holdings requires constant interference by the state in people's lives. This action by the state would therefore impose on individual rights. The only just patterns of material property redistribution are derived from voluntary

gifts or trade from an earlier just pattern (Nozick, 1974). The problem created by Nozick is that of what makes the original pattern of acquisition just. The Old Testament model of land distribution described by Sider in the preceding section provides an answer to the critics, while meeting Nozick's criteria for an original just pattern.

Nozick created a theoretical Utopian structure of society formed by like-minded individuals. His primary focus was on equality of liberties, and he asserted that any interference in the distribution of material economic resources would interfere in the notion of individual liberty. Christians evangelicals on the political left never adopted the ideas of Nozick because of his aversion to the redistribution of economic resources, however he was the leading conservative political philosopher and a favorite among Christians on the far right until his death in January 2002.

### **Sen's Capability Approach**

Another leading voice from the egalitarian school is that of the Nobel economist, Amartya Sen. He received the Nobel Prize in Economics for his thoughtful work in 1998 although he had been hard at work on the question of inequality for the previous three decades. An in-depth examination of Sen's theory of inequality shows how he came up with the "capability approach" as the foundation of his work on social justice in economic development.

There is a broad assumption among economists that the study of inequality implies the investigation of measurable variables such as income or wealth, yet Sen is a classically trained economist who has challenged this notion. Sen has

posited that the central question in the study of inequality must be to determine the "equality of what?" (Sen 1980, 1992, 1997). Income egalitarians want equality of income while welfare egalitarians want equality of welfare. Neoclassical utilitarians want equal weights on the utility of all. Libertarians seek equality with respect to a broad class of rights and liberties. Sen argues that the common feature of "being egalitarian" relates to the need to have equal concern at some level for all persons involved (Sen, 1980, 1992, 1997).

According to Sen, the concept of inequality is confronted by two different types of diversities: 1) the basic heterogeneity of human beings, and 2) the multiplicity of variables in terms of how inequality can be judged or measured. Sen is concerned with both types of diversities, but even more importantly, with the relationship between the two different types of diversities. The heterogeneity of people points to divergences in the assessment of inequality in terms of the variables chosen in the central question of the "equality of what?" (Sen, 1980, 1992, 1997).

Sen argues that pervasive human diversity is substantive to the central question of "equality of what?" Human beings are diverse in what Sen defines as internal characteristics such as gender, age, talents, abilities, or health. There is also considerable diversity in external circumstances and characteristics such as assets or social background. Because of this tremendous diversity, there must be the trade-off of egalitarianism in one variable that requires the rejection of egalitarianism in another. There is a tendency in the analysis of inequality to "assume away" interpersonal diversity to simplify the analysis. This notion of

human diversity cannot be treated as a secondary complication to the equality issue to be addressed “later on” or even ignored (Sen, 1980, 1992, 1997).

The powerful rhetoric that “all men are created equal” deflects attention from the basic differences among human beings. This is another common tendency in the analysis of inequality. Sen claims that by ignoring interpersonal differences, the statement is actually deeply inegalitarian. For example, equal consideration of individuals may require unequal treatment in favor of one who is disadvantaged either in his external circumstances or in his personal characteristics. Sen uses the example of a handicapped child who needs considerably more educational resources than children who are not handicapped. Therefore, to achieve equality in education level, there must be inequality in the distribution of educational resources (Sen, 1992). One cannot make the claim that all human beings are created equal when the accidents of birth bring misery to some, yet privilege on others (Osmani, 2001).

Equality in terms of one variable may not correlate with equality in another variable. For example, equality of opportunity may lead to very different income levels depending on one’s internal characteristics such as intelligence or one’s external circumstances such as what he chooses to do with the opportunity given the constraints of his personal situation. Equality of income may lead to significant differences in wealth depending on the savings or consumption patterns among diverse human beings. Equality of wealth may produce very different levels of utility or “happiness” among diverse human beings, and so on.

Sen’s level of analysis goes much deeper than any of the Christian theorists calling for economic equality. The concept of Sen’s human heterogeneities supports the biblical notion of Romans 12:2 which describes each human being as a unique member of the body of Christ with each member of the body having a different function.

In Sen’s 1973 work, *On Economic Inequality*, he is concerned with not only the identification of different “spaces” in which to identify equality, but also with the way that the space is utilized. In his 1992 work, *Inequality Reexamined*, his focus is on the choice of space and its implications. In the standard theories of inequality measurement, the problems of choosing the appropriate variables have received primary attention.

The concept of freedom has been implicitly included in Sen’s theory of inequality. He ties freedom to the space of capability when he claims that the quality of one’s life can be evaluated according to not only the capabilities that one has, but the substantive freedoms that person enjoys in choosing capabilities to lead the kind of life that person has reason to value (Sen, 1997). In *Development as Freedom*, Sen clarifies the distinction between capabilities or achievements, and the *freedom* to accomplish those achievements. His work on inequality has evolved to focus on the “freedom to achieve” rather just on the “level of achievement.” Yet he notes that inequality in achievement can throw light on inequality in respect to the freedoms enjoyed which leads to using observable data on achievements to get a significant, if only partial, view of the freedoms enjoyed by a variety of persons (Sen, 1992, 1997). The capability approach to the assessment of living

standards includes not only the evaluation of well-being, but the freedom to pursue well-being.

In this way it differs from other approaches to inequality assessment that determine well-being by using only one object of value such as income, wealth, resources, or liberties. This solves the problems of the critics who demand that the one object of value used in the analysis of equality be central to the concept of what that society has determined to be good and just (Osmani, 2001). The object of value must be of fundamental value to that society, otherwise the argument for equality of that object of value would have no moral or ethical foundation. There is no single answer to the question of “equality of what?” because of the different conceptions of what constitutes a good and just society presented in as many different theories of inequality. Sen argues that his capability approach leaves room for a variety of conceptions, and is therefore a superior ethical argument to justify equality (Osmani, 2001).

Sen admits that he has built his capability approach to development, poverty, and inequality on the work of John Rawls, but has taken his theory a step further. Rawls built his theory on the notion of “primary goods” which include resources such as income, wealth, opportunities, and other such goods that make up the social basis of self-respect. This is part of Rawls’ “Difference Principle”, and integral component to his theory of justice that will be fully developed in the following section on Rawls. Sen argues, with great respect for Rawls, that Rawls’ focus on primary goods neglects some considerations important to the substantive assessment of inequality and

efficiency. Once again, Sen posits that because of the diversity of human beings, the focus on Rawls’ primary goods as the space in which to judge inequality is inadequate. Two persons holding the same bundle of primary goods can have “very different freedoms to pursue their respective conceptions of the good (regardless of whether these conceptions coincide)” (Sen, 1992: 6). The use of primary goods as the evaluative space amounts to giving priority to the *means* of freedom rather than the *extent* of freedom.

Sen argues that using Nozick’s use of libertarian rights as the space of analysis in judging equality creates a different type of conflict than the theories of other egalitarians in answering the question, “equality of what?” It is true that equality in liberty may lead to inequality in wealth or happiness, but that “equality” and “liberty” are not trade-offs. Sen claims that this creates a “category error.” Liberty is merely one “space” or field of application in the assessment of equality. On the other hand, equality is just one possible pattern of the distribution of liberties (Sen, 1992).

One may argue that the plurality of spaces makes the argument of the egalitarians less powerful. Many of the debates on inequality comes from the plurality of spaces which come out of a plurality of the ethical theories, including the Christian faith, about what defines a good and just society. Sen claims that it is because “equality speaks with so many voices” (Sen, 1992), the space must be clearly defined so that it doesn’t become an empty concept. Once the space is defined, and the context fixed, the equality argument becomes a more powerful argument. Sen posits that Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* became a very

powerful foundation of social justice theory because of his interesting choice of primary goods as the evaluative space. The distribution of income is included in Rawls' definition of primary goods.

### **John Rawls: A Theory of Justice**

Since the publication of John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* in 1971, he has been regarded as the leading political philosopher in the Western world. John Rawls is hardly known beyond the walls of academia, yet his ideas have had a profound influence on the concept of economic justice over the past forty years. Until his death in 2002, John Rawls lived a quiet academic life in New England. Though he never publicly claimed to be a Christian in the academic arena, he was a devout Episcopalian in his private life. His concern for the "least advantaged" in his theory of justice closely parallels Jesus' concern for the "least of these" in Matthew 25, therefore many Christians have embraced the work of John Rawls.

In the first paragraph of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls insists that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well-arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust...Justice denies that the loss of freedom for some can even be made right by a greater good shared by others" (Rawls, 1971:1).

Rawls suggests that to understand his theory, we enter into a thought experiment. He asks us to imagine ourselves in what he calls the "original position." People in this "original

position" are denied knowledge of everything which makes them who they are including their social class, knowledge and skills, age, gender, religious views, and conception of "the good life." This situates people behind what Rawls calls a "veil of ignorance." It is only from behind this veil of ignorance that people would choose to regulate their relationships with one another in a truly just manner. From behind this veil of ignorance, one's views on justice are not distorted by one's own interests.

### **Two Principles of Justice**

Rawls claims that this committee of rational people behind the veil of ignorance would choose to be governed by two principles of justice. The first principle concerns liberty in that each person is to have an equal right to the extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all (Piccard, 2000, Rawls, 1971). The second principle concerns the distribution of wealth and power.

The first principle of justice on which men and women in the original position would agree is the importance of guaranteeing their freedom to live their lives as they choose. Rawls' first principle states that each individual should have a right to the most extensive basic liberties such as the right to vote, freedom of thought, and so on. The basic liberties of the individual are compatible with a like liberty for all in society. Rawls argues that the state should remain neutral between different concepts of what is a "good life", and simply protect the freedoms that allow us to live according to our own choices of what makes life worthwhile. (This

principle is not original in that it does little more than offer a general guarantee of the freedoms protected by the US Constitution's First Amendment).

Rawls second principle of justice, his famous "difference principle", is much more original. The difference principle concerns the distribution of wealth and power in society. It states that social and economic inequalities are acceptable only in so far as they benefit the least advantaged. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, a statement that addresses the distribution of wealth. However, Rawls adds to this notion by stating that the social and economic inequalities will be arranged so that they are attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity, this phrase thus addressing the equitable distribution of power (Rawls, 1971:73). He goes on to develop the notion of equal opportunity by clarifying that the formal rules related to hiring use only criteria related to competence in the job. He then claims that even more importantly, excessive accumulation of wealth and unequal access to educational opportunities that would give some an unfair advantage should also be precluded (Rawls, 1971:73).

The best way to understand this second principle of justice, the difference principle, is to contrast it with the traditional notion of "equality of opportunity." The proponents of equality of opportunity posit that people who have the same abilities, along with a similar willingness to use them, should enjoy the same prospects of success in a market society. In contrast, Rawls argues that it is clearly wrong that our chances for success be determined by our

educational opportunities or our social class. It is equally unjust that our success be determined by our talents or abilities. These characteristics of our personal lives, just as much as the social class of our parents, are the outcome of what Rawls calls the "natural lottery", a circumstance over which we have no control (Rawls, 1971).

Rawls' critique of the "natural lottery" is also echoed in other critiques of meritocracy, such as that of Michael Young (Young, 1958). It is not "just" or "fair" that just because someone is uniquely intelligent, strong, or talented, he or she should have a higher standard of living than someone with a different level of natural endowments resulting in less marketable skills. Rawls uses the natural lottery argument to throw out the notion of "desert" as it applies to material rewards or the rewards of influence and power in a market society. Rawls claims that a better way of dealing with an "unfair" distribution of abilities is to allow inequalities that benefit the worst off. He argues that inequalities based on his difference principle would not be regarded by the less well-off as unmerited or degrading (Rawls, 1971). In this sense, the distribution of primary goods would need to offset an unequal genetic or natural endowment. Rawls call this the Principle of Redress. "Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out" (Rawls, 1971: 101).

In summary, these three prominent theorists in the egalitarian school of thought, Rawls, Sen, and Nozick, have challenged the call for pure economic equality measured in terms of wealth and income. In the following final section,

we look specifically at what several key Christian voices have to say about economic equality and economic justice.

### **A Christian Perspective of Economic Equality**

The Oxford Conference on Faith and Economics declared that “Justice is basic to a Christian perspective on economic life” (Hawtrey, 1990; 1). There is no doubt in the minds of evangelical Christians that economic justice is to be pursued, but the clarification of what the term “economic justice” means is the focus of this paper. Does it include a notion of economic equality? Is distributive justice defined as the equal distribution of wealth and income always a part of Christian social justice?

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the greatest Christian thinkers of the last century to address the issue of equality, defined a two-pronged approach to justice which was made up of a balance between freedom and equality. By freedom, he meant individual freedom along the thinking of Robert Nozick, discussed in the previous section. His “equality” does not imply a redistribution of economic resources in the sense of distributive justice, but instead, he has fine-tuned his description of equality to call for the political empowerment of the poor rather than a strict equalization of material resources. In Niebuhr’s theoretical framework, the concept of justice lies beneath the superior law of love in seeking a higher moral ground, and thus incorporates a spiritual element in the call for social justice. He provides a framework for social justice and economic equality based on a particular notion of political empowerment (Niebuhr, 1974).

Jayakumar Christian, expert on poverty and development and author of *God of the Empty-Handed*, agrees with Niebuhr that the equality issue is not one of material well-being, but an issue of empowerment or increasing the “voice” of the least advantaged. Christian believes that defining poverty as merely a lack of material resources leads to a disregard for other aspects of poverty. He develops his theory of inequality and injustice to explain that this inequality of empowerment leads to the least advantaged living with a marred identity of whom they were created to be in Christ. Through spiritual transformation, the poor will recover their identities in Christ, and justice will then prevail as that society is reconciled to its creator (Christian, 1999).

### **A Deeper Look at Scripture**

Ronald Nash explains that in the Old Testament, justice did not refer to economic equality or distributive justice, but was a synonym for righteousness. For example, when Moses said that Noah was a “just” man, he meant that Noah was a “righteous” man (Nash, 1986). In Isaiah 28:17, God uses two terms interchangeably: “I will make *misphat* the measure and *sedaqah* the plumb line.” Here the term *misphat* means “justice, right”, while *sedaqah* means “righteousness, justice” (Lebacqz, 1986).

In the New Testament, we see that the First Century church did not insist on absolute economic equality, nor did they abolish the concept of private property. It is true that the first Jerusalem church lived in community, sold what they owned and shared with each other, but this sharing was voluntary, not compulsory (Sider, 1997).

Often, the specific scripture used to support the call for economic equality is II Corinthians 8:13,14: "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be *equality*. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality" (NIV). Paul is talking to the Corinthians about the generosity of the Macedonians, and that perhaps now that the church in Macedonia is in need, it would be good for the Corinthian church to let their "heart regulate their hands" in following the example of generous giving of the Macedonians (Peterson, 2003). The *Message* translation of the same text states: "This isn't so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you're shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even. As it is written, 'Nothing left over to the one with the most, Nothing lacking to the one with the least.'" This is more of a call for caring for your neighbor rather than a call for an equal distribution of resources, as in the spirit of Ephesians 4:28: "...work, doing something useful with his hands, that he may have something to share with those in need (NIV)."

Luke 6:30 calls for a constant willingness to share: "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back" (NIV). In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about being responsible for those you are able to help as he gives his famous lesson on caring for the "least of these." Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, admonishes him to "Command those who are rich in this present world...to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous

and willing to share`." (I Timothy: 6:17-19 NIV). These verses are all echoes of the Old Testament command in Deuteronomy 15:11: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded to your brothers and to the poor and needy in your land" (NIV). The Oxford Conference on Faith and Economics stated that "justice requires special attention to the weak members of a community because of their greater vulnerability" (*Transformation*, 1990; 5).

Michael Novak, Roman Catholic philosopher and social critic, has written extensively on capitalism, poverty, and political economy. In his work, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, Novak discusses how most of the poor in this world are in such a state of poverty because of politics. The sinful political actions of man prevent so many from using their God-given right to economic initiative. Novak claims that he has tried to work out his "theology of economics" with the poor at the forefront of his attention (Novak, 1982).

Donald Hay suggests that the reason the command to share with the poor is so often repeated by Jesus is that perhaps it is the most difficult command for us to truly obey in the fullest sense (Hay, 1989). What is it that keeps rich Christians from distributing their abundance to those in need? Why do Christians with so much continue to acquire so many material treasures on earth rather than in heaven? This brings the issue of distributive justice back to being a spiritual problem rather than an economic one, and is surely not an issue that can be solved through a redistributive tax policy!

Ron Sider notes that even though God is not partial, He is also not neutral,

and that He has a special concern for the vulnerable and the poor (Sider, 1997). In James 2:1-4, we are admonished by the author not to discriminate between the rich and the poor in treating the poor differently from the rich.

Ronald Nash posits that the economic injustice of the Bible does not mean inequality, but instead means dishonesty, fraud, theft, bribery, or the exploitation of the weak and the poor (Nash, 1986). God's people are to rectify instances of economic injustice as shown in the following verses. In the twenty-second chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet warns the people of God not to exploit the labor of those who work for them, and to defend the cause of the poor and needy. Leviticus 19:13, Malachi 3:5, and James 5:4 also command the people of God not to defraud or exploit another. These verses are all exhortations by God to abstain dishonesty and exploitation, symptoms of injustice that stem from sinful action. Missing from these Biblical calls for justice are calls for economic equality; nowhere is the equal distribution of income or wealth called for in scripture. The economic injustice referred to in the Bible stems from sin, not from the unequal outcomes of a market system distributing the material resources of a society.

God loves those on both ends of the income distribution: "Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2 NIV) and "The Lord sends poverty and wealth: He humbles and He exalts" (I Samuel 2:7 NIV). In no way does scripture condemn wealth. Abraham, David, and Solomon were all wealthy men of the Old Testament, and close to the heart of God. God restored Job's wealth in return for Job's faithfulness – God did not assign a more "equal" level

of living for Job, but restored him as one of the wealthiest men of his time. Christians have a responsibility to actively create wealth so that it can be used in a manner consistent with Christian principles, such as sharing with the less fortunate. However, God cautions his people to beware of the enticements of wealth that quickly become sinful, such as materialism, idolatry, and selfishness (Hay, 1989). Wealth in itself is not sinful, an idea expressed in the following verse: "Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work – this is a gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 5:19 NIV).

### **Conclusion**

From scripture and the writings of prominent Christian thinkers, it is evident that economic inequality does not necessarily imply a lack of economic justice, and that wide discrepancies in income and wealth are not always sinful. The Christian views of income, wealth, and prosperity should go beyond ethical earning and wise spending and should include a call for right relationships among people, a result of the concept of shalom. Economic prosperity is only one facet of a greater notion of biblical prosperity based on shalom, justice, and righteousness. Economic prosperity only has value when shared generously in a just manner (Berger, 1995).

Upon taking a hard look at the multifaceted approach to economic equality and economic justice presented by the diverse theorists from various disciplines, one can see that there is no perfect theory of economic justice to establish economic harmony among society as a whole, or even among

evangelical Christians. Simply calling for economic equality in terms of income or wealth does not solve the issues of economic and social injustice.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 26:11 that the poor will always be with us. Poverty is a symptom of man's fallen nature. Capitalism is not an inherently evil economic system, but an amoral system in which man makes economic decisions in his fallen state. The goal of economic policy-making then should be to provide all people within that socioeconomic system the opportunity to acquire the capital so that ideally they can provide for themselves (Sider, 1997). Rather than continuing to pursue economic equality through either policy or protest, Christians are called to minister to the poor, and share out of their abundant social and economic resources as God works in their hearts and lives to transform them to be more like His son, and restore a bit of shalom on earth.

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