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 GOVERNMENT & ECONOMICS SERIES | PART 9

God's Design for a Societal Safety Net



ONE OF THE MOST VOLATILE POLICY issues of our times relates to a fundamental disagreement as to how a nation should approach entitlements. Entitlement programs now devour the majority of the U.S. federal government's budget, and as of 2019, the national debt reached \$23 trillion dollars and is growing rapidly at an uncontrollable rate.

What does Scripture have to say about such allocative decisions and policy? In a pre-political sense (informing policy through what the Bible says versus attempting to create policy via lobbying pressure), how can the Bible be used to inform the public servant in this regard? Does God speak to this issue? I believe the answer is a resounding yes!

In fact, there are so many passages that relate to the subject of God's Design for a Societal Safety Net that one can build a societal-safety-net theology from them. What follows is my attempt to do that.

Read on, my friend.

Ralph Drollinger

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- CABINET: 7:00 AM Wednesdays, location undisclosed, refreshments served.
- SENATE: 8:00 AM Tuesdays, rotating offices, hot breakfast served.
- HOUSE: 7:45 AM Thursdays, The Capitol Hill Club, hot breakfast served.

The views expressed in each Bible study are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the position of any individual Bible Study Sponsor.



Capitol Ministries: Teaching the Whole Purpose of God



It is paramount for Capitol Ministries to teach the “whole purpose of God” to the world’s political leaders rather than capitulate to trendy consensus on controversial social issues.

Ralph Drollinger, CapMin president and founder, taught that concept at the recent CapMin International Training Conference in Washington, D.C. that drew 100 people world-wide. Drollinger said when CapMin ministry leaders go into the capitols of the world to loving proclaim the Word of God, they sometimes butt up against postmodernism, a concept with rejects absolute truth. Sometimes ministry leaders are asked, “Why are you bringing this up? The consensus has already moved on from that concept.”

“But we at Capitol Ministries believe in God’s truth and continue to stand on that rather than what is true for today,” Drollinger said. God’s truth is inviolate. It’s unchangeable. We teach the truth that you know deep down inside is really true. You already believe what

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the previous study in this series regarding the Rich and the Poor, I touched on God’s Design for a Societal Safety Net as it pertains to how to best help the poor. In so doing, under that point in the outline, I referenced this study and what follows, which is a more biblically in-depth treatment of the subject.

II. SEVEN NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES REGARDING THE CONSTRUCT OF A SOCIETAL SAFETY NET

A caveat is in order before plunging into the following passages that serve to inform us regarding the mind of God on this matter: it is important to approach this discussion through the lens of the New Testament (NT) only because God has clearly separated the institution of civil government from any and all sacerdotal responsibilities in the time in which we live per the clear instruction of Jesus in Matthew 22:21. Such was not the case with Old Testament (OT) Israel. This is a critical distinction to make since many liberal theologians, who are pro government entitlement programs, use the OT as their proof text.

The apostle Paul in Romans 13:1–8, the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:13–14, and Matthew 22:21 (as used repeatedly throughout this series on *Government and Economics*) serve to make this clear OT-versus-NT distinction. We are not living in the times of theocratic Israel wherein civil government and sacerdotal responsibilities are both contained in and conducted by the same institution. Accordingly, to examine OT passages in this theological quest would only muddy the waters and be confusing to any quest for perspicacious conclusions. Accordingly, therein is why I will limit—and any theologian worth listening to must limit—this exercise in theological construction of a societal safety net to passages outside of a theocratic context and economy.

A. 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–12

This passage is fundamental to the beginning of our study. It provides the foundational starting point, revealing whom God has assigned to be the primary caretaker for providing life’s basic necessities for living. Notice verse 10 in this regard: *“If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either,”* which Paul states to the believers at the church of Thessalonica. Note the whole of the passage and context:

“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.”

This passage was and remains instrumental and informative to what is commonly referred to as the Protestant work ethic. Stemming from the Reformation and the rediscovery of such pertinent and informative passages in Scripture, this idea of hard work and providing for one’s self have become historic cultural constructs in the American culture and way of life, as they should in any nation. The ethic of personal responsibility is a major pillar in the explanation of America’s quick rise to productivity, prosperity, and economic prowess. Further, to under-



score this very important beginning point, this passage under study is not making a suggestion. Rather Paul is employing an imperative command to be personally disciplined to meet your own needs! This passage serves to inform us of the following:

In God's mind, the first source of provision relative to meeting the various forms of physical needs in a society is one's self.

Apart from those with genuine needs due to birth defects, war injuries, disease, developmental disabilities, etc., how many live in poverty because they are *“not willing to work”* or not *willing to work hard enough*? In attempting to diminish the unmet needs of a society, this basic truth must not be overlooked by the public servant in his policy formation. At the risk of sounding unloving, a father in the institution of marriage, a family in the institution of the family, a pastor in the institution of the church, a business owner in the institution of commerce, and a government in the institution of government should not bear or be led to think they bear the responsibility to meet the needs of the individual who lives in an *“undisciplined manner,”* who does *“no work at all,”* who is *“not willing to work,”* or is not *willing to work hard enough*. Proverbs 10:4 echoes this principle: *“Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”*

Furthermore, each *individual* in society should *work hard* enough to have an abundance to give to others who are in genuine need. States Proverbs 22:9 in this regard, *“He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor.”* Paul and Solomon herein, respectively, are both preaching that it is better to give than receive (cf. Acts 20:35).

The biblical pattern is for one to work hard. Genesis 2:15 states the concept that in the mind of God, hard work has always been His intent for those whom He created in His image:

“Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.”

This is God's original design for man. God wants him to be responsible for *cultivating* and *keeping* or maintaining the earth. As mentioned repeatedly in this series, such are normative activities for mankind even before the fall, per Genesis 3:17–19. Post-fall, part of the curse by God on man for his disobedience includes a heightened scale and necessity relative to hard work; the curse means in part that man will now *toil* in labor:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust.”

Given the condition of man (due to the fall and the *toil* involved with labor, he will have a desire to be lazy and not work) combined with the command of God to work, public servants must be wise and take these biblical realities into mind when crafting policies that will align and will motivate in mankind what God intends for mankind to do for himself. To unload a man of his responsibilities to take care of himself and to work hard enough to be able to give something to someone else who is truly in need is to take away to some degree a part of the man's intended work ethic and esteem. It is to diminish him, not help him!

Again, it is God's design that the individual be the first means of provision for himself as well as for others who have genuine needs.

Wise is the policymaker who understands this inherent design of God—and incentivizes, not replaces personal responsibility and behavior in this regard. Corrupt is the policymaker who twists this and uses enti-

♥ VERSE OF THE WEEK

1 John 3:17

“Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?”



We, as individuals, families, and churches, are part of God's plan to meet the needs of the poor in a fallen world.

Continued from previous page

the Bible says, you are just suppressing it. Romans 1:20 states, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” God uses His truth to draw all men to Himself. That gives us the confidence to preach in the capitol.”

Capitol Ministries has established more than two dozen discipleship Bible studies to leaders of nations world-wide; planted 43 ministries in state capitol; and has launched ministries to local government leaders in the U.S. and foreign nations.



James Madison



“Government is instituted to protect property of every sort.... This being the end of government, that alone is not a just government, ... nor is property secure under it, where the property which a man has in his personal safety and personal liberty is violated by arbitrary seizures of one class of citizens for the service of the rest.”

— James Madison, signer of the Constitution, author of *The Federalist Papers*; framer of the Bill of Rights; secretary of state; fourth president of the United States.

Saul K. Padover, ed., *The Complete Madison*, Harper & Bros., New York, 1953, p. 267.

tlement promises as a way to gain votes, appealing to the base instincts of his district, state, or nation. Such is a violation of God's intended purpose of government, wherein God states in Romans 13:4 that government is a servant for your good. It does not say government “is a servant for my benefit and reelection.”

B. 1 TIMOTHY 5:3–16

This is the most insightful NT passage that reveals the mind of God and His intended pecking order of institutional responsibility relative to meeting the needs of others who possess genuine needs that they cannot meet by themselves (per the first point in this outline). Even though the context of this passage relates to widows in the church per se, it reveals the mind of God on this matter relative to others who are dependent. The passage serves to be very informative as to how God views the matters this study is discussing. Herein revealed (through the lens of providing for widows in the church) is the order of “catch basins,” if you will, as they relate to who is responsible in God's eyes for meeting the needs of others who are truly needy. These “catch basins” serve to display God's compassionate nature in a fallen world. He does not desire for anyone created in His image to float downstream.

“Honor widows who are widows indeed; but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

A widow is to be put on the list only if she

is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work. But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”

Again, as you see, verses 3–16 in its tightest context specifically relates to caring for believing widows, but the principles communicated via the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul are transcendent of believing widows: Not only in terms of a broader application to others (in addition to widows) but in terms of nonbelievers as well, i.e., those outside of the church, who are needy (per verse 8, which will be examined more specifically).

Studying these first two passages in our outline together reveals that providing provisions for the genuinely needy is first one's own responsibility. We are as individuals to provide for our own family members. Note this at the beginning of the passage: “*But if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents.*” Civil government should not be tasked with taking care of the needs of individuals when an individual family member or members can step up. In-



dividuals and other family members are to take care of their own blood lines; to refuse to take care of your family members is akin to asking your neighbors to take on your personal responsibility—in essence, others should pool their money so you don't have to spend yours.

In the flow of this passage, if the children or grandchildren for legitimate reasons are in no position to meet their grandmother's needs, then the duty falls to other members of the institution of marriage and/or the institution of the family. This is evidenced by the less particular language stated next in the passage *“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”*

Herein implied more generally is that members of the household, in addition to the children and grandchildren now included, must step up. The final catch basin one can glean from this passage is the institution of the church, which is to step up to the plate and take care of the needy if the aforementioned do not. Notice this place of prioritization in the final verse: *“If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”* Paul is stating that the church is the final catch basin, but only after the dependent person's bloodlines are unable to provide. The institution of the church should not be tapped until other upstream resources are considered and utilized for meeting these kinds of needs.

Exhaustively, since all of the explicit and direct passages in the NT (here in this study) regarding helping the truly needy relate to the responsibility of believers, one could argue that these passages only relate to the church and should not be applied to secular society in general. First Timothy 5:8 is most pivotal in countering this view. Why? This small passage facilitates the assimilation and incorporation of unbelievers into one's broader understanding and applica-

tion of this passage. Notice the concluding phrase here states, *“is worse than an unbeliever.”* Why is this glimpse so profoundly important?

For a believer to fail to take care of the needy in his own family makes him or her worse than an *unbeliever who—even he—inherently knows the right thing to do!* The familial duties for provision are written by God on the consciences of unbelievers too. Namely, unbelievers understand via their God-wired conscience (cf. Romans 1:19–20; 2:15) that they have a personal responsibility to care for the needs of their own family—and for that matter, others outside their family. It's intrinsic! All that to say this:

First Timothy 5 reveals societal-safety-net principles that are innately understood by all.

These principles are written on everyone's heart!

As such, astute policy makers should take them into consideration.

This is God's design for not just the church community's safety net, but for a societal safety net for the whole of a secular country!

Further Scriptural evidence of the applicability of this catch-basin concept to the whole of a country is the additional perspective that Paul states in Galatians 6:10. This particular passage seems to indicate that all believers should care for the poor outside of their own believing church community: *“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith”* (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Timothy 6:18). Believers as individuals and as bodies (churches) are tasked with the responsibility of meeting other's needs. This is an important distinction worth mentioning at this point because the same charge is nowhere to be found in terms of the insti-

John Adams



“The moment the idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence. Property must be secured or liberty cannot exist.”

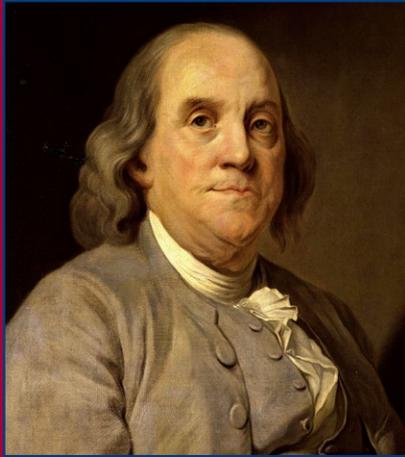
— John Adams, second President of the United States; signer of the Declaration of Independence; judge; diplomat; one of two signers of the Bill of Rights.

Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, 10 vols., Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1850-1856, 6:9, 280.





Benjamin Franklin



“I thought often of the Happiness of New England, where every Man is a Freeholder, has a Vote in public Affairs, lives in a tidy warm House, has plenty of good Food and Fuel, with whole Cloths from Head to Foot, the manufactory perhaps of his own Family. Long may they continue in this Situation!”

— Benjamin Franklin, signer of the Declaration of Independence; diplomat; printer; scientist; signer of the Constitution; governor of Pennsylvania.

Benjamin Franklin, letter to Joshua Babeok, January 13, 1771, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Jared Sparks, Boston: Hilliard Gray, 1840, 7:553.

tution of the state being responsible for the same. This is an important point of distinction that will be underscored at the conclusion of this study.

What follows is even more of the mind of God as it relates to how the needs of the poor are to be taken care of in a fallen world.

C. ACTS 6:1–6

This narrative passage from the early church is illustrative of the principles and teaching examined previously in 1 Timothy 5. The believing widows (most likely qualified widows per the criteria of 1 Timothy 5) were to be cared for by the institution of the church. This is in keeping with the hierarchy of 1 Timothy 5: God’s fourth catch basin for caring for the poor, the first being children and grandchildren, the second being other family members, the third being other resourceful widows, and fourth and lastly being the church.

“Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

What is said in this passage underscores God’s design for the church in meeting the needs of dependent people, but note that

this responsibility of the church’s role of taking care of the poor is, exegetically speaking, a very qualified responsibility, given what we have already discovered from other informative doctrinal passages (cf. 1 Timothy 5:5, 9, 11, 14). Furthermore, again, and most important, is what is *not* said about the institution of the state: Taking care of the poor is nowhere to be found in all three of the passages we have examined thus far.¹

Nowhere in Acts 6, nor elsewhere in the NT, is the state deemed responsible by God to meet the needs of the genuinely bereft.

D. ROMANS 15:25–26

“But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”

In this passage, Paul is taking a gift from several Gentile churches and giving it to the Jewish church of Jerusalem—specifically to the poor therein; this is indicative and synonymous with his 1 Timothy 5 instruction, in that case, to the church at Ephesus. Further note Acts 2:44–47 in regard to the corporate church and its role with the needy:

“And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Wherein Acts is a historical narrative, not necessarily intended as instructive (likened to the epistles) the book records events that actually happened—good and bad, right and wrong—in the church. Could it be that the overzealousness (v. 2:43) of congregants



led to some wrong decisions (“*and they began selling their property and possessions*”) that would later lead to the poverty in the church as evidenced by what Paul is stating he did in our previously examined passage in Romans 15:25–26, i.e., that Paul was taking a contribution from two Gentile churches “*for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem*”? The events of Romans 15 occurred after the events of Acts 2.

All that to say, an important aside to our study, Acts 2 should not be understood as a theological basis for economic socialism. Combined with the insight provided in Romans 15, this passage serves to illustrate precisely the opposite: The fruits of socialism, the possession of little or no personal property, both here, as evidenced in this passage with the Jerusalem church, and elsewhere equates to greater difficulty in meeting one’s own present and future needs—as well as the present and future needs of others who find themselves in difficult circumstances.

Conclusively, Romans 15:25–26 and Acts 2:44–47 serve as additional biblical evidence of churches helping the poor in other churches. Combined with Paul’s instruction to the church at Galatia, wherein again he states, “*So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith*” (Galatians 6:10), these passages serve as illustrations of the fourth tier of a God-intended societal safety net, that the institution of the church is commanded by God to take care of the needs of the poor. But again, no overt mention of the institution of the state is in view here.

E. GALATIANS 2:10

Romans 15 is not the only passage that indicates the need of other churches to help the poor in Jerusalem. Galatians 2:10 serves the same purpose:

“They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.”

Paul is being compelled to “*remember the poor*” at the Church in Jerusalem, albeit something he “*was eager to do.*” This serves as more evidence of a fourth tier of provision intended by God in His fabrication of a societal safety net for a nation.

F. JAMES 1:27

“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

To “*visit widows and orphans in their distress*” is euphemistic language, evidencing again the first-tier responsibility of a societal safety net: for individual believers to help all people, regardless of religious beliefs or lack thereof (there is no qualifier in this passage that says this applies to believers only), who possess genuine needs. Again, there is no mention of the institution of the state taking on this task.

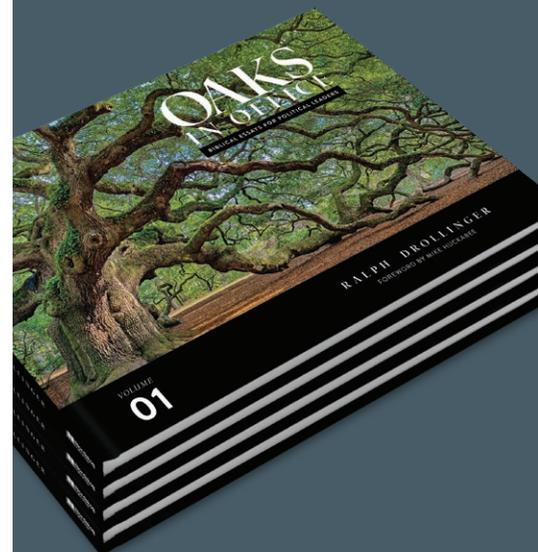
G. 1 JOHN 3:17

“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?”

This is yet another passage strongly admonishing believers to meet the needs of the poor. This passage seems to include first, second, or third tier responses to such needs.

III. CONCLUSION

Is there any wonder as to why believers have established orphanages, founded downtown rescue missions, and built magnificent hospitals? That is because they understand God’s plan to some extent for a societal safety net! There exists a specific design in Holy Writ relative to a biblically informed construct of a societal safety net for those in genuine need in any and all nations. Short of the ability for one to provide for himself, God’s order of catch basins is for *individuals* to help others. Closely related to that is



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helping the poor via the institutions of marriage and family. Lastly, the responsibility falls to the institution of the church—but only at such a time as the other predicates have fallen short of meeting those needs; only then does the need become the responsibility of the institution of the church.

Importantly, the institution of the state is explicitly absent: it is outside the preview of God's ordained means of provision for the truly needy.

Inefficient and ineffective results are always the outcome whenever any of God's ordained institutions attempts to hijack the responsibilities of another. The wise public servant always poses the question as to which God-ordained institution is specifically commissioned by Him to achieve a purpose. The wise public servant realizes God has not ordained His institution of government to be the end-all for every need that surfaces. Far from that, He has ordained five separate institutions, civil government being only *one* of them, in order to accomplish His will in a fallen world prior to His second coming. Specific in this regard, and as mentioned previously in this series and worth repeating, one cannot expect the state to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of society's bereft any more than one can expect the institution of the family to manufacture well-running automobiles.

God has ordained and provided other more efficient and effective means, catch basins if you will, to meet the genuine needs of others in a fallen world so, again, ideally no one ends up going down stream in society. In summary, those catch basins in their order of the priority of first response are:

The Hierarchical Order of God's Societal Safety Net

1. Meeting one's own needs
2. The institution of the family
3. The institution of marriage
4. The institution of the church

May God use this study to shape your thinking in these areas of importance to our nation.

Next week in part 10, we look at the need for righteous leadership in government as it relates to a nation's economic viability. **cm**

1 Bolstering this point is theologian Wayne Grudem. In his study of pertinent passages relative to our subject, he states: "I am surprised to discover that few people seem to realize that these verses say nothing about civil government overcoming individual citizens' poverty!"

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- Asunción, Paraguay
- Bangui, Central African Republic
- Brasilia, Brazil
- Bucharest, Romania
- Bujumbura, Burundi
- Dodoma, Tanzania
- Freetown, Sierra Leone
- Georgetown, Guyana
- Kiev, Ukraine
- Kigali, Rwanda
- Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Libreville, Gabon
- Lomé, Togo
- Lusaka, Zambia
- Malabo, Equatorial Guinea
- Maputo, Mozambique
- Mexico City, Mexico
- Monrovia, Liberia
- Montevideo, Uruguay
- Nairobi, Kenya
- N'Djamena, Chad
- Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
- Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea
- Porto-Novo, Benin
- Quito, Ecuador
- Riga, Latvia
- San Jose, Costa Rica
- Suva, Fiji
- Tegucigalpa, Honduras
- Vilnius, Lithuania
- Warsaw, Poland
- Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire
- Yaoundé, Cameroon