

Preface 21

Ecclesiastes 12:12

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George Grant's BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES

by David Chilton

In the Spring of 1982, the large Sun Belt cities of the United States were inundated with a flash flood of refugees from the economically stagnant industrial centers of the North and East. For the most part, these were not transients. They were skilled, hardworking people in the automobile, steel, and coal industries who had been laid off and were now seeking employment in what was rumored to be the booming economy of the South.

The real "job Mecca," many believed, was Houston, Texas. For a time, this had been true: Copies of Sunday's *Houston Chronicle*, which contained the nation's largest classified advertisement section, had gone for \$20 apiece in places like Detroit and Pittsburgh. And so the work-seekers sold everything they possessed and made hopeful, desperate pilgrimage to Houston. In they streamed, more and more each day, eventually arriving at the rate of three thousand families per week, pitching their last-chance bets on the folk legend of available work, in a job market that had been squeezed dry many weeks before. Houston's population swelled with up to 60,000 of them that year, homeless, hopeless, lining the riverbanks and huddling under bridges for shelter from the elements, waiting.

One of these large "tent cities" was gathered under a bridge in Humble (pronounced the way Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* said it: 'Umble), a suburb on the north end of Houston. Long before the media circus began focusing attention on the problem (it made good copy for guilt-manipulating Thanksgiving stories), concerned members of a small local evangelical church decided to do something about it. Under the energetic leadership of their young pastor, George Grant, these Christians began working to bring compassionate assistance to the multitudes of *nouveaux pauvres* flocking the streets of their town. They founded an organization called Humble Evangelicals to Limit Poverty—HELP (or possibly, as Uriah Heep would say, 'ELP).

George Grant had already had some experience in relief work with another church, in which his primary responsibility had been to fork over \$25 to practically anyone who came by with his hand out. Grant knew *that* wasn't the answer—a mere giveaway program is simply bad stewardship of God-given resources. A system with no controls often fails to reach the truly needy, is extremely liable to abuse, is almost impossible to evaluate, and is degrading to its recipients. The real value of that program for Grant was that it taught him those lessons, more vividly than a textbook ever could have. He also learned some valuable techniques of discernment, acquiring the ability to make the necessary distinction

between the professional panhandlers and the people who genuinely needed help. He learned how to weed out cons and hustlers, and, on the other hand, how to spot even the "invisible" poor. Grant applied these lessons to the very foundation of the Humble project. It perhaps wasn't a very impressive body of knowledge, but it gave him at least a place to start in his attempt to create a really Biblical relief effort.

The HELP ministry began from the premise that 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is true: *If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.* Their food pantry, in striking contrast to those run by other "charities," didn't give food away, but instead exchanged it for work—cleaning up around the church building, stuffing envelopes, and so on. Those who refused to work were turned away, with no tears of guilt or pity shed over them. On the other hand, the "deserving poor," who needed help to get back on their feet, were given assistance without demeaning them. The response was amazing: HELP discovered that many people actually wanted to be treated with respect, as men and women in the image of God, instead of being treated like animals, whose "keepers" would provide meals at feeding time.

Very soon, the HELP ministry had more applicants than odd jobs around the church. So they sent them into the streets in a program that came to be called "Community Clean Sweep." In exchange for groceries, adults and teenagers swept the streets clean of trash and overgrowth. Results: "The poor have the Gospel preached to them" (Matt. 11:5); they are given food and meaningful work, the city becomes more attractive—a small-scale evangelistic campaign, welfare program, employment service, and urban renewal all rolled into one, at no taxpayer expense!—and a young, small church receives favorable publicity vastly in excess of its slender resources.

As time went on, HELP branched out into other services, making some mistakes and learning a lot more lessons in the process. By contacting similar ministries in other parts of the country, by getting to know the poor and their problems, by experimenting with different methods, Grant and his organization gained practical wisdom and wide-ranging expertise, which Grant has distilled into this very helpful book. *Bringing in the Sheaves*, appropriately subtitled *Transforming Poverty into Productivity*, is designed to be a practical primer for Biblical charity. While Grant does spend some time sketching the failure of unbiblical programs, his work is not primarily theoretical. It tells us what to do, and shows us how to begin doing it. Grant says: "What we've achieved in Houston is not the panacea for all social ills from now till evermore; but it is a start. What we've learned in Houston is that functioning models of Biblical charity are not only necessary, they are possible. What we've learned in Houston is that small churches, starting with little or no money, little or

no resources, little or no staff, and little or no experience, can put together a formidable challenge to the modern notion that poverty is a problem too big for anyone but the government to handle. What we've learned in Houston is that we can really make a difference in our world, if we only take seriously our high calling as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ" (p. 22).

Until now, much "reconstructionist" work on the poverty issue has been long on critical analysis and short on practical activism. Grant's work yanks us out of the realm of critique and dumps us smackdab in the middle of practice. We have no more excuses.

Principles of Biblical Charity

Unlike humanistic poverty experts who exploit welfare issues in order to put forward totalitarian notions of social control, George Grant actually goes to Scripture to get his principles. As he shows, the Biblical blueprint for poverty relief can be summarized in one word: *Work*. "Work is the heart and soul, the cornerstone, of Biblical charity. In fact, Biblical charity is little more than a sub-function of the doctrine of work. Its operating resources are the fruit of work: the tithe, hospitality, private initiative, and voluntary relief. Its basic methodologies are rooted in the work-ethic: gleaning, training, lending, and facilitating. Its primary objectives revolve around a comprehension of the goodness of work: productivity, rehabilitation, and the entrepreneurial effect" (p. 74).

Following from this, Grant demonstrates that the primary Biblical source of regular charity to the poor is the practice of gleaning—putting the poor to work. Again, the Bible does not countenance the practice of simply throwing money at the problem of poverty. "When the Church mimics the government by promiscuously dispensing groceries and other goods and services, it hurts the poor more than it helps. Adherents of such short-sighted thinking only perpetuate the war against the poor. . . . Biblical charity does not attempt to smooth over economic crisis by making privation somewhat more acceptable. It attempts to solve economic crisis. Biblical charity does not attempt to help families adjust to their situation. It attempts to change their situation. Biblical charity does not strive to make poverty and dependence more comfortable. It strives to make productivity and independence more attainable" (pp. 79f.).

Therefore, in terms of the Gleaning Principle, "recipients of Biblical charity must be diligent workers, unless entirely disabled." When we fail to do this, we create a culture of dependence. Charity divorced from responsibility is addictive and destructive, producing not only slaves but a slave mentality, from which few are ever able to break free. True *charity—love—*does not seek to enslave its objects. It seeks to set them free, as responsible men and women in Jesus Christ.

In addition, of course, the Bible does not establish the State as a welfare institution. The Biblical gleaning laws were administered by the landowners themselves; charity is not a proper sphere for State action. When charity is dispensed privately, it remains simple, responsible, accountable, flexible, and personal. "By keeping charity decentralized, de-institutionalized, and private, everyone concerned is saved from the anguish of graft, corruption, and red tape" (p. 81).

A further conclusion from the Gleaning Principle, Grant says, is that "Biblical charity is discriminatory (Ruth 2:7). Biblical charity knows nothing of promiscuous handouts to sluggards" (p. 82). "The gleaner model instantly differentiates between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Sluggards won't work. The truly needy will. There is no need to run down character profiles or social service histories on each of the applicants. If they are willing to work

hard to improve their lot, then they are eligible for the provisions of Biblical charity" (p. 187).

Examining other forms of Biblical charity—tithes, private giving, interest-free loans, and so forth—Grant forms two conclusions: first, that gleaning remains the "primary means of lifting the poor from destitution to productivity"; and second, that the Gleaning Principle summarized in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is basic to every form of responsible charitable enterprise. "Biblical charity is not built upon the flimsy foundations of a guilt-edged sentimentality. It is built upon God's Law. It is built upon a bootstrap ethic of hard work, determination, productivity, and personal responsibility.

"Sustaining a life through a handout or two is quick and easy. But such short-term efforts create a permanent welfare under-class. Equipping a life through counsel, training, accountability, and referral is time-consuming, financially demanding, and difficult. But such long-term efforts create self-sufficient, productive workers. Thus, anything less than the time-consuming and the difficult is an unadulterated waste and deserves our boisterous repudiation. Anything less is something other than Biblical charity" (p. 86).

Another basic principle of Biblical charity, Grant points out, is the importance of the family as "society's safety net." The family is crucial in "every societal endeavor from education (Prov. 22:6) to governance (Deut. 6:20-25), from economics (Deut. 21:17) to spirituality (Eph. 6:1-4), from the care of the aged (1 Tim. 5:3-13) to the subduing of the earth (Gen. 1:26-28)." More than this, it is also "the chief agency of human welfare." Grant quotes Gary North's observations on the subject: "It is the agency that is most effective in solving the problems of poverty, sickness, and crisis. It is the only agency which knows its limitations and strengths, for the self-interest of every household head is to count the cost of every project undertaken by the family. No other human agency links mutual self-interest, mutual understanding, mutual obligations, and mutual support in the way that a family can. Members are close. They know each other's weaknesses and strengths. The family is also an extended institution, with bloodline contacts that can spread out widely. It can call upon related families for help in a crisis" (p. 115).

When the family is supplanted in the work of charity, charity is distorted and eventually destroyed; all usurpers of familial authority in personal charity have proved utter failures. Family charity, with all the imperfections of a sinful world, still comes close to being an ideal system: it is personal and flexible, fosters accountability, discourages sloth and vice, reinforces responsible and productive behavior, and, in short, is effective beyond the wildest dreams of the most starry-eyed social planner.

"A U.S. Senate subcommittee report estimated that if every Christian family would only take care of its own, the federal dole would decrease a full 30%. If every church would then take care of *its* own, the dole would decrease another 12%. And then, if each of those churches would provide a sponsoring family to exercise charity to a single outsider, the federal dole could be eliminated completely. Just like that. Families simply fulfilling their Christian responsibility to their own (1 Tim. 5:8), to their brethren in Christ (Gal. 6:10), and to the stranger and alien (Ex. 23:9), can so effectively do the work of charity that no back-up system, no federal bureaucracy, no matching funds, and no professional humanitarians are necessary. Families can do the job" (pp. 118f.).

How to Begin

One of the problems of modern American life is that after decades of the civil government, at all levels, taking upon itself the charitable responsibilities of the Church, the family, and the individual, we have grown accustomed to the idea of charity being a mammoth project, requiring huge expenditures and a highly trained staff. Instead of concentrating on

the problems of the elderly on fixed incomes in our own church, or the next-door neighbor who's been laid off, we read *Newsweek* and see The Poverty Problem, a national issue of such gigantic proportions that we feel it cannot be solved apart from the federal government; if it is to be solved by private individuals, we feel, it will take the Rockefellers and their friends to cough up a few hundred billion before anything concrete will be accomplished. But we can't possibly do anything about The Poverty Problem.

This is all backwards, Grant says. God intends for us to do something about poverty—not The Poverty Problem, but the poor in our own midst. For this reason, his book is devoted to practical suggestions about real activities that real people—meaning not *them* but *us*—can do. Let's assume that a small church, with few resources and below-average talents and abilities among its members, desires to obey the Biblical charity mandate. Where should it start? How can it accomplish the task?

First, the people themselves must be convinced of their priestly and covenantal responsibility in this area. *Charity is a Biblical obligation, not merely an option.* Grant urges pastors to "motivate, equip, and educate the saints so that they can then undertake the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12)." But, he complains, "all too often our preaching, the primary means of producing Scriptural convictions in others, has been entirely inadequate. Our focus in homiletics has either been doctrinal and exegetical to the near exclusion of specific, practical application, or is awash in an existential piffle, drivel, and swill. As a result, our sermons have lost their life. They are either dry or soppy. They are either intangible or incorrigible." Laying responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the leadership, he suggests that pastors initiate an aggressive program of preaching on charity issues. "When the pulpits of America begin to sound the strains of the Good Samaritan faith, a vast army of motivated, dedicated warriors for Truth *will* emerge. When missions-oriented sermons ring forth once again, then we *will* have committed congregations" (p. 101).

The local church's leadership can do more than this, as Grant shows. He suggests structuring the worship service itself to reflect the Biblical emphasis on missionary concerns; instructing the people on the "missionary implications" of the Eucharist as God's gift of food to starving people; turning the Sunday School from "a dilapidated vehicle for watered-down moralisms" into "an intensive training camp for dedicated Kingdom activists . . . from which strategies are plotted, tactics are launched, and reclamation is begun." Churches can set up special events that emphasize charitable missions (HELP, for example, has sponsored very successful benefit concerts with canned goods serving as entrance tickets); the deacons can be trained to fulfill their original Biblical mandate as administrators of Christian charity; youth groups can be mobilized in service activities; even counselors can be directed toward the discipline of serving others as a central aspect of their return to Spiritual health. Through it all, Grant maintains, there must be a firm commitment to the development and nurture of a Biblical worldview, based on the conviction that the Bible really does provide the divine blueprint for every area of life. Only this will equip us with confidence in the certainty of earthly victory for the Kingdom of God, producing the "war-zone mentality" characteristic of successful Christian activists throughout the history of the Church.

Guilt, Pity, and the Unfocused Do-Gooder

The average church "poverty project" starts off with good intentions and poor motivations, stumbles along aimlessly for a period, and perishes in a slow, agonizing, and embarrassing death. Grant conducts a post-mortem examination of a typical example—the names have been changed to pro-

tect the guilt-ridden—and offers an explanation for its failure. In the first place, the project was crippled from the start because its primary impulses, guilt and pity, were insufficient to bear the burden of meeting the needs of real people. Ultimately, guilt and pity can only manipulate; they cannot truly motivate. They cannot sustain us through the often wearying task of ministering to the afflicted; they distort our perception of problems and solutions; they render us incapable of dealing properly with sin in ourselves and others; and they make both the dispenser and the recipient of welfare permanent dependents of the system. The Biblical motivation for charity is fundamentally simple: God commands it.

Another reason for the project's failure, however, was its unfocused, general—nay, cosmic—goals: Its promoters wanted to help "The Poor 'n Oppressed." They didn't really think about *which* poor. In a few brief sentences, Grant places an everlasting wet blanket on the Pollyannas of poverty relief: "In order to be successful, a program of Biblical charity must have focus. It cannot simply set out to 'help the poor.' It must pinpoint a precise target group. It must identify needs. It must develop relationships, set goals, and establish priorities. It must carefully weigh the circumstances of local privation against the resources of the caring community. It must discover what kinds of help are most needed" (pp. 144f.).

I know what you're thinking. This George Grant is pretty unspiritual. All this talk of charity, and then he goes and puts a damper on your enthusiasm. Why not just let things flow naturally? The reason, he says, is this: When things flow naturally, they go down the drain.

Charity needs a proper focus, and that means another rule—"Know your community." Take a drive, or better yet, a walk, around town and become acquainted with the needs. Read the local paper. Find out what's happening in business, employment, housing, and crime. Because every community is different, an effective charity program cannot be implemented without a solid basis in demographics, the science of vital and social statistics. "Demographic acumen can provide the raw materials for an informed, precise, effective, focused, efficient, and productive charity outreach. No need to administrate by guess and by golly. No need to flail about in uncertainty. No need to mimic mindlessly the 'proven successes' of others. No need to duplicate services and ministries ably provided elsewhere. Demographics can take the foundation of good theology and the framework of committed believers, and channel them to appropriate effect. Demographics can mean the difference between a powerful societal and spiritual impact and a 'gospel blimp'" (p. 145).

To get the information you need, make some phone calls. Start with all the churches in town and find out what they're doing, what they've tried and failed to do. Find out what services are already available, and see if you can establish a basis for cooperation. Contact all the social services and get their materials. Speak with the police department, the local schools, the businessmen. And talk to the poor themselves. Know what's wrong before you start fixing it.

Grant is not trying to baptize demographics, or make it the determinant of everything we do. The opinions of people in the community must not take the place of Biblical principles. But demographic research is an important tool in fulfilling God's mandate to bring the Gospel and its fruits to the world around us. In repeated examples, Grant shows that the successful Christian charities are those that are committed to Biblical authority, are grounded in the work ethic, are family-oriented, work with private enterprise in devising practical solutions, engage in systematic demographic research, and are "organized. Very organized."

One of the best ways for a church to accomplish the twin task of both meeting needs and equipping the saints to meet those needs, Grant says, is by establishing a task force, a

core group of activists who will take on the job of identifying needs in the community, doing the necessary research and then informing the congregation about the local situation. The task force can also take the lead in planning the strategy and tactics for the operation, and in training families in the church for service. This central "hard core" of activists would also develop contacts and cooperative relationships throughout the community, especially with private businesses, in order to bring in tangible support for the program. And, certainly not least, it would develop a good relationship with the local media—which, like it or not, often can mean the difference between life and death for your project.

(A few media hints: Try to find a press-release writer who understands how the English language works. Use a spokesperson who looks good on TV, who can speak whole sentences without mumbling, and who can refrain from making embarrassing remarks. And remember that reporters are always on a deadline, which means that they don't have time to read *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, or even *Bringing in the Sheaves*, before they write the story. Any concise, prepackaged information you can give them will be greatly appreciated, and will probably find its way into the article.)

There are other ways for small churches to organize for dominion. Grant suggests a community coalition of churches to divide the labor, share the burdens, and participate in joint projects. Beyond this—and, between you and me, one of the most effective tools of Grant's own organization—is the referral notebook: "Each charity outreach needs to compile a notebook that lists community agencies, social service programs, United Way groups, doctors, lawyers, public health clinics, and rehabilitative services. There are a whole lot of agencies that perform special services: care for battered women, drug and alcohol recovery clinics, veterans retraining programs, care for the elderly, homes for abused children, crisis pregnancy centers, etc. Each charity outreach ought not only to know what help is available to the needy, but how to procure it. Are there waiting lists for any of the programs? What about costs? Are there prerequisites, conditions, and qualifications? Find out and notate your referral list accordingly. Include admitting procedures, names, addresses, phone numbers, office hours, and any other bits of information you can discover. That way, when a needy family shows up at your door, you can know precisely how and where help can be had. Even if the local task force or the community coalition is unable to satisfy a need, supplicants won't be turned away cold" (pp. 160f.). If you want to serve your community, acting on that paragraph alone could work wonders. Does your city need an efficient, up-to-date referral service? As Grant says, don't be afraid to start small; but be ambitious as well.

Grant does offer an important warning about falling prey to the temptation of becoming over-organized, a private bureaucratic monster that commits the same errors as its publicly funded twin. Beware, Grant says, of "caring by committee" and neglecting personal concern; beware of using the referral notebook as a means of passing the buck, shuttling hard cases off to the next guy; and beware of overspecialization, as in the case of the shelter that accepts only "black men from the ages of 45-65 who suffer from alcoholic debilitation and homelessness," or another that will take only "battered women, with children, between the ages of 25 and 40," and so on. "The trend toward overspecialization has fragmented the social service coverage in the United States into an abominably complex jigsaw puzzle. . . . We must be organized, but never so organized that we lose the sensitivity, the accountability, and the individuality so central to the Good Samaritan faith" (p. 163).

Putting the Gleaning Principle to Work

The aim of Biblical charity, said Charles Spurgeon (founder of over sixty charitable organizations), is to rid the impoverished of "the curse of idleness." The HELP ministry took this with utmost seriousness, and early on established a job referral service high on their list of priorities. By gaining the trust and cooperation of local businesses, they were able to run an active "job board" during even the worst part of the economic crunch. In one period of less than five months, "when all leading economic indicators pointed to unrelenting 'stagflation' and decline, HELP was able to place 432 poor applicants in permanent jobs, and another 367 in temporary situations."

Another way HELP has been able to implement the gleaning ethic is its reeducation program, which trains the poor in how to pass a job interview, how to keep a job, how to establish personal disciplines, and how to manage time and money. Nutrition and hygiene are taught as well; and all of this in the context of bringing the Gospel into people's lives. "If we would only teach, equip, and facilitate the poor so that they can begin to establish small, efficient, cost-effective, and labor-intensive small businesses, we would do more for our society's economic outlook than any number of corporate shakedowns, tariff restrictions, union confederations, or governmental regulations. . . . Biblical charity is not mere philanthropy. It is doing anything and everything necessary to enable the poor to stand on their own, to provide for their families, and to prepare for the future" (pp. 178f.).

A further way the HELP people applied the gleaning model, especially during the "tent city" crisis, was through its use of creative lease agreements. At a time when apartment managers were requiring a \$200 deposit, plus a utilities deposit, plus two months' rent in advance, HELP members were able to work out arrangements in which tenants would agree to exchange work in place of all the required deposits and the first few months' rent. The result is that "families with no money, no job, and no hope can suddenly find themselves gainfully employed (at least part-time) and adequately housed. The landlord, on the other hand, has hungry, willing crews of workers to upgrade the maintenance of the property, as well as a high occupancy rate and insurance for the future, when a soft rental market might otherwise drive him to the brink of bankruptcy" (p. 202).

George Grant is, as we have noted, a fairly hardheaded guy, and he repeatedly offers warnings that any attempt to "bring in the sheaves" can bring in a few thieves as well; his comments about protecting families from danger, screening applicants, and keeping scrupulously detailed records as insurance against lawsuits deserve careful attention.

George is not one to overlook or minimize the difficulties involved in a Biblical ministry of charity. In fact, his clear-headed attitude is part of what makes his book so valuable; you won't hear any Panglossalalia from him. Yet, in spite of the problems, he is adamant that a primary task facing the Church in the world today is the poverty issue—an issue that must be squarely addressed and acted upon by those who believe in the authority of Scripture. We must not allow the Marxists the fraudulent luxury of claiming the high moral ground on an issue which is so often, and so clearly, dealt with in God's Word.

George said to me the other day, "Read Isaiah 58: Reconstruction begins with care for the poor. The blessings of *Paradise Restored* come after we have broken our bread with the hungry, brought the homeless into our houses, clothed the naked, furnished ourselves to the needy, and satisfied the desire of the afflicted. When that happens, God will restore our land. Until then, poverty is Job One."

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