

## The Church and Poverty

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What is poverty? Some might say that it is “the state of not having enough money to take care of basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing”, while more commonly we see it as “the condition of having less than another”.

What causes poverty? Some say it is education, skill, intelligence; some say physical condition; some point to a culture of poverty or politics, or discrimination. Obviously, poverty has many causes, some of which are not under the control of the impoverished. We need to understand that ALL of the sources of poverty go back to one root – SIN.

A bit of History: before World War II, churches of the world addressed poverty issue by charities. There were first Catholic hospitals and charities; then in the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there came Protestant hospitals and charities. One particular example is the Salvation Army in 1865, which is a denomination formed primarily to address poverty. After World War II, there were drives to rebuild Europe and Asia that led to the political poverty issues of the 1960s. All of this has led to a mindset today in the world that churches ought to lead the fight for social issues. As one source said<sup>1</sup> "Poverty is becoming the leading issue for churches". With this mindset, we now see many (even most) churches engaged in poverty battle issues. We see churches that put a large part of their effort into soup kitchens, shelters, and financial disbursements.

Should the Lord's church follow the denominations in this issue? Let us make a very clear distinction here: this lesson addressed the churches roll in facing poverty, NOT the individual Christian's work. We would see in Scripture that the authority for action for the church is VERY different that the individual Christian; there are things that the individual Christian can do the church cannot, and things the church can do that an individual Christian cannot.

In fact, when we study the Bible we find three major reasons (strikes) why the church cannot address poverty in the manner of other church, and one major way the church can address poverty (in a manner no other church does).

**The Strike of Examples:** the New Testament Christian relies on the testimony of the New Testament to address the authority of the church. When we search the New Testament on the churches work with poverty, an absolute pattern emerges: 100% of examples of church aid is exclusively for church members. In Acts 11:28-29 and the parallel text of Galatians 2 we are told the churches money was used for “relief of the brethren”. In I Corinthians 16:1-2 the collection is used “for the saints”. In Romans 15:25-26 the contribution is taken for “the poor among the saints”. We might even add that these collections for the saints were conditional (! Timothy 5 and II Thessalonians 3).

Consider Acts 3:1-6 in particular. There Peter and John tell a man (who is not a member of the church)\_ that they have no money to aid him. Yet the immediate chapter and context tells us that money was collected and given to the apostles. Did they lie to him, or was it the case that *they had no money they could share with him* as a non-Christian? Clearly, Peter and John did not lie; they could not share the churches collection with a man who was not a Christian.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wallis, [Call to Renewal](#)

**The Strike of Possibility:** Is it even possible for the church to take on the poverty of those outside of the church? Consider that the only authorized way for the church to take up a collection is by the free-while (non-tithed) collection on the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:1-2, II Corinthians 9:7). Consider that this method of financing brings an extremely limited amount of money into the church. If someone gave you \$5 for lunch, would you not assume that it necessarily meant you could not take five or six other people to lunch too? Would that not reveal the intent and purpose of the gift? So it is with the church; we need to see that our means of financial intake is so small as to exclude the possibility of addressing the poverty of the non-believer.

**The Strike of Consequences:** We have in Scripture an evening in John 6 where Jesus fed 5000 people. We read the result of this in John 6:26, after this group of people chose to follow Jesus rather than return home for their food. "Jesus answered them and said, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled."*" When Jesus did not feed them a second time, "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more" (John 6:66).

This speaks to a problem called the dependency syndrome. "The dependency syndrome contributes much to poverty of communities and nations. The charity mode of developmental aid, in turn, contributes much to the dependency syndrome."<sup>2</sup> When we consider this, it makes sense that the Bible says: *"Nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you....For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: **If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat**"* (2 Thessalonians 3:8,10). We also can make sense of why Paul said this to Timothy: *"Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man.... But **refuse to put younger widows on the list**"* (I Timothy 5:9, 11a). Church aid utterly denied to even Christians can only make sense in light of the clear message from John 6.

With the evidence so clear, why do so many churches still move into this issue, and end up destroying their works and making financial strains so significant that they cannot continue? We understand that many people are moved by emotion on this issue. Feelings such as sympathy and guilt, both of which are good in their place but dangerous when uncontrolled are present. Understand that NEITHER are being moved by Faith. In fact, the Bible warns us constantly of the danger of acting on feelings (Proverbs 14:12).

Is there a cure for poverty? We know that secular cures for poverty do not work. Since the signing of the **War on Poverty** by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964, the US government has spent \$5 (some say \$9) trillion dollars directly fighting poverty.<sup>3</sup> Why does it not work? Because we fight the symptom of poverty, not the condition. What is the condition of poverty? We said this in the beginning: poverty is caused by SIN.

The Biblical Cure for Poverty is the Gospel. It changes the factors of contribution and legitimately offers the support of the church. Therefore the Church needs to spread the Gospel. We are EQUIPPED to do this. We are AUTHORIZED to do this. The CONSEQUENCES of this effort are proven to work.

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<sup>2</sup> DEPENDENCY AND POVERTY by Phil Bartle, PhD

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=2807](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=2807)