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Responses

Two responses to Professor Jones' article

(a) *by* JAMES W. SKILLEN

THE brief survey of the Old Testament's picture of 'the poor'. as David Jones presents it. is very helpful. It should be sufficient to overcome the two distorted interpretations that he characterizes at the beginning of his paper. The conclusion of the paper is slightly disappointing, however, because even though he indicates that the New Testament continues the complexity of Old Testament usages, he does not adequately pull the pieces together in a way that gives us a clear understanding of the New Testament teaching. His concluding paragraph Following the quote from Calvin needs further elaboration.

The problem is not simply that the two Testaments use the word 'poor' in both a 'literal' and a 'figurative' sense, with both an 'economic' and a 'religious' connotation. The socio-economic conditions of the poor and the rich appear to be related to the condition of mankind before the face of God in a way that does not leave two usages simply dangling side by side.

On the one hand the 'poverty' of spirit which God requires of the proud and haughty, or which he weeks to bring about by means of the chastisement and affliction which he himself administers, or which he applauds when he finds it present in the heart (Isaiah 42; 66:2; Psalm 37; Matthew 5:3; Revelation 3:19), is a 'poverty' that clearly reflects and leads to further humility, openness toward God, love of neighbor, and non-selfishness. In this sense 'poverty' does not merely have a 'religious connotation', but rather it suggests an attitude of heart that is part of a way of life—a life of deeds, including economic deeds, of justice, mercy, and love. God's chastening of his people by means of exile (Isaiah 30:20–21: 42:24–25) was not merely to give them 'poor hearts' but hearts that p. 228 would lead them to 'walk in his ways' and to 'obey his law'. Poverty in this sense is not 'figurative' in contrast to 'literal&3rs; poverty, but is a 'way of life' that would necessarily express itself in deeds of economic justice so that none would be 'poor'.

On the other hand, it seems clear from the passages which Jones cites, that conditions of economic privation and oppression are judged by God to be unjust and improper, manifesting the hard hearts, selfish attitudes, and unjust social structures of those who are responsible for such poverty and oppression (Psalm 82:3–4; Isaiah 1:16–20 ; James 5:1–6). Thus the problem here is not simply that some kind of literal poverty exists as compared with 'non-literal' poverty, or that an economic condition which is not 'religious' comes into focus. Rather, poverty, hunger, and oppression are wrong in God's sight because his creatures were created to be recipients of his rich blessings; they were created to enjoy fullness of life in this world. If some do not have enough to eat, or if they have no place to lay their heads at night, then this situation calls for: (1) patience and humility (poorness of spirit) on the part of the poor (Psalm 37:7, 16–17); (2) radical repentance on the part of the rich whose deeds are partly or totally responsible for the hunger and oppression of the poor (Amos 5; Isaiah 55:7); and (3) the establishment of new cultural patterns and social structures that will allow everyone to be 'rich' in the enjoyment of God's blessings while being humble ('poor') before the face of God (Isaiah 1:16–17).

If this is what the Scriptures teach, then we can say that they actually reveal quite different meanings of wealth and poverty; they do not simply make references of a 'literal' and 'non-literal' character by means of the same terms. 'Poverty' is a reference to the condition of not being free to enjoy God's earthly blessings: a tragedy that ought not to

exist. God is always on the side of the poor in this case and against the rich who are responsible for the poverty of others. The rich and the oppressors are wrong and they stand under judgement. That is why they (the rich) are truly poverty-stricken, 'wretched, poor, blind and naked' (Revelation 3:14–21), in the sense that their lives are not 'right with God'. In this sense the rich are really poor, not honorably 'poor in spirit', but rather 'poor' in that God will spit them out of his mouth.

Being rich in the enjoyment of God's blessings, or *shalom*, on p. 229 the other hand, is a proper way of life for God's creatures—all of whom should be enjoying his blessings. In this sense those who are 'right with God' are rich (Revelation 2:9), not just in a non-literal sense, but in the deepest sense of present condition as well as eschatological anticipation (Psalm 37:3–4, 9, 16; Matthew 5:3). However, if there are rich people who are rich in the possession of certain things (money, land, food, etc.) as a result of selfishness or oppression that makes or keeps others poor, then they are actually living deformed, unjust lives that reveal their real poverty before God.

My conclusion from Jones' study, in other words, is that 'poverty of spirit' in the healthy sense is not a figurative use of the word 'poor' that also has a literal economic sense, but rather is a use of the term 'poor' that goes hand in hand with *shalom*, wealth, righteousness, justice, and richness before God. Such 'richness before God' (or humility of spirit) works its way out in blessing for everyone, including the end of 'poverty'. On the other hand, 'poverty' in the sense of oppression, hunger, and the lack of freedom to enjoy God's blessings goes hand in hand with those unjust and anti-normative attitudes and institutions of the rich and the oppressors whom God always stands against in judgment. This kind of poverty flows from the works of those who are truly wretched before God ('poor' in the sense of Revelation 3:14–21), and the tragedy of it is that even those who are 'right with God' might suffer much unjust poverty in this world because of the sinfulness of the rich.

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(b) *by* HARVIE M. CONN

???IN REACTION to what I increasingly see to be the world Reformed community's 'hidden theological curriculum', I decry the methodology we mistakenly call 'theology' which starts with p. 230 abstracted word studies and not what Jose Miguez-Bonino called 'that concrete reality in which we find ourselves'. I do not ask simply that our theology be concrete, what Francis Schaeffer might call the practice of the truth. I argue that if theology is to be theology, and not an abstracted, theoretical process of conceptualizing propositions concerning God, it begins, not abstractly with the Bible, but with the Bible in confrontation against trampled human dignity, against the plunder of a vast majority of people. It cannot simply ask: 'Who are the poor?' That is abstraction. It can only begin with the realities provided by the September 15, 1975 issue of *Newsweek*, the subsistence of 900 million persons on less than $75 a year, while the gross national product per capita in the United States reaches $5,590 in 1972, the Netherlands $2,840.

Theology begins with the reality of dividing up the world into a rich one-third and a poor two-thirds, the rich claiming 87% of the world's total GNP each year, the poor two-thirds left with 13%! A theology of the poor begins with the words of Racema da Silva. resident of a Brazilian slum. 'Sometimes I think,' he writes, "If I die, I won't have to see my children suffering as they are." Sometimes I even think of killing myself. So often I see them crying, hungry; and there I am, without a cent to buy them some bread' (Ronald

Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1977, p. 31). Liberation theologians call this *praxis*, the Marxist abhorrence of ideology, the action/reflection call to economic, social self-realization in making (or changing) history, in work. on which theology is to reflect critically and creatively. I deplore what I feel to be the Renaissance view of man on which that concept of *praxis* is built by Marxism's dialectical materialism. But I recognize slowly that my own dimensions of theologizing are too often constructed from white, middle class *status quo* systems created by capitalism and not by Christianity as 'the third way'. And I see dimly and grudgingly that until these 'humanist' presuppositions are challenged also by the painful reality of poverty *in concreto, et in Scriptura*, I cannot make a beginning at theology.

I fear that my way of looking at the Bible, my definition of exegesis, has not been gripped enough by the implications of Martin Luther's statement that 'if you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you arc not preaching the Gospel at all' (Sider, *ibid.*, p. 231 p. 58). My model for doing theology has been held captive by the same ideology of objectivism that Walter Wink sees as the bankruptcy behind the classic pattern of historico-grammatical exegesis. 'By detaching the text from the stream of my existence, Biblical criticism has hurled it into the abyss of an objectified past' (*The Bible, in Iluman Transformation, Fortress Press*, 1973, p. 4). I cannot agree with Wink that the answer is a psycho-analytic approach to the text, but I lind his charges hurt my evangelical model of exegesis, or syntactic word study, as much as the Liberal one he has in mind. I wonder if what I have comfortably thought of as my Reformed model of objective exegesis pulls me away from the missiological challenge which the concrete reality of the poor presents to the world Christian, rather than sensitizing me of it. I wonder if I have still more to learn from Calvin and his methodolegy of *theologia pietatis*, which offered our world a way of doing theology radically different from Lightfoot, Westcott, and F. F. Bruce. What did Karl Barth see in Calvin's method when, in his preface to the second edition of his commentary on Romans (1921), he notes: 'How energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text. sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the 16th century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the 16th century hears.' I have no desire to cling to the existentialist mould Barth saw as the Calvinist's counterpart for the 20th century. But I no longer desire either to cling to the crypto-rationalist model of 'objective' exegesis that makes our response as images of God to the world's poor an accountability primarily to 'the guild of Biblical scholars'. I am equally sure David Jones does not want that either. But do our word studies begin at the wrong place and build walls instead of breaking them down?[1]

How then does Scripture function if 'objective' exegesis is defined as a myth? How shall I answer Bultmann's virtually rhetorical question, 'Is exegesis without pressuppositions possible?' if I now question the only legitimate presupposition he seemed willing to admit, 'the historical method of interrogating the text', p. 232 history understood by him as a continuum that 'cannot be rent by the interference of supranatural, transcendent powers'? (*Existence and Faith*, Meridian Books, 1960, p. 291). Am I left only with 'an *existentiell* encounter with the text'? Shall I, with Frederick Herzog, endorse Bultmann's argument simply by saying that Bultmann (and Wink) must now add a 'rider' to their argument, namely, 'the socio-economic context of exegetical work' ('Liberation Hermeneutic as Ideology Critique?' *Interpretation*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, 391)? With Herzog,

[1] I have given more elaborate treatment to this classical model of exegesis in 'Contextualization: A New Method for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 10. No. 1 (January, 1978).

am I left with a return to the quest for the historical Jesus, only this time to an affirmation of Jesus' self hood as freedom and liberation?

I think not. In reaction to Bultmann and Herzog, I decry any methodology which starts with an acknowledgement of our preunderstanding, even with the socio-economic concreteness of our reality, and offers us no inerrant canon by which to judge that preunderstanding. Again, I do not ask simply that our theology be concrete, what Frederick Herzog might call our 'solidarity with the despised and forgotten'. I argue that if theology is to be theology, it begins, not abstractly with the Bible, as a mine of proof-texts awaiting the chisel of the systematic theologian, but with what John Murray called 'exegesis … regulated by the principle of Biblical theology', the Bible as the inerrant history of special revelation. I seek to put our Biblical study of the poor under new management, under the eschatological domination of history with Christ as the realized center of its promises, the New Testament as the end-point of the process of revelation history.

With Richard B. Gaffin, I see exegesis itself as 'misunderstood if Biblical theology is seen as no more than a step (even the most important) in the exegetical process. It does not appear to be going too far to say that in "Biblical theology", that is, effective recognition of the redemptive-historical character of Biblical revelation, the principle of context, of the analogy of Scripture, the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, so central in the Reformation tradition of Biblical interpretation, finds its most pointedly Biblical realization and application. All exegesis ought to be Biblical-theological' (*The New Testament Student and Theology*, John H. Skilton, ed., Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976, pp. 45–6).

How should this methodology affect my study of the poor in the p. 233 Bible? I should not spend 11 out of 17 pages of typescript on the Old Testament and the poor and only three on the New Testament (and most of those in the Book of Revelation). Or, as Ronald Sider does, three rich, full chapters (Sider, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–130) without a proportionate focus on Jesus, not simply in his incarnational identification with the poor (pp. 68–9) but Jesus in his redemptive work of substitution as the suffering poor man of Isaiah 53. With Herman Ridderbos, I should analyze the Gospel message of the Kingdom of God as 'the Gospel of the poor' (*Coming of the Kingdom*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962, pp. 185–92). I should underline, perhaps more than David Jones does in the opening sentence of his paper, those critical occasions in the gospels when Jesus intereprets his mission in terms of bringing good news to the poor. And I should want to analyze those commandments of Jesus regarding giving to the poor (Matthew 19:21, Luke 12:16ff.; 16:19ff.) as applications of the demands of the Kingdom (Ridderbos, *ibid.*,, pp. 321–9). And then I should be ready to turn to the task of Jesus' people with regard to the poor as it is reflected in Acts and the rest of the New Testament. I should struggle to see (and help others see) the divinely inspired agony of Isaiah over the injustice of his people's treatment of the poor (a category in the prophets closely related to 'the remnant' concept) issuing in Isaiah's prophecies of the coming *Goel* who would 'redeem' his orphaned, widowed kinsmen (Isaiah 43:14; 54:5; 59:20), the coming King who would judge his people with righteousness, and God's afflicted with justice (Psalm 72:2ff.), the coming Poor man (Psalm 22:1ff.) who, in his own atoning suffering as slave/servant, bears our sorrows. And I should see this as the center of the New Testament focus on Jesus, 'the Poor Man', who takes upon his lips the words of the poor man's agony as the words of Messianic redemption (Matthew 27:46), one more royal Messianic title alongside 'Son of Man', 'Son of God', 'Lord'. My effort in all these suggestions is not meant as a corrective for David's exegesis (I have no radical disagreements with it) nor even an implementation of it. I am simply sketching where I feel a Biblical theological model might go in its analysis

of the Biblical view of the poor. I offer no suspicions David might disagree with it. Balance is always hard to obtain in a paper with deadlines of brevity. I still engage in self-reaction. p. 234

The danger will always be that Biblical theology will become an abstractionist discipline and not a conscientizing instrument, an aid for understanding some Pauline theology of the poor, and not ours. Brevard Childs reminds us of its failure in precisely this area in the past (*Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Westminster Press, 1970, pp. 123ff.). Even the eschatological 'now' of our stance between the 'already' of Christ's first coming and the 'not yet' of his second coming can be manipulated to abstract the history of redemption from our place in it with Peter and Paul and John (I Corinthians 10:11), a *Heilsgeschichte* that runs parallel to, but never touches, *Weltgeschichte*.

I decry any methodology, even that which we call Biblical theology, if it issues in a pseudo-gnostic notion of revelation in or by itself, revelation without a covenant call to action towards the poor, commissioned by the inherent authority of God's covenant truth. I argue that if theology is to be Biblical theology, it ends. not in the self-reassurance of an exegetical job well done, but in the re-appraisal again of those demands and solutions we originally brought to it at the initiation of our participation m the 'hermeneutical circle'. In the language of Childs, 'each new generation standing in its particular moment of history searches the Scriptures in order to discern the will of God, and strives to receive guidance towards the obedient life that must be pursued within concrete issues of the world' (Childs, *ibid.*, p. 131).

How has David Jones' Biblical analysis, or Ridderbos', made me ask again, in the face of my wealth and my whiteness, 'Who is my neighbor?' How has Amos' call for a tidal wave of justice (Amos 5:24) sent me to the sirens of Seoul, Korea with a word of good news from God to the prostitute and pimps and the police who support the system? Will James' remarkable declaration of the literal poor as the special objects of divine favor say to me, 'The rich must live more simply that the poor may simply live'? Will a Biblical *diakonia*, contextualized by Jesus into clothing for the naked and visits to prison (Matthew 25:31–46), open my heart to brothers and sisters in prisons in South Korea or Russia, the images of God defiled by the power of the state? Will the Pauline exaltation of the 'new man' formed out of black and white. Gentile and Jew, allow us, with David Bosch, to question the legitimacy of the efforts of the Church in South Africa to define a group of p. 235 people solely as an ethnic entity, as an 'ordinance of creation' ('The Church and the Liberation of Peoples', *Missionalia*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 34–5)? Or will that presupposition be allowed to remain as the 'hidden curriculum' of a C.W.H. Boshoff ('Church and Mission and the Liberation of Nations in the South African Context', *Missionalid*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 51–2)?

I am hurt by these questions. And I fear any practitioner of Biblical theology who asks them unscathed. Thank you, David. for your essay which makes me ask them again. 'Faithful are the wounds of a friend' (Proverbs 27:6).

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Theology for the People