

Christian Ethics and Poverty: A Position Paper
on Stewardship, Social Responsibility, and the Poor.

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Out of the plentiful variety of social and ethical problems facing the Church today, it is the aim of this paper to focus primarily upon the ethical issue of poverty. The aim of Christian ethics is to seek out one's moral responsibility from a foundational biblical framework, and this paper will answer, specifically, our appropriate responsibility to issues of poverty; including: our social responsibility to the poor, a biblical stance on personal finances, a biblical model of stewardship, and the moral debate surrounding personal wealth. This paper will take a closer look at the biblical teaching on poverty and its directive for managing funds, as well as the moral trappings of wealth and social injustices of poverty. It seems only pertinent, within a culture of such financial plenty, that we seriously consider the responsibilities accompanying our inherent wealth and take seriously the topic of money, which is so frequently discussed within scripture.

Let us first evaluate the condition of our Western culture, as one of the consequences of our prosperity is the gap between the rich and the poor, which is expanding at the expense of the poor.¹ "The United States and Canada just now have only 10 percent of the world's people but they have 75 percent of the world's income."² Can we assume, within our society of predominant wealth, our nation does not have members of the poor? Before we may discuss the poor, it is essential that we achieve a working definition of poverty. "Suppose we agree that poverty is a state in which resources are chronically insufficient to meet one's necessities and that absolute poverty means less than adequate food, housing, or clothing."³ According to this model, many North Americans are comfortably outside of the poverty level, but members of the poor, even the absolute poor, do exist. This, however, raises the question of what is, or is not, a required life necessity within our current society? This is difficult to answer within our culture of affluence

¹ Donald W. Hinze, *To Give and Give Again: A Christian Imperative for Generosity* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), 8.

² Joseph Fletcher, *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics at Work* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 194.

³ Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Carol Streams: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995), 402.

and consumerism. “Does ‘need’ include savings and insurance?”⁴ Does our Western affluence suggest we need more than many poorer areas of the world? The debate becomes whether or not making safeguards against the uncertainties of the future is an issue of mistrust of God’s provision, or a necessity of our culture, even shrewd management. Arguably, the search for security through the accumulation of wealth encourages a mistrust and desire for autonomy apart from God’s. Jesus spoke to his disciples, saying, “It is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt.19:23) This passage should not be taken as a condemnation of wealth, but of the divisiveness wealth may hold within the believer, as scripture points out that “no one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money.” (Mt. 6:24) As our energies are diverted to the pursuit of wealth, the seduction of wealth drowns out the faith.⁵ The warning is an attachment to things, covetousness and idolatry, which is sin. It was this attachment to things which caused Ananias and Sapphira’s judgment in Acts 5, as they misrepresented the value of their financial gift to the Church for a love of money, an action God dealt with most severely.

Another biblically founded argument is the concept of stewardship, for money is an important means by which God’s mission may be advanced. “Stewardship is growing, developing, advancing, and building the gifts with which God has blessed us. Stewardship is not conserving, holding, protecting, and preserving.”⁶ We receive this model of stewardship throughout scripture, but, perhaps, most clearly through the parable of a master and his three servants within Mt.25:14-30. Within the parable, in the master’s absence, each of the three servants was given charge of a sum of money. Upon the master’s return, he was pleased with the wise management of the first two servants, but displeased with the wasteful squandering of the

⁴ (McQuilkin 1995, 406)

⁵ (Hinze 1990, 3)

⁶ Kennon L. Callahan, *Giving and Stewardship in An Effective Church: A Guide For Every Member* (San Fransisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 115.

third, who simply returned the master's gifts without use. This biblical model of stewardship views everything within our possession, time, abilities, and wealth, as firstly God's, and we as mere managers with much responsibility.⁷ This managerial position evokes a responsibility upon the believer to handle their funds and possessions within a manner capable of good report before their Master in Heaven. Adherents to this attitude of stewardship see all believers, as managers of God's inherent wealth, and "stewards of God's mission."⁸

What, then, is our responsibility, if any, towards the poor in light of Christian ethics? We find ourselves in a similar position to that of the expert of law in who wanted to validate himself by asking Jesus, "who is my neighbor?" (Lk.10:29) To this, Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan, whereby a Jewish man, robbed and left for dead, is ignored by two of his own countrymen, but aided by his national enemy, a Samaritan. "It is intriguing that the word Luke uses for 'compassion' here is the one he uses only for the activity of God or Jesus elsewhere in the gospel."⁹ Jesus' parable is meant to juxtapose our sense of social responsibility and God's; for the parable suggests that we have, through cultural context and personal assumptions, placed restrictions upon those we would consider to be our neighbors. For Jesus, and what this parable articulates, all people are considered to be our neighbor, and not excluded from compassion. Much of scripture echoes this same theme of justice, which may take two forms: distributive and retributive. Distribution justice deals with justice through the distribution of goods, services, and aid. The issue of retributive justice deals with punishment for wrongdoing, an ultimate justice within God's judgment.¹⁰ Scripture, however, appears to call believers to distributive justice most clearly. The third commandment, do not steal, has an equal mandate for helping others by

⁷ E. Clinton Gardner, *Biblical Faith and Social Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960), 285-91.

⁸ (Callahan 1992, 121)

⁹ Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri, *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 10.

¹⁰ Kyle D. Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 44-45

protecting the product of everyone's labors and "to seek a world where stealing is less a temptation because there are fewer desperately poor people and less materialism."¹¹

Additionally, much of scripture speaks to issues of money and taking up the cause of the poor, a most vulnerable member of society. Within the Torah, there is a key theme of protecting the powerless. "Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry." (Ex.22:22-23) These members represent the most financially and socially vulnerable members of society and the God of the Bible most certainly cares for them. "To mistreat these members of the community whom God loves so deeply is a rejection of God."¹² God's favoritism seems to rest with the poor and oppressed, in contrast to a worldly stance which often shows more favoritism to the wealthy.¹³ It is important to remember that demonstrating mercy to the poor is not voluntary charity, but it is a mandatory commandment. Perhaps, the greatest opposition to a greater sense of social responsibility is the individualistic mentality rooted within our Western culture. Individualism, "the unself-conscious blindness to social problems and obligations,"¹⁴ appears to be the exact danger that scripture strives to protect against. Individualism suggests every person is responsible for themselves and all sins are rooted in the individual. "The ultimate triumph of individualism is expressed by the... inability to even raise the issue of social obligation."¹⁵ The Old Testament does not support such individualism.

As followers of Christ, we best look to Jesus' example and response to the poor as a model for ourselves. From the outset of Jesus' inaugurating declaration, his ministry was "to proclaim good news to the poor." (Lk.4:18) Jesus' ministry was among sinners, which included the socially and financially disenfranchised, where he was needed most. Jesus demonstrated this

¹¹ (Fedler 2006, 103)

¹² (Fedler 2006, 106.)

¹³ Mary Alice Mulligan and Rufus Burrow, Jr. *Standing in the Margin: How Your Congregation Can Minister With the Poor (and Perhaps Recover Its Soul in the Process)* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 73.

¹⁴ S. Dennis Ford, *Sins of Omission: A Primer On Moral Difference* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 46.

¹⁵ (Ford 1990, 49)

emphasis upon the disenfranchised when he said, ““it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”” (Mt.9:12) “Congregations who claim to follow Jesus are commanded to join in his ongoing work of setting at liberty those who are oppressed and otherwise counted among the least.”¹⁶ These outcast members of society surely include many varieties of oppression, including poverty. Several times within the gospels Jesus instructs his disciples to give to the poor (Mt.19:21; Mk.10:21; Lk.11:41, 12:33, 18:22), and, surely, Jesus’ example portrays a concern and responsibility to the poor; but, foundationally, it is the very characteristic of God’s love which admonishes us to a concern for the poor. Consider Jesus’ parable of the great banquet. (Lk.14:15-24) Within the parable, after the banquet host receives only excuses from his intended guests, the host sends his servants “into the streets and alleys of the town to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame,” excluding those originally invited. The parable is used to explain Christ’s activity and ministry to the socially and financially downtrodden. While the Jews may have rejected Jesus, his love and forgiveness has been poured out to the world, and God’s compassion has most definitely been seen and heard by those impoverished and oppressed. The model of Christ’s love was sacrificial, as evidenced on the cross, and as our highest standard of love. We are commanded through scripture to love others as ourselves (Mt.22:37-38), and this is a love authenticated by actions not without expense. This cost may take on many forms but, certainly, includes the financial, as we are given powerful capacities, time, and means by which we may partner in God’s ongoing work.¹⁷ “The kingdom of God of God represents a great reversal of the status quo.”¹⁸ While these acts of mercy reveal more of the character of God, this mercy to the poor also “calls us into a deeper practice of listening to the

¹⁶ (Mulligan and Burrow 2004, 56)

¹⁷ (Mulligan and Burrow 2004, 65)

¹⁸ (Fedler 2006, 145)

transcendent God.”¹⁹ Scripture’s call to care for the poor is both a benefit of the downtrodden, in conveying God’s mercy, and an instrument in softening the hearts of believers as active participants in God’s redemptive work.

The New Testament Church echoes Jesus’ teaching and paints a clear picture of caring for the poor. James 1:27 admonishes followers of Christ to “to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world,” and 1 Timothy 5 speaks clearly to the need of supporting the financially vulnerable, giving priority to those within one’s social responsibility and sphere of influence: “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Tm.5:8) In fact, the New Testament example of social support for the poor was so good, that Paul strongly rejected ‘freeloading’ and instructed such people to get to work.²⁰ It would appear that, in regards to personal poverty, one is admonished to work hard and not be a financial burden, but productive member, to the Church body. We see this same teaching modeled by the Apostle Paul who wrote to the church in Thessalonica; “we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.” (2 Thes.3:8) Those capable of supporting themselves should do so with honesty and integrity, as part of God’s created design,²¹ while those finding themselves struggling to meet life’s necessities should not be fearful from also seeking aid from the body of believers in integrity of their need. This does not, however, suggest that those in roles of provision for others may shirk their responsibilities, for “self-contained poverty” or modest living is admirable; but when one pulls others into that poverty, such lifestyles becomes questionable.²² Frugal living should not be a guise or excuse for laziness.

¹⁹ Pamela Couture, *Child Poverty: Love, Justice, and Social Responsibility* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2007), 45.

²⁰ (McQuilkin 1995, 408)

²¹ (Gardner 1960, 292-3)

²² Kelly S. Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 27.

What about caring for those outside the Church community? The example of Christ certainly provides enough support, through his exemplary model, to minister to the downtrodden members of society extending beyond his followers. “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (Gal.6:10) Unfortunately, the assumption may exist within our individualistic and capitalist minded society that the poor are poor as a result of personal laziness or failure. While scripture does not support laziness, it also does not treat poverty as a direct cause of it in most cases either. In order to effectively minister to the poor, the Church needs to reassess its attitudes and begin within their area of influence and mission field. Through an attitude of solidarity, “understanding the interconnections that exists between oppression and privilege, rich and poor,”²³ that all followers of Christ are called to act as continuous participants in the ministry of Christ to the poor and oppressed; we may actively go to the poor in order to fulfill this mandate. In 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, the New Testament Church is encouraged towards generosity, an exceeding generosity to the poor and those in need. For the apostle Paul, and New Testament Church, generosity towards others is necessary, so that “others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.” (2 Cor.9:13) Not only was this generous living admirable, but a sign of obedience and powerful witness; for Paul admonished Christians onward beyond mere obedience, but to sow generously and give cheerfully as giving directly to the ministry of Christ. In this same manner James challenges believers that faith unaccompanied by obedient works is dead. He uses the example, “suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” (Jm.2:15-16) In this same manner, scripture does not appear to

²³ (Mulligan and Burrow 2004, 88)

provide any footing for those unwilling to be generous with the poor. For any person assuming that he might only provide marginal aid to the poor and oppressed, by neither worsening their situation nor attending to their immediate physical needs, James rebukes openly as having the equivalent of no faith at all. Scripture demands faith lived in action.

“What are we to conclude from the biblical themes of God’s special concern for the poor and oppressed?”²⁴ An intrinsically linked love of God and love of people is at the heart of biblical message. This love of people speaks clearly to a protection of the poor as vulnerable members of our society deeply valued by God. One must make amends within their own life and management to be generous, as well as do what is necessary to protect these vulnerable members of society from abuse. One way believers may participate in God’s restorative work within the lives of others is through the obedient stewardship of funds; being mindful, however, that the misappropriation or covetousness of these entrusted gifts is a sin, dangerously leading the believer astray from God. Certainly, there are worse eternal fates than poverty. We are to promote a detachment of things and increasing value of others, especially those overlooked and undervalued by society. We might best articulate our responsibility to personal wealth and the poor, as to produce all the wealth you can with honesty, to manage what God has place within our care as wise stewards, and giving faithfully in obedience.²⁵ “Hence, the Christian should care for himself or herself as for the poor, by tending to the necessities and nothing beyond.”²⁶ In doing so, proving obedient stewards of what is inherently God’s and in taking up the cause of the poor with compassion.

²⁴ (Mulligan and Burrow 2004, 72)

²⁵ (McQuilkin 1995, 407)

²⁶ (Johnson 2007, 86)

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