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Beyond that it means that in our approach both to our personal and to world problems, we shall take that which God did, and that which we could never have done for ourselves, as our starting point. The testimony to what God did, is doing and will yet do, will form a vital part of our programmes, because we know that there lie the vital springs of power. We shall not despise small and apparently insignificant things, because we know from the cross that God can use such things to revolutionize the status quo. We p. 253 shall not allow ourselves to be polarized or trapped into either/or situations, because we know from the cross that God can and has broken out of seemingly hopeless deadlocks with solutions that assuredly would never have occurred to man—to Him be the glory for ever and ever.

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The Economic Gospel of Jesus

by VISHAL MANGALWADI

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INTRODUCTION

KALICHARAN LIVES in a village 10 km. from Chhatarpur, M.P., India. He comes from the lowest caste—Basore. Traditionally his family wove baskets from bamboo stolen from the jungles, and earned Re. 1 or Rs. 2 per day. But since the nationalisation of forests, he has had to buy bamboo poles at the rate of Rs. 75 per hundred from the Government. Since he did not have enough working capital he took loans from the money lenders to buy the bamboo in order to carry on the business. But it did not work. Often bamboo was not available at the Government store. Even when it was available the margin of profit was extremely small, not worth the labour. In frustration he gave up the business. Because he could not see his children starving, he used the working capital which he had borrowed, to feed his children. He had no land, no jewellery, no furniture, no utensils that he could sell to pay back the debt. When the interest kept on increasing and the abuse and harassment by the money lender became intolerable he quietly fled from his village to Delhi and started working as a labourer in the better off colonies. He promised his wife that he would save money and come back every six months to return the loan and to look after her and the children. Meanwhile she could work in the fields as a labourer when work was available, and at other times beg or borrow.

Kalicharan has been faithful in returning home twice a year. But the money that he brings back is barely enough to pay the interest of the money lenders. His wife and children continue to exist in hope. She does not complain about the fact that her p. 255 children cannot go to school (even though the education is free) or that they wear rags and have no soap with which to wash. She does not even complain that they eat only dry chapaties, made out of *kodon* and *basara* (a kind of grass seed) twice a day. But she does

feel irritated that even though her family has lived in the village for over a century, they still have no well from which she can draw drinking water whenever she wants to. She finds the abuse that the women of other castes hurl at her, when she goes to draw water, intolerable. But the only time she actually cursed her fate and cried about her poverty, was when her second son died of malaria, last year, simply because she could not buy medicine for him.

Poverty is hundreds of thousands of mothers crying in the villages of India because their infants and children die as they cannot buy medicine or proper food for them! But rich Christians, unlike their Master, don't know what poverty is. Therefore their Gospel often has no relevance for their hearers.

THE TIMES OF CHRIST

The heavy taxes imposed on the Jews at the time of Christ had contributed to making the majority of them poor. The rich among them were naturally those who collaborated with the Romans in exploiting their brethren.¹ No wonder the Jews expected their coming Messiah to deliver them from their poverty. When Mary learnt that Salvation had come in her womb, in her delight she sang this Magnificat:

“He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree,
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.”

([Luke 1:51-53](#))

St. Paul says that the Son of God chose to become poor, so that we might become rich ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)). That Jesus was born to poor parents is obvious from the fact that his parents offered the sacrifices prescribed for the poor ([Luke 2:24](#); cf. [Lev. 12:2-8](#)). p. 256

As a lad and a young man Jesus lived close to poverty. He knew the indignity and oppression that poverty brings. As a Jew, Jesus knew that poverty was a moral issue.² It was the result of the sin of selfishness, laziness, injustice, oppression and exploitation. As is evident from his story of Lazarus and the rich man ([Luke 16:19-31](#)), Jesus accepted the contemporary Jewish identification of ‘the poor’ and ‘the pious’. In Old Testament thought, the terms ‘the poor’ and ‘the pious’ were often synonyms (e.g. [Psalm 14:5, 6](#)), and that is how Jesus used the term in this story. Also he used the word ‘rich’ as synonymous with ‘the oppressor’, because in that day exploitation was almost the only way to become rich.

¹ R.E. Nixon, article on “Poverty” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London, 1965.

² “In the Old Testament, God’s concern with the poor consistently appears within the context of the justice of God and the working of justice among God’s people. Thus, biblically, words such as the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the sojourner, typically have moral content, relating to God’s requirement for justice. “This is not easily comprehended in today’s world because “the poor” does not have such a moral content for us. It has a purely descriptive sense; one might say that for us it is a purely secular word. But what we must see is that poverty itself is of ethical significance—the poor is a moral category. In God’s world there is no human condition which escapes moral significance, and the poor, and the treatment they receive, are strong indicators of the faithfulness of God’s people.” H. A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wine Skins*, p. 39.

It is against this background that we should look at Christ's sermon at Nazareth in which he expounded his mission and gave validation of his claim to Messiahship. Jesus stood up and proclaimed:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ..."
([Luke 4:18](#))

The gospel Jesus preached was *good news to the poor*. The modern day gospel that promises only "pie in the sky" is not good news for the poor but often an opiate to help them live through their poverty passively.

How was Christ's Gospel good news to the poor?

I have pointed out the profound economic implications of six aspects of the work of Christ in an earlier article.³ Here we shall focus on only one of his (greatly neglected) teachings, namely, *repentance*. [p. 257](#)

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF REPENTANCE

Martin Luther's dictum that salvation is by faith alone, was and is correct against the background in which it was formulated. However, its mis-use has become heresy. In the New Testament salvation is not by faith alone, but by repentance and faith.

The repentance which Jesus proclaimed was not being sorry for smoking, drinking, going to movies and reading novels, though that is all that most of our evangelists ask us to repent for. Like John the Baptist, Jesus' appeal for repentance struck at the roots of socio-economic and political evils.

John the Baptist gave the thundering call:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low ..."
([Luke 3:4-5](#))

The Jews asked him, "What does that mean? What exactly do you want us to do?" John replied, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" ([Luke 3:10-11](#)). The mountains of riches should be redistributed as an act of repentance. Riches by themselves are not sinful. In fact, in themselves they are the gift of God for mankind. But a time comes in society, because of the greed and selfishness of man, when wealth gets concentrated in a few hands; then the majority lives in indignity, harassment and want. In such a setting to be 'haves' and not to share is sin. To cling to your fundamental 'right to property' is not Christian capitalism but humanistic greed. God calls us to voluntarily 'share with him who has none'.

The Lord Jesus Christ carried on this preaching of John the Baptist. Let us consider Christ's encounter with the rich young ruler in [Luke 18](#). In response to his question as to how he could inherit eternal life, Jesus told him, "Go and sell that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me".

Jesus was not asking this rich man merely to love God more than money, as most of the evangelical interpreters would suggest. Nor was he asking him merely to love the poor more than his money, as some Christians might think. Jesus was asking him [p. 258](#) to

³ "A Christian way to reconstruct the Indian economy", *TRACI/ETS. Journal*, May 1975, pp. 30-37.

repent. To give his money back to the people from whom it had come to him through unjust means. Of course it meant that he had to love God and people more than his money. For that is what true spirituality is all about. But we must not lose sight of the facts. Jesus was commanding him to repent and to make restitution. Jesus did not ask him to give his money for evangelism or to the temple. It had to be returned to its rightful owners—the poor.

This radical preaching failed to convert him; but Jesus did not belong to that school of thought which would put priority on adding souls to the kingdom rather than on calling sins of economic exploitation by their name and demanding repentance for these. I, for one, take comfort from the fact that Jesus failed in ‘winning this soul’. But ‘what is impossible with men is possible with God’ ([Luke 18:27](#)). And the next chapter of Luke illustrates this. In Chapter [19](#) is another ‘rich man’, i.e. a sinner, Zacchaeus. When the Saviour came into his home he stood up and said, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” ([Luke 19:8](#)). Fantastic! Here was indeed good news to the poor.

It is often argued that Jesus did not ask Zacchaeus to make this restitution: Zacchaeus didn’t have to do it, he did it voluntarily. Nothing can be a more superficial reading of the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus had already demanded such repentance and restitution in [Luke 18:22](#); [16:5–7](#), [19–31](#) and [14:33](#), as did John the Baptist in [Luke 3:11](#).

Redistribution of wealth or economic justice, when it is part of repentance, is integral to salvation. A man who is guilty of economic sins cannot be saved if he does not thus repent. Giving such money to the poor is not “works of charity” to be done after one is saved. They are works (or fruits according to John the Baptist) of repentance to be produced before one can be saved. Salvation thus is very much by works of repentance and faith. This is not to imply that we earn our salvation by repentance. No, salvation is a free gift of God. But repentance and faith are the preconditions we have to fulfil before we can receive the gift of salvation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Few of my readers may be guilty of direct, visible exploitation of [P. 259](#) the poor. But I reckon most of us are guilty of *direct but invisible* (because institutionalised) exploitation of the poor. How? One of our many ways is through using education as a passport to privilege.

In pre-war China it was estimated that it took the labours of 30 peasants to support one student in college for 1 year. So, if a student spends 5 years in college, it takes the labour of 150 peasants for one year. If he then uses this education to further accumulate wealth for himself, he is exploiting these peasants. He ought to go back from the university to serve them. Instead, he often uses his education to exploit them further.

In India it is estimated that it costs the state over one lakh rupees to make a child a doctor. Initially this amount may come from tax-payers, Security Press and foreign aid; eventually it comes from our primary producers in rural India. But how many doctors are there, even Christian doctors, who use this privilege either to amass wealth for themselves in Western countries or to further exploit the poor of India through the training they have received at the cost of poor people’s labour. These are the modern Zacchaeuses.

Jesus demanded a drastic redistribution of wealth because unjust distribution is one of the most important causes of poverty. A pamphlet jointly produced by the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, GATT FLY, and the United Nations Association in Canada asks: Why are 460 million people hungry? And answers,

After pondering this question for a long time and after studying mounds of books, articles and United Nations documents, GATT FLY has concluded that the most basic problem is *not* that there are too many people in the world ... *not* that there is any fundamental reason why the world cannot produce more food ... *not* that there is insufficiency of food aid ... Rather the basic problem is the mal-distribution of wealth that allows some people to command more than their fair share of food from the market while others starve.

"It is no accident that most of the poor nations today were at one time colonies of the developed countries. The colonial system set up an international division of labour under which the toil and resources of the poorer nations subsidise the prosperity of the affluent people".

Much of western affluence today is the result of exploitation of labourers of the poor countries.

The above article goes on to say:

"It is no accident that most of the poor nations today were at one time colonies of the developed countries. The colonial system set up an international division of labour under which the toil and p. 260 resources of the poorer nations subsidise the prosperity of the affluent people."

This 'international division of labour' continues to work for the advantage of the developed nations—because the export prices of the industrial goods produced by the developed countries continue to rise whereas the prices for the primary commodities produced by the third world countries continue to decline.

For example, the percentage change in prices 1950–1973 i.e. Canadian exports of zinc ore was 348.9 and percentage change in real purchasing power in terms of manufactured goods was 119.0. In the case of copper ore, the figures were 326.0 and 107.8 respectively. In comparison the percentages for coffee in the developing countries exports were 44.2 and -29.7 and for jute 20.7 and -41.1 respectively.

This trend cannot be changed by mere aid investment and loans, because these in reality contribute to the growing external debt of the poor countries. The external debt of the poor countries grew from 10 billion dollars in 1953 to \$80 billion in 1973. Latin America pays out \$4 for every single dollar it receives in investment. What is the alternative to this notion of development through investments, loans and aid?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ demands that these countries simply give back what they have taken from the poor. Many Western nations and churches are giving much for the development of the poorer nations. But often their attitude in giving is one of pride and pity, whereas they ought to give in a spirit of repentance and gratitude to those who have contributed to their affluence.

But for me (and our intellectuals) to condemn the "Western colonisers" and to go on exploiting my own brethren would be sheer hypocrisy. If a Christian University professor or railway employee were to say, "It is unjust for my colleagues to go on strike to demand higher salaries from society and it is unjust for me to receive a thousand rupees per month; I will therefore giveaway half of my income to the poor", this country would indeed hear *His Gospel* ... the Good News to the poor.

This might mean that we cut down our food budget. That we do not travel by taxi where we can go by auto-rickshaw. That we do not buy the 21st saree, until we give away the first 11. That we decorate our living room with baskets made by Kalicharan p. 261 and not with the latest furniture that has appeared in the market. That we use our education not as a passport to privilege but as training for service to the needy.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Are works of repentance the sign of a previous attitude of repentance or the essence of the repentance necessary for salvation?
2. What redistribution of money is God calling *me* to?

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The U.S.S.R.—The Church After Sixty Years of Persecution

by MICHAEL BOURDEAUX

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ABOUT SIXTY years after the Communist revolution in Russia—and that is sixty years too late—the Christian world seems to be just starting to take seriously the subjects of Communism on the one hand and of the Soviet Union and what it represents in the international power structure on the other. It may be that recognition of the importance of the subject is coming now, partly, as a panic reaction. You hear people say, “Well, Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, Portugal, probably Italy will be the next and what then is the next country to become communist?” And the tendency is to react in fear and possibly even in hatred and put up the shutters. But there are other Christians who say: “God is failing us, our social system has had its day, and perhaps the new social justice is to be found in Communism or Marxism. Let’s learn from them while there is yet time.” Both attitudes I find to some extent inadequate.

Over the past twenty years I have had some experience of how one Communist society—the Soviet Union—works, and that has been very largely at first hand since I went to Moscow in 1959 as a member of the first-ever group of exchange students sent by the British Government. I stayed a whole year there and I have been back many times since. This experience is personal and limited, but at least it was of the heartland of Communism.

The years that have passed since I first went to Russia have deepened my absolute certainty that we have a basic and a dynamic lesson to learn from the Soviet Union. It is not a lesson from the Communist system as such; it is a lesson about Christianity in the world today. It is a lesson about the reality of Christ [p. 263](#) crucified in 1978, not a lesson of the triumph of Communism, but of the defeat of the Cross.

I believe that the Russian Christian is probably closer to the New Testament in spirit and in fact than you or I, because of the way in which he, the average Russian Christian, is suffering for his faith at this moment. Christians in the Soviet Union are already achieving a certain knowledge of the truth of the resurrection because they have themselves experienced the suffering, the crucifixion, many of them in the immediate past, some still in the present.