

Publishing Editor's column

THE LAST FEW YEARS have been times of unparalleled growth for the economies of the world. This has especially been the case for many countries in the Third World, such as India and China. The gap between these countries and the wealthy countries of the West is narrowing, although there is a long way to go to catch up. Yet this overall pattern of growth masks a very significant trend, the growing gap between the rich and the poor in most of the nations of the world. This was highlighted in a recent report in *Newsweek* magazine, which gave a number of examples. Here are two. In the USA a chief executive of a top company receives, on average, remuneration 411 times that of the average worker; in 1990 it was 107 times. India has over 100,000 millionaires, yet forty-five per cent of the nation's children under five are malnourished.

Inequality between rich and poor has always existed, of course, but in modern times there has been the rise of the political movement known as socialism, which is supposed to bring greater equality between rich and poor. Part of a long definition of socialism in the Collins English Dictionary is that it is "characterized by . . . equality of individual wealth". Any progress towards that ideal in modern times is rapidly being reversed, it would seem, especially in countries that embraced communism, the logical extension of socialism, such as Russia and China. Britain has not been exempt from this trend to greater inequality in recent years, ironically under the government of the Labour party, originally a socialist party.

In truth, even in those countries that have been supposedly dedicated to socialism it has not truly been practised, and the ruling hierarchies of Communist countries have tended to enjoy wealth and privileges denied to the common people. Taxation is, of course, the main means of redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor, but the rich have proven adept in minimising or eliminating their payments of taxes by ingenious avoidance schemes (legal) or downright evasion (illegal). The kibbutz movement in Israel has been one of very few examples of societies that practise socialist principles, but this is increasingly not so because kibbutz members want to be free to keep what they earn rather than pooling it for the common good. Greed pervades all societies, preventing there ever being a true equality.

In the Acts of the Apostles we have an example of a society run on socialist principles. The early believers in Jerusalem "had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (2:44,45). Yet problems soon arose. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be seen to be conforming to this practice while keeping back money for their own enjoyment (5:1-12). Inequality in the redistribution of money brought complaints, which had to be dealt with by creating an organisation to administer aid fairly (6:1-6). The practice of communal living neither spread nor lasted in the early ecclesia, and Paul had to take the Corinthian ecclesia to task for the way rich members consumed abundant food and wine at their meetings while the poor members looked on hungry (1 Cor. 11:20-22). The natural selfishness of human nature led to these evils even within the ecclesia.

Paul developed a project in which the wealthier ecclesias of the Gentile world gave money to support the impoverished Jerusalem ecclesia (Rom. 15:26). Accepting that there would always be wealthy members of the ecclesia, he urged them to use their wealth for the benefit of others (1 Tim. 6:17-19). These things are precedents for us today in the way we use our wealth, if we have it. And indeed this is done. The extent to which it is done remains hidden, for giving should never be done to be seen of others, as Jesus warned (Mt. 6:1-4), but there is likely to be scope for more. One thing we can be sure of, the human nature we all bear will bring problems as it did in the early ecclesia; the warning of Paul in 1 Timothy 6:10 is a very strong one: "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (RV).

We vary in our ability to help relieve inequality, in our motivation to do so and in the ways we think it appropriate to do so. Whatever the case, we can do nothing actually to solve the inequalities of our world, and so we look and pray for the establishment of the Kingdom and of a just world in which there will be no extremes of rich and poor. In the meantime, those of us who are blessed with being able to live in relative ease and comfort should be thankful for what we have and cheerfully pay the exactions of the state, instead of grumbling and complaining as so many of our contemporaries do, and, sad to say, even some who have embraced the Gospel.

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