

# PROPERTY RIGHTS

1 Cor 6:1-11; Micah 2:1-2

## I. A PARTICULAR PROBLEM: LITIGIOUS CORINTHIANS

- A. Greek city-states characterized by lawsuits before assemblies
  - 1. Sophists earned their livings by training orators to win verdicts
  - 2. Socrates found guilty by Athenian assembly
- B. Jews were allowed by Romans to establish special courts to hear cases—e.g. Sanhedrin in Jerusalem
- C. Corinthian Christians taking each other to court (civil, not criminal cases), so Paul rebuked them
- D. Paul's admonition:
  - 1. Settle conflicts within congregation, remembering to forgive & overlook
  - 2. Generosity and mercy should characterize Christians

## II. A GENERAL PRESCRIPTION: HEED the COMMANDMENTS re SANCTITY OF PROPERTY

- A. "Steal no longer" (Eph 4:28)
  - 1. Force: burglary—forced entry, petty theft, looting; robbery—hold-ups; unjust taxation—government exacting from some to benefit others
  - 2. Fraud: Ahab takes Naboth's vineyard & politicians exercise "eminent domain;" Ponzi schemes of various kinds; devious treaties & lost lands (Manhattan Island, Indian Territory—cf. Angie Debo: *And Still the Waters Flow*); plagiarism—long list of eminent practitioners
- B. Curb Covetousness (Micah 2:1-2)—commandment re inner state of mind, assenting to theft—houses; transport; livelihood; savings

## III. PROPERTY PROPERLY VALUED

- A. Guiding biblical principles:
  - 1. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps 24:1)
  - 2. Stewards (Adam and we) entrusted with tending the garden (Gn 2:13)—gratitude for gift of creation
  - 3. Promised Land and sanctity of property evident in OT from Abraham through Exodus and prophets
  - 4. Gleaning (cf. Ruth) provides for needy—charity and accountability both important.
- B. Avoid extremes
  - 1. Rapacious individualism evident in Hobbes: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" & Social Darwinism
  - 2. Tyrannical collectivism evident in Socialism
    - a. Fanciful (utopian) follies—Owen's New Harmony; Brook Farm
    - b. Actual failures (abolish private property, family, religion, hierarchies)—USSR; China; Cuba
- C. Golden Mean: family-focused, decentralized, law-abiding, moral foundations

## IV. PROVIDING PERSPECTIVES—blending sound economic thought with ethical principles ordered to enable human flourishing

- A. *Aquinas and the Market* shows theologian's grasp of economics.
- B. Spanish Scholastics—the right to property absolute; rooted in Reality, divine & human
- C. Adam Smith: *Wealth of Nations* (inseparable from his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*)
- D. William Roepke: *Humane Economy*
  - 1. Swiss, English, and American examples of limited government, free enterprise economics
  - 2. Importance of intermediate, subsidiary institutions limiting state
- E. Pope Leo XIII: *Rerum Novarum* & encyclicals urging subsidiarity & justice
- F. Abraham Kuyper & Reformed positions re "spheres"
- G. Peter Berger: *The Capitalist Spirit: Toward a Religious Ethic of Wealth Creation*.
- I. Schumacher: *Small Is Beautiful*.
- F. John Paul II: "Wealth creation is a specifically economic form of human participation in God's abiding creativity, God's sustaining care for his creation."
- G. Evangelicals divergent
  - 1. Left—John Howard Yoder (Politics of Jesus), Jim Wallis (Sojourners), Ron Sider (*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*) impact many younger thinkers
  - 2. Right—Harold Lindell (editor of *Christianity Today*), Ronald Nash (*Why the Left is not Right*)
  - 3. Centrist—Carl F.H. Henry (*The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*).
- H. Wayne Grudem: "The Solution lies with neither Marx nor the market, but in the words of the Master" (*The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*)