

# “THE GOSPEL OF WEALTH”

## BY ANDREW CARNEGIE

### Background on the Selection

Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919) worked his way from penniless immigrant to become one of the wealthiest men of his time and a founder of what became known as “scientific philanthropy.” A man of great personal charm and integrity, he was better read than most businessmen and also published several books. When the essay that comprises the first part of this *Reading* first appeared in 1889, it caused a great splash on both sides of the Atlantic. Here was a rich man criticizing the practices of the wealthy class and speaking frankly on what, to many millionaires, were sacred subjects—money and personal goals. This essay, described as “the most famous document in the history of American philanthropy,” lays out the philosophy behind Carnegie’s vision of professional philanthropy embodied in a foundation.

“The problem of our age,” he writes, “is the proper administration of wealth,” arguing that the mutual resentment between rich and poor can only be eased if those who accumulate wealth also themselves distribute it for society’s benefit. His uniquely American vision draws both on Carnegie’s Christian upbringing and his later Social Darwinist views and bears the stamp of his rise from extreme poverty to the highest stratum of the ladder of worldly success. Interestingly, he hated the term “philanthropy” and does not use it in this essay.

### Group Discussion Questions

- 1 What are the enormous changes hinted at in the first paragraphs and which Carnegie views as the spur to his new philanthropy?
- 2 Carnegie reveals his own philosophy of life in the paragraph, “The price which society pays for the law of competition.” How does Social Darwinism shape his view of wealth-creation and philanthropy?
- 3 How does Carnegie define “surplus” wealth? How would you? Who makes the final determination? On what basis would you, or Carnegie, ground your answer?

4 What are Carnegie’s “three modes” of dispensing surplus wealth? What is his assessment of each and why? Which do you favor?

5 What is his reasoning for how wealth has ended up in the hands of the few? To what end? How does he see charity and the poor?

6 Carnegie claims that his gospel of wealth “but echoes Christ’s words.” In actuality, there are stark differences with what Jesus was saying. What points does Carnegie miss? In what ways does he draw on the Jewish and Christian view of ownership as stewardship? How much does the gospel of wealth overlap with the Gospel of Jesus?

7 Carnegie argues that his method for administering surplus wealth will “solve the problem of the rich and the poor.” It’s now more than a hundred years since the method was put into practice. Has it? How well does his argument hold up given the developments of the past century? Is there more good will and interaction between people of varying wealth now? Has corporate philanthropy addressed underlying issues of envy and resentment between rich and poor? Of respect for rich and poor as full human beings who are responsible for their actions? How much of the results you see—for better or worse—can be traced back to Carnegie’s methods?

8 Discuss Carnegie’s celebration of capitalism and its alternatives. Do you agree with his assessments? In your experience, how well do other models for creating or distributing wealth make for the overall well-being of a society? For harmonious relations between rich and poor? On what principles do you base your giving?

## Further Reading

- *Doing Well & Doing Good: Money, Giving, and Caring in a Free Society*, The Trinity Forum (NavPress 2002)
- “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” by Leo Tolstoy, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1996.
- “The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg,” by Mark Twain, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1999.