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The Church's Complex Relationship with the Idea of Wealth and Need

Thomas K. Johnson

I AM VERY GLAD I WAS asked to use the word 'complex' to talk about our theme this afternoon. Under the influence of our own moral and spiritual blindness it is very easy to be one-sided and miss a balanced and complete perspective. This is a major reason why in evangelical theology and philosophy today we increasingly talk about complementarity, meaning convictions and truth claims that we have to hold together simultaneously to keep our worldview and lives in balance, convictions that might otherwise come apart, making us one-sided.

I Two Theses

This desire, not always articulated in exactly this way, has been a part of Protestantism at least since the time of Martin Luther, who sometimes used a turn of phrase that sounded completely contradictory in order to get his readers to listen carefully and to think with him. For example, in his essay, 'The Freedom of the Christian', he famously wrote, 'A Christian is a perfectly free

lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.' My theses lack the eloquence of Luther, but in this spirit let me suggest the following complementary theses for your consideration:

1. A crucial way to demonstrate to the watching world that we truly believe that both creation and redemption bestow a unique dignity on humanity is to help people in need.
2. An easy way to destroy the dignity of the poor who are created in the image of God, for whom Jesus gave his life on the cross, is to treat them like objects of charity.

Before clarifying these complementary theses, let me mention two of my background observations that inform how I think about these themes.

1. What is humanness?

Background observation number one: A key ethical question running through all of western culture, including education, health care, politics, business, law, and the arts, is, 'what is a human

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being?' The West is stumbling and tripping because our culture at large does not have a satisfactory answer. As Christians we have real answers about human nature, answers that are rooted in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Western culture, probably every culture, urgently needs such answers. A more adequate understanding of humanity can and should have multiple valuable functions religiously and culturally.

On the one hand, a better understanding of humanity, with our created dignity and fallen shame, should provide the framework for appropriating the gospel; knowing ourselves properly should lead to knowing God, just as knowing God should also lead to understanding ourselves. On the other hand, a better understanding of humanity should also contribute to the healthy functioning of the several different spheres of society, including health care, education, business, law, and government.¹

How a visible society functions is heavily dependent on the invisible realm we call culture, including customs, theories, ideas, practices, habits, role models, slogans, proverbs, and more, all of which are oriented around understanding and guiding our humanness. God has created us such that there are multiple structures in society, but whether we move in a healthy or an unhealthy direction within these structures depends on a cultural definition of humanness. Healthy governments, economies, and educational systems require direction-setting definitions.

¹ I am consciously using the language of 'sphere sovereignty' developed in the terminology of Dutch Protestants.

Of course, religions and belief systems play pivotal but multifaceted roles in every culture.² In order to set the stage both for more people to come to faith in Jesus and for a more healthy society we Christians should communicate our biblical convictions about human nature more clearly and effectively.

2. Do we believe our beliefs?

Background observation number two: our world around us, that is often watching Christians, assumes we do not honestly believe our own Christian message. People frequently assume we Christians do not believe our own words because they do not completely believe their own worldview or philosophy of life. Many of our neighbours, I believe, go back and forth between worldviews, changing them like clothes. Perhaps at university they talk as if they are rationalistic naturalists, saying that only that which is physical exists, while in private they jump into a realm of irrationality to find faith, hope, and love.³ Some of the time our neighbours act as if they accept parts of the Christian worldview because God's general revelation is constantly impinging on human experience; simultaneously the same people may profess another belief system.

People cannot escape this situation of being of two minds if they are cre-

² On the multiple relations of God's word to cultures see Thomas K. Johnson, 'Christ and Culture', MBS Text 79 (2007), online at <http://www.bucer.org/resources/details/mbs-texte-079-2007-christ-and-culture.html>.

³ This observation is based on two decades teaching philosophy, ethics, and religions in secular universities in Europe and North America.

ated in God's image and live in God's world but do not acknowledge God. The everyday truths that all people learn as a result of God's general revelation provide the transcendental conditions of human life and experience even if people suppress their knowledge of God.⁴ Our neighbours have to see that we honestly believe our own words for which our response to people in need is crucial.

II Proving We Believe in Human Dignity

Our first thesis: We have to demonstrate to the world that we truly believe that creation and redemption bestow a unique dignity on humanity by helping those in need. The preferential option for the poor stands as a test for the Christian community so that the world can see that we truly believe and practise our professed beliefs.

As a result of modern media, more than in previous generations, we are constantly confronted with scenes of suffering: refugees from wars, the victims of religious persecution, honour murders, natural disasters, people dying as a result of air or water pollution, generations of hunger and poverty, human trafficking. All these scenes and more prompt a God-given sympathy reaction in the hearts of millions across the globe. And even if few can formulate the words, many know that their good reactions to human suffering are

related to their natural awareness of God, their *sensus divinitatis*.

1. Human Need, Duty, and Atheism

As a part of God's direct general revelation into human consciousness, even one who claims to be an atheist will both sense the dignity of the other and perceive a moral duty to help the person in urgent need so both human dignity and duty have a vague but real reference to God. This moral/religious sympathy reaction may stand in conflict with the claimed worldview or religion of the person reacting.

If anyone is truly convinced of atheistic evolution, that person might be expected to say something about the survival of the fittest in reaction to human suffering, but almost no one says that. I have never heard anyone say that 'we can be happy so many poor people die as a result of disasters, persecution, and pollution so that the strong can survive to perpetuate humanity'. The moral reactions of millions to others in urgent need show that many may not fully believe their own worldviews which seem to deny human dignity. Their practised beliefs, including their moral sympathy reactions, are better than their professed beliefs.

2. Human Need in Christian Theology

For us, as people of the Bible, we have always had good explanations of why we should help people in need. The first explanation was that God created us male and female in his image. Even if we do not know all that this means, it is clear that people have a very special

⁴ See Thomas K. Johnson, *The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God's General Revelation*, World of Theology vol. 1 (WEA Theological Commission, 2014), available online at <http://www.bucer.org/resources/category/buecher.html>.

status and value in the universe. This status explains why our moral reactions to people are properly different from our reactions to a stone or a tree.

The theological basis for helping people in need is developed in redemption, since redemption is a restoration of creation. But redemption tells us more about both God and our duties to people in need, since redemption is God's response to people in need. And at certain points in the history of redemption we see that God is not concerned only about spiritual needs.

The Exodus from Egypt shows God setting his redeeming love on poor slaves, while the wealthy, powerful army that had been oppressing them died under the water of the sea. With this background the Old Testament people of God received very high standards for care for people in need. Shortly after the Exodus they were told, 'If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest' (Ex 22:25). In the Ten Commandments, the servants were specifically mentioned as not having to work on the Sabbath, and the phrasing of the Sabbath commandment sounds as if it is the special duty of people in positions of authority to be sure that those under their authority do not have to work on the Sabbath.

Even the Old Testament institution called 'slavery' was radically different from slavery in the surrounding nations. If properly applied, the Old Testament transformed slavery from an abuse of the poor to become a safety net to keep the poor from starvation; if properly implemented, it would have led to renewed economic independence. God set high standards for pro-

tecting and restoring the poor within his covenant people.

It seems to me that the protection of the poor, even the rehabilitation of the poor, was intended by God to be a distinguishing characteristic of his ancient people. The protection of the poor was emphasized much more in the Old Testament than in the other systems of law and ethics in the ancient near eastern world, even those other systems that are usually deemed somewhat humane.⁵ In this light it was especially wicked, as Amos mentioned, for the people of Israel to sell the needy for a pair of sandals and to trample on the heads of the poor (Amos 2:6,7).

This moral theme continued directly into the New Testament, with the care of the poor becoming a crucial theme in the relations between Jewish and Gentile believers in the first century (Gal 2:10); wealthier Gentiles assisted poorer Jews. And John wrote, 'If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?' (1 Jn 3:17). This principle was practised to the extent that it was noticed in the unbelieving world. Christians have often quoted the pagan Emperor Julian (332-363) who complained that the Christian faith

was specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans [Christians] care not only for their poor but for ours as well; while

⁵ Compare Old Testament ethics with the Code of Hammurabi to see this contrast.

those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render to them.⁶

Christian care for the poor confirmed that Christians really believed what they said they believed, challenged the belief system of the surrounding world, and thereby helped set new social standards for caring for people in need. Early Christian practice and preaching offered a critique of the culture of the ancient world that stood behind and guided the societal institutions while a more humane alternative was offered.

Whereas in the unbelieving world people often practise better than they believe, so that their practised belief is better than their professed belief and they practise sympathy though their worldview might call for ruthlessness, within the Christian churches we sometimes face the opposite problem. Our professed belief is wonderful. At times our practice has been wonderful. But today informed people are much more aware of global human suffering than in previous generations; it fills our TVs and computer screens. Our neighbours will wonder if we really believe the poor and needy are created in God's image (and can also receive redemption in Christ) if they do not see us practising what we say we believe. The Christian community faces a continuous test.

I have written and edited academic materials about human rights and human dignity as based in creation and redemption, and I wish those materials would convince our world that God has

truly given dignity to the poor and desperate. But I do not expect our books and journals to change the world very much. It has a far larger impact when people see Christians honestly caring for the poor and needy. This has to be at every level, local, regional, and global. If our neighbours see that we truly care for the homeless, the boatpeople, the victims of trafficking, the refugees, and those suffering religious persecution, then they may question their secularism (which has terrible difficulty explaining human dignity) and consider our Creator and Redeemer. As a friend described it, caring for human needs can be the boat that carries the gospel as a passenger.

III Compassion Gone Astray

Now the opposite thesis: An easy way to destroy the dignity of the poor who are created in the image of God, for whom Jesus gave his life on the cross, is to treat them like objects of charity.

Many of us have heard the stories of many generous attempts to help people in need that have done more harm than good. The stories are very discouraging. It sometimes seems as if the larger the effort, the greater the problems that we cause. The irony could easily make us bitter and disillusioned. Everywhere we turn we see examples of humanitarianism causing destructive dependence, sometimes fuelling corruption, often preventing economic development of people in need.

Two specialists from my church circles who have addressed this problem summarized the issue in the title of their excellent book, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without*

⁶ Quoted in Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th edition (Thomas Nelson, 2013), 38.

*Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself.*⁷ I will not summarize their important study, but I believe the key to the problem is the total picture of how people are viewed that is communicated by our activities and embodied in our programs. Do we treat people as *objects* of pity, or do we treat them as *subjects* who will make decisions and implement plans for their future based on their values and convictions?

1. Thinking about people in need

If there is even a hint that we see people as objects, this way of thinking will be perceived by people in need; it can easily cause the poor to see themselves as objects, inferior to the people helping them, thereby causing further dependence and discouragement. In contrast, engaging people as subjects with whom we are in conversation helps them to plan a better future for themselves. Regarding a person's subjective feelings, convictions, and decisions as truly decisive is a central part of recognizing the image of God in that person. Fellowship with those in real need is part of what draws them out of their need. Indeed, when people who were in terrible need begin to participate in a wider economy, which could be described as participation in business fellowship, serious need is nearing its end.

A complementary observation is that efforts to relieve poverty that see a lack of money as being the primary characteristic of poverty tend to cause

destructive dependence and more poverty, for within this way of thinking a person's value comes from the amount of their possessions. Inadequate definitions of poverty, with terrible irony, become causes of continuing poverty. Defining poverty primarily as the lack of money defines the poor as inferior to and dependent on people who have money.

Ideas have consequences, especially when those ideas are incarnated into the way programs and organizations are designed. The poor often feel worthless because they do not have money, that very characteristic that defines value in a materialistic society. And then our definitions of poverty, communicated by the whole way in which our anti-poverty programs and organizations are designed, confirm that people without money are, in fact, worthless.

Fortunately there are better definitions of poverty available. Those better definitions lie in the direction of seeing poverty as an organic part of comprehensive alienation. If we define poverty as an economic symptom of people being alienated from themselves, from other people, from nature, and from God, then our efforts will tend to succeed and raise people back up to being socially functional and related, closer to being in good relationships with themselves, nature, and society, perhaps even reconciled with God. This holistic reconciliation will bear fruit in the realm of raising people out of financial poverty.

2. Economics and Culture: Marx or Weber

For the sake of university students I would point out that I am intention-

⁷ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor. . . and Yourself*, 2nd edition (Moody, 2012).

ally interacting with Karl Marx at this point, taking note of his sensitive descriptions of human alienation while fundamentally disagreeing with his understanding of human nature.⁸ Marx and his modern friends habitually perceive most of the conscious dimensions of human life, including religion, belief systems, ethics, relationships, and alienations, as resulting from economic influences.⁹ Change the economic situation of a person or a class, or so the thought goes, and you can change everything else in the life of that person or class. Conscious life (including relationships, beliefs, and values), within the perspectives influenced by Marx, is shaped or even controlled by economic relations. I would call this 'economic determinism'.

When we pick up the Bible and classical Christian books we see a very different perception of how human life works. This sounds theoretical and impractical at first, but it is very practical long-term. Within the biblical worldview, the contents of human consciousness, meaning our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, relationships, hopes, and loves, shape everything else, including economic activity. What is inside the human mind and heart, obviously including education and those contents and skills communicated by education, plays a massive role, whether contributing to poverty or to plenty, contribut-

ing to alienation from God, world, self, and others, or contributing to reconciliation with God, world, self, and others.

Please do not misunderstand me at this point. This does not mean that we first discuss philosophy of life with the boatpeople before we get them shelter or medical care. It does not mean that religious education comes before taking care of the refugee. We need good distinctions between crisis intervention and long-term development, and these distinctions are clarified in the better books.¹⁰ We need a clear distinction between crisis intervention and evangelism along with an ethics of mission that forbids using humanitarian aid to manipulate people to believe the gospel we constantly discuss.¹¹

But whatever the situation of a person or group, part of the way to a better future will include a lot of new thinking, learning, planning and imagining a different future, all of which can best occur in relationships and dialogue with other people. Within the biblical worldview, the way to a better future normally comes through the subjectivity of people; this means through their conscious planning, learning, and work. This requires engagement in relationships, not treating the poor as objects of our pity.

So that educators see the connections I am drawing let me explicitly reference Max Weber's theory of society in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit*

⁸ See Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>.

⁹ See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, chapter 3, online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch03.htm>.

¹⁰ Again I would mention Corbett and Fikkert.

¹¹ See *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, principle 4, http://www.worlddevangelicals.org/pdf/1106Christian_Witness_in_a_Multi-Religious_World.pdf

of *Capitalism*.¹² Protestant theologians have long pointed out that Weber largely misunderstood Protestant theology, especially on the themes of predestination and assurance of salvation.¹³ But the Roman Catholic theologian Michael Novak has pointed out that Weber offers a real alternative to Marx in terms of the relation between the contents of human consciousness and economic development.¹⁴

Without looking at details but following Weber let me suggest that religious values such as diligence, honesty, and thrift, preached initially by Christians as a God-given calling and work ethic, first concentrated in northern Europe and North America but now widely distributed, contributed significantly to economic growth in the developed world. Much of this work ethic was started with directly religious motivations, such as seeing daily work as a place to serve God by means of serving people, but its influence came after it was no longer seen as a purely religious conviction but as

economic rationality.

More pointedly for our purposes, the way out of the poverty that still gripped most of Europe and North America in 1800 came largely through values, expectations, and convictions, some seen as more religious and some as more rational, in the hearts and minds of people. It was not the result of an impersonal power of development or class struggle in which people were passive objects. The intelligence and creativity invested by particular people led to economic growth, lifting entire regions of the world out of poverty. So too today, the way out of terrible circumstances for most people will include their planning and efforts in light of what they know, believe, and value, even when they need emergency aid and a lot of help.

IV Reflections

A compassionate but wise response to wealth and people in need is a test of our moral/spiritual integrity if we claim to be followers of Jesus. It is also a test of our ability to think carefully, but not out of a speculative interest in academic theories. Compassion guided by bad ideas will lead to bad results for real people. But compassion guided by a theology which embraces properly complementary principles can lead to several distinct good results. Real people can be helped and moved from a position of crisis and desperate need to restoration; wisely planned humanitarian aid and economic development work.

In this way we can also contribute to the cultural definitions of humanness that guide how societies function. This in turn tends to convince our neigh-

12 Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, vol. XX and XXI (1904 and 1905) of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. English: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, foreword by R. H. Tawney (New York, Scribner, 1958; New York, Dover, 2003).

13 On using Weber's ideas in Protestant ethics see Thomas K. Johnson, 'The Spirit of the Protestant Work Ethic and the World Economic Crisis', chapter 5, *Christian Ethics in Secular Cultures*, World of Theology vol. 2 (WEA Theological Commission, 2014), online <http://www.bucer.org/resources/category/buecher.html>.

14 See Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Madison Books, 1990) and *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Free Press, 1993).

bours that we honestly believe what we say we believe as Christians, so that they are challenged to move from the position of being of two minds to

consider the biblical message. I think it is crucial that we practise our complex Christian relationship to need and wealth consciously and intentionally.

Job's Way Through Pain: Karma, Clichés & Questions

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