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WITNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY
TO THE POOR

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Introduction

Much is being said about the poor and hungry and their needs. Indeed, "Fight Poverty" has become a banner for various political and social movements. Some have said, "The government owes me a living," meaning that whether they work or not, they deserve a living wage.

We hear clamors from various religious groups urging us to help the poor. The old liberals with their social gospel preached a works salvation. Their concept of salvation was doing good works including helping the poor, widow, and orphan. They were most concerned with the materially poor. Liberation theology, a "Christian" variety of Marxism, sees salvation largely in terms of political and economic liberation. (See *Ministry With the Poor*, Theological Education Fund, WCC, Geneva.) It has a great appeal to the revolutionary movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹⁾ The "unconcerned evangelicals," those only concerned with the needs of the soul, have little concern for the material needs of the poor.

The Christian view is to work and serve so you can support yourself and others. The work ethic begins in Genesis and continues through the whole Bible. After Adam's fall, God drove him from the Garden of Eden and commanded him to cultivate the ground from which he was taken (Gen. 3 : 23). In the Decalogue, God commanded a day of rest after *six days of work*. Solomon urged the sluggard to look at the ant as an example of a hard working insect, and be wise. Paul said, "Let him who steals, steal no longer; but rather let him labour, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need (Eph. 4 : 28). To the Thessa-

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1) This Neo-Marxism developed by Ernst Bloch has contributed to the "Christian Theology of Hope," and especially to the thinking of Jurgen Moltmann in the 1960's. Neo-Marxism has inspired much of the theorizing about liberation in the Third World.

lonians, Paul exhorted, "...If anyone will not work, neither let him eat. 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. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good." (I Thess. 3 : 10 - 13). Peter exhorted, "Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good works and glorify God on the day of visitation." (I Peter 2 : 12). This is witness by service. Just before this (2 : 9), Peter had called them "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Notice the relationship between service and witness- we declare by our good deeds. Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they were saved "unto good works," for the purpose of good works.

Who are the poor? In the Scripture, initially the poor were described as those who had basic material needs. This problem was accentuated by the fact that lacking material goods meant they also lacked social position, and therefore were unable to defend themselves socially or politically. The concept of the poor then changed from that of the purely physically poor to include that of spiritual poverty. The poor and needy are not just the socially or materially needy; they are also the spiritually needy.

Whose responsibility is it to care for the needy? In the Old Testament, this responsibility was delegated to those in positions of authority - the elders, the judges, and then the kings. Prophets predicted a Messiah who would come to establish a perfect and eternal kingdom in which He would provide for the poor and needy. These poor and needy (cf. David in the Psalms) were not just those who were physically deprived, but were those who would confess before God the poverty of their souls. In obedience to Christ, God's people have a responsibility to both the physical and spiritual poor. Their motive should be love and compassion (note F. Schaeffer's tapes on Economics). Our responsibility is not restricted to fellow Christians - the purpose for helping non-Christian poor is for a witness to them of the active love of Christ.

A Study of Some Relevant Bible Passages

God is concerned about the poor and needy. Deuteronomy 10 : 17, 18 testifies, "For the Lord your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of Lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and

clothing." God shows love by providing food and clothing to the alien, or stranger, and by executing justice for the orphan and widow. He said, "Show me your love for the alien, for you were aliens in Egypt."

What about lending? Polonius advises Laertes in Shakespeare's Hamlet, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." But God says, In Deuteronomy 15 : 7 - 11,

"If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. (Having a right attitude is important.) Beware, lest there is a base thought in your heart saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission is near, and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you. You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease to be in the land, therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'"

God is saying that His people ought to loan to the poor and needy. This was said here in connection with the year of remission, which came once every seven years, according to Jewish law. On the seventh year, one could not charge interest on the money that he had loaned. Deuteronomy 24 : 12 is talking about a very poor man, The only collateral that such a man had to offer was the cloak from his back. So in order to buy food, he gives the lender his coat. The Lord commanded the lender to return his coat to him every night. A man might pay his debt a good deal quicker if he had to sleep in the cold, but in the case of the poor and needy, lenders were not to keep his coat overnight. Furthermore, the believing poor were not to be charged interest (Ex. 22 : 25).

God's protection of the poor and needy in His law is further illustrated in verses 14 and 15 : "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he may not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you."

The man in verse 15 was a man who lived "from hand to mouth." He was totally dependent on his wages. The Lord commanded then to give such a man his wages before the sun went down so he could still go out and buy food. When neglected, the poor and needy would go to God, and God would consider it a sin. (vs. 15)

One of the agricultural laws in Leviticus commanded the owners to have the reapers leave some grain and fruit for the poor gleaners.

"Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners

of the field, neither shall you gather the gleaning of your harvest. Nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19 : 9, 10) We see this illustrated in Ruth 2 : 2 - 23 where Boaz instructs his workers to make sure there is enough gleaning for Ruth. (See Deut. 24 : 19~22)

In Esther 9 : 22, when the Lord established the feast of Purim, He commanded the people to express their joy in deliverance from the hand of Haman by giving. To quote : "...because on those days, the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing, and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor." Could this be the roots of the modern pot-luck fellowship dinners? Do we remember to send some to the poor?

In the Psalms, God is shown as the One who takes care of the poor and needy-poor meaning not only the physically poor, but the spiritually poor. David the king considers himself as one of the "poor." "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted." (Psalm 25:16) "This poor man cried and the Lord heard him ; and saved him out of all his troubles." (Psalm 34:6) "But I am afflicted and needy; Hasten to me, O God. Thou art my help and my deliverer." (Psalm 70:5)

Solomon in Proverbs writes, "Do not rob the poor because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord will plead their cause, and take the life of those who rob them." (Proverbs 22 : 22, 23) God will take the side of those who are needy; He will even "take the life of those who rob them."

Turning now to the Prophets, we read about the Messiah Who will care for the poor and needy.

Isaiah refers to the coming Messiah Who will establish righteousness and justice on the earth. "But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips will He slay the wicked." (Isaiah 11 : 4)

Isaiah speaks much of the Messiah's work of caring for those who are poor and needy.

We are reminded of Jesus' statements that he came for the afflicted, for the sick, for those who were not righteous, for those who recognized their spiritual needs before God (in fulfillment of prophecy), he brought water to the "thirsty", like the Samaritan, woman.

In Luke 4 : 18, at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus read Isaiah 61 : 1, which

says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me...to bring good news to the afflicted, he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to bring liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners..." Jesus then declared Himself to be the Messiah who would care for the captives, the blind, the downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, to proclaim the eternal Jubilee. He thus claimed to fulfill the O. T. promises as Messiah King. The ultimate reference in the promises was not to material, but spiritual benevolence. His material benevolence was the means whereby He validated His messianic message. His pattern, therefore, was to use benevolence as a vehicle to communicate the Gospel as well as to validate his Divine Nature. (cf. Mk. 2 : 1 - 12 - healing the paralytic, etc.)

When John the Baptist (Matt. 11 : 2ff) was in prison, he sent word to Jesus asking Him, "Are you the Messiah, the anointed King, the son of David?" Jesus answered, "Yes, I am. I do what the Messiah was to do. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them."

Although Jesus showed great compassion for the physically afflicted, His primary concern was not to alleviate physical ills, but to bring men to see that He was the Messiah. It was to cause people to repent. "Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent." (Matt. 11 : 20) Jesus declared by His acts and words that He was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, who had come to help the poor.

In the temple, Jesus said, "Come unto me, everyone who thirsts." Here the emphasis is on spiritual benevolence. Jesus said He is the living water, the water that gives life. Rivers of living water shall flow out of the heart (innermost being) of the believer in Jesus. (John 7 : 37, 38) Jesus refers to the Old Testament promise of Isaiah 55 : 1 ; "Come, everyone that thirsts, buy food without money and get water without any coinage. This Old Testament promise is fulfilled in me." (note also : Isa. 29 : 17, 18 and Ex. 4 : 11-fulfilled in Mk. (7 : 37)

Christians are to follow His example, in helping the poor. Matthew 25 : 31-46 describes the time when Christians will be required to give an accounting for their deeds :

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with him, then He will sit on His glorious throne, and all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from

the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me...' and these will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

When Jesus returns the second time, there will be a judgement. Men will stand before Almighty God and He will ask, "What did you *do* about your faith?" (cf. James 1 : 22-27) True Christians will show their faith by concern for the poor.

To whom do we minister? Who is our neighbor? This is clearly laid out for us in the familiar parable of the good Samaritan. (Lk. 10 : 25-37) A lawyer was trying to gain legal grounds whereby Jesus could be charged as a false prophet (cf. Deut. 13ff.), and so he asked Jesus how one can gain eternal life. Jesus answered with another question, "What does the law say?" The lawyer quoted Deuteronomy 6 : 5, and Leviticus 19 : 18. He hoped to trap Jesus as he continued, "Who is my neighbor?" The Pharisees considered only fellow Jews as neighbors. They hated the Samaritans whom they classified as idolators and worthy of death, and would have no dealings with them. (Jn. 4 : 9, 8 : 48) From Leviticus 19 : 18, the Pharisee might argue that "neighbor" might be a fellow Jew because of the immediate context (vs. 17). But it is clear from Leviticus 24 : 19-22 that the "Neighbor" is the person living close to you, be he fellow Jew or a Gentile a stranger. As we have seen previously, the law concerned the stranger within the gate as well as the Jew-Jesus brings this truth home with the parable of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan (the most hated of all Gentiles) practices Leviticus 19 : 18 while the Jews did not.

Christ was our example as a servant in God's kingdom. He said, "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." The apostles and elders continued Christ's ministry as they ruled over the church. They received the ministry of taking care of the poor and needy as they were to be the shepherds of Christ's flock after he left. Jesus provided for them and they provided for others. Deacons were chosen in Acts 6 to help with caring for the poor.

The early church took collections for the poor as well as for the needs of the local congregation. In Acts 11 : 29, 30 we find that the disciples sent a collection to the elders for the poor in Jerusalem. In Acts 24 : 17, we read about Paul giving offerings and alms. In Romans 15:25-27, we see Paul taking offerings from Macedonian and Achaian churches for the poor in Jerusalem. In I Corinthians 16 : 1-4, Paul gives orders to Ga-

latian churches exhorting them to take offerings on the first day of the week for the poor saints in Jerusalem. In II Corinthians 8 : 1-15 and 9 : 1-15, Paul uses the Macedonian and Achaian Christians as examples of those who gave liberally and exhorts the Corinthians to do likewise. This should begin in the home, included in the fifth commandment (Ex. 20 : 12) and in similar passages (Eph. 6 : 2 and Mark 7 : 11-13) the responsibility of children meeting the needs of their parents is included in the idea of honoring them. Paul in I Timothy 5 : 8 reinforces the principle of the family taking responsibility for its poor members : "If any provide not for his own, and especially those of his own house, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever." James said : "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world"

Post N. T. History

Gradually, almsgiving became an act of merit and satisfaction for sins instead of the N. T. position that such gifts were the fruit of love for God. This idea became dominant in the church until the reformation at which time indulgences had become prevalent. The diaconate was somewhat active before the reformation, but was revived at the reformation. Offerings were again taken regularly for the relief of the poor on the Lord's day.

CRC Report

In a recent report of the Task Force on World Hunger of the Christian Reformed Church, they dealt with the problem of hunger and poverty and the task of the church and church members. It urges the development of a Christian lifestyle and the modification of cultural, economic, and political structures. The following are their guidelines which give a summary of their stance.

1. Relieving world hunger is not incidental to other, more pressing obligations, but is an unavoidable dimension of our stewardship in the world. God wants us to exercise this stewardship by caring for the physical world, by exercising self-control in the consumption of the world's resources, and by sharing its bounties with all the inhabitants of the earth.
2. We should alleviate hunger because God commands that we love our neighbor as ourselves. Such love expresses itself both in a compassion of heart and in a striving for justice.

3. Since man's most basic need is for the Living Water and the Bread of Life, the Christian response to the challenge of world hunger must address itself to the total person. The Christian response to the issue thus joins the proclamation of the Gospel to the practice of justice and mercy.
4. The basic motive for combating hunger is our thankfulness to God for the salvation which has appeared in Jesus Christ and for the surplus of benefits we have received in Him (Romans 8 : 32). It is precisely our allegiance to Jesus Christ that moves us to show compassion to the hungry and to promote justice through effective social structures.
5. Feeding the hungry begins with a ministry to the saints, but extends beyond that as a program of doing good to all who are in need. This requires a mentality which views with compassion all the world's human communities (Christian as well as non-Christian) who lack the basic necessities of life.
6. Because the effects of sin penetrate human structures and communal relations no less than they do personal attitudes and habits, Christians need to subject all existing social, economic, and political structures to the biblical standards of love and justice. Systemic evil calls for systemic reformation.
7. Since most North American Christians belong to the rich of the earth, which places them under the biblical injunction to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, they bear a special responsibility to relieve world hunger.
8. The call of Scripture to a life of sobriety, contentment, and self-denial requires that we limit our consumption to such a level that it does not deprive others of the necessities of life. If a lowest life-sustaining minimum is to be maintained for all, we need to carefully limit the amount which we consume.
9. God's generosity in providing enough food to feed 4 billion people today and His promise to His people to care for them each day (Matt. 6 : 25-34), should prompt us to be generous also. God's generosity is our responsibility.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Was Jesus selective as to the recipients and the occasion of His help? Leonard J. Coppes (*Who Will Lead Us*, P.141) feels He was, and that we should be also. Others disagree. If so, what are the Scriptural guidelines for this selection?
2. How does providence enter in (the people we meet and live near)?

3. Should a greater portion of our time and effort be spent visiting and helping the poor and needy? (Including hospitals, prisons, sick, etc)
4. Should greater effort be put into preventing poverty (loans, self-support projects, financial management counseling, education in nutrition, agricultural advice, energy source and saving advice, etc)?
5. Is there a Scriptural injunction to go to the ends of the earth to find and help the physically and materially poor and needy non-Christian neighbors?
6. Should our giving be without any pointed attempt to make converts, or should it be used as a means of witness of the love of Christ?
7. How much should we get involved in social work and politics?
8. Is there a danger of encouraging sloth and laziness with "handouts"? When are self-help projects the answer?
9. What is the Christian's image in your area? Is it one who loves mercy, does justly, and walks humbly with his God?
10. What is the relationship of medical and relief work to evangelism and church planting?

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