

Unemployment and Welfare

"Whilst we must be willing to provide a safety net for the poor, we are under no moral obligation to provide benefits for those who refuse to work."

by Derek Thompson, November 2013

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Introduction

The provision of income support to the unemployed forms a significant portion of the Federal Government's budget, so it is understandable that the government will want to encourage welfare recipients to find full-time work.¹ The above quotation appears to support restrictions on the distribution of unemployment benefits to only those who have demonstrated a willingness to work, demonstrated by such things as showing proof of submitting numerous job applications for any work that the person is qualified for, being willing to be retrained if necessary, and doing unpaid work experience. We will examine from a Christian perspective the ethics of imposing these conditions in the light of the failures of the welfare system to treat its customers with dignity or effectively deal with the problem of long-term unemployment.

Relevant Scriptures

Scripture does not deal directly with the problem of unemployment but it does have something to say about how we should react to the resulting poverty. Idleness and laziness are criticised in Proverbs (6:6-11; 10:4-5, 26; 12:24, 27; 13:4; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15, 24; 20:4; 21:25; 24:30-34; 26:13-16) and by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thes 3:6-15.

Leviticus 25:35 requires Israelites to provide for the needs of the poor amongst them. Deuteronomy 15:11 notes that having poor people in the community will always be the case and for that very reason they should receive help. Proverbs 14:31 says to honour the poor by showing kindness to them so that their Maker will also be honoured. These passages emphasise the duty of giving. Joseph Fletcher, a consequentialist, said that "Christian love is benevolence" and this is "not for our own sakes nor for theirs, but for God's" (Fletcher, 1966, p. 105).

Jesus tells his followers in Luke 12:33 to sell their possessions and give to the poor in order to gain the Kingdom of God. This puts the emphasis on the character of the giver rather than obedience to God's commands or meeting the needs of the poor. Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 13:3 that Christians need to have a right attitude about selling possessions to give to the poor if the giver is going to gain anything. In any case, a condescending dole does not satisfy a Christian view of giving (Walhout, 1957, p. 169). Although Scripture says it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35) this does not mean that it is not blessed to receive (Walhout, 1957, p. 165).

Moral Obligation

The Christian deontologist appeals to Scripture as a moral rulebook and uses the language of obligation to persuade the powerful to accept responsibility for the vulnerable and for the unemployed to find work. If we view membership of a society as a social covenant, there is an obligation of care upon those in power (Forrester, 2012, p. 217). The givers need to be mindful that they only have the resources to give because they have received them ultimately from God

¹ This essay focuses on the situation in Australia, although similar situations occur in other countries.

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(Walhout, 1957, p. 171).² Similarly, the welfare recipient has ethical obligations for receiving help (Walhout, 1957, p. 170). The Australian Government bases its “Mutual Obligation” scheme on this principle.³ If social justice were merely about fairness, the responsibility of the unemployed to find work would be a condition of support. In the USA, welfare support is limited to six months, which the government deems is sufficient time for a conscientious person to find work (Benjamin, 1973, p. 686).

However, most Christians would see in Scripture a revelation of the grace of God rather than rules to be obeyed. The Christian view of justice is informed by love and its generosity is capable of eliciting sacrificial giving (Forrester, 2012, p. 215). The non-achievers in our society and the disabled should not be the victims of a welfare policy aimed at limiting support to what they deserve.

Welfare

Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) reveals in passing that unemployed workers were standing around in the market place waiting to be hired. So, unemployment was a problem in the first century and there were no welfare payments from the state. The unemployed needed to seek assistance from relatives, the temple or church, beg, or sell themselves into slavery. Paul wrote, “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thes 3:10b) in the context of pre-industrialised society with its very different concept of unemployment. The agricultural economy, family owned farms, and slave labour, made unemployment less of a problem than droughts and Roman taxes.

Recent surveys of people receiving income support reveal that they suffer from loss of self-esteem, humiliation, disrespect, and being stigmatised as dole bludgers (Murphy et al., 2011, pp. 151-155). Welfare support needs to be more than financial. The recipient also needs care, value, dignity and love.

The work for the dole system is based on the principle of reciprocity. This is questionable because of the lack of mutuality on the parts of the welfare system and employers, and the lack of freedom on the part of the unemployed (Moss, 2006, p. 192). Welfare payments are like a debt to be paid back in some way and the welfare system ethos is punitive instead of assistance to the disadvantaged (p. 193).

The Problem of Long-term Unemployed

The long-term unemployed face a loss of self-esteem, reluctance of employers to give them priority because of a perceived unwillingness to work, and a gradually increasing level of poverty due to inadequate welfare payments.

Do the long-term unemployed⁴ have an obligation to accept retraining? Jonathan Wolff argues that

2 Klaas Woldring commented that remuneration of executives in Australia increased 48.7% between 1984 and 1992 compared to a decline of 1.9% of average earnings during the same period (Woldring, 1995, p. 942). Woldring said the lack of ethical foundation for managerial rewards would not inspire employees (p. 946). We might add that it would not inspire the unemployed either.

3 For “Mutual Obligation/Work for the Dole” see http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/dole

4 The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines long-term unemployment as being unemployed for one year or more. The percentage of unemployed people who were long term unemployed in 2011 was 20%. This is down from the

although retraining should be encouraged, retraining should never be compulsory under threat of discontinuing welfare payments (Wolff, 2004, p. 285)⁵. It is not practical to enforce moral duties by the law and there are always competing moral duties. In any case, Wolff says, enforcing moral duties would be worse than allowing some “free riding” on the system (p. 287). There may well be unwanted side effects to the character of society if moral duties were enforced.

A better method currently used by the Australian Government is to pay a wage subsidy to employers of long term unemployed. This helps reduce the tendency of employers to pass over their job applications.

Christian Ethics and Public Policy

The relationship between personal ethics and public policy is relevant here. If a Christian cannot expect his or her personal ethics to determine how a secular society makes its decisions, can a secular government still be lobbied to make decisions in accord with general Christian ethical principles? Preston does this by arguing that we can discriminate between private and public ethical responsibilities by asking (a) is it in the public interest, and (b) is it for the common good (Preston, 2007, p. 149)? He then expands these concepts so that (a) does not overlook the interests of minority groups and (b) looks beyond economic concerns (p. 150)⁶.

Scripture does not compartmentalise personal and social ethics. In Amos, for example, there is no differentiation between personal immorality (Amos 2:7-8, 12) and social justice sins (Amos 2:6; 4:1; 8:6) (Bronnert, 1978, p. 217). Duncan Forrester proposes the church as the exemplar of social justice (Forrester, 2012, p. 212). The church should lead the way, albeit with limited resources, in showing the “generous justice” which anticipates God's reign as a confession of its faith. This would show the Christian ethic as a credible alternative.

Other Christians despair that Christians in politics are inevitably involved in compromise. The Exclusive Plymouth Brethren Church sees Christian ethics as applying to Christians whereas others need to repent and become Christians⁷. Most mainstream Christians do not withdraw from politics, citing the Apostle Paul's contention in Rom 13:1-3 that God appoints the governing authorities to restrain evil. Those who are concerned that a welfare system following Christian principles of grace and generosity would meet with abuse by some recipients may be right, but a Christian ethic accepts this so as not to place a burden on vulnerable members of society, which would be a greater evil.⁸

high of 34% in the early 1990's but an increase over 2009 when it was 13%. See <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features20Sep+2011>

5 The equivalent of unemployment benefits in the USA is Unemployment Insurance (UI). The normal period of 26 weeks for UI can be extended but it is still time limited.

6 Thomas Burke, a secular ethicist, disagrees with Hegel's view that civil society is like a universal family, which has welfare obligations (Burke, 2011, p. 180). Burke thinks a just society will respect the free will of all its citizens rather than imposing any personal morality. Therefore, the state should only use taxation to raise revenue to carry out its constitutional duties. Welfare payments are not primarily about redistribution of wealth (p. 205). Burke says inequality of wealth or power is not unjust (p. 114) and that redistributing wealth through the taxation system is legalised theft (p. 194). Burke argues that access to welfare implies welfare recipients have obligations to society (p. 157) and that relieving poverty is a duty of Christian charity rather than justice, except in extreme cases and even then cannot be enforced by the law (Burke, 2011, p, 71). Christian charity exhibited by the state would be a desirable thing from the Christian point of view.

7 They do not even vote. See Australian newspaper article <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/brethren-lift-veil-on-lifestyle/story-e6frg6o6-1111117535438>

8 This is similar to the criminal law's bias towards innocence to avoid wrongful conviction of the innocent.

Conclusion

In a sinful world, there will always be some people who do not want to work just as there are some affluent people who do not want to give. Public policy needs to err on the side of the innocent and vulnerable to ensure it does not do injustice to its citizens, even if it means tolerating some abuse of the welfare system. A Christian ethic is sacrificial by nature.

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