

# SOJOURNERS on the issues

*A discussion guide from the editors of Sojourners magazine*

This series is designed to spark discussion and thought about how to live out God's call for justice in our world. This guide includes four sessions, each with Sojourners articles, questions for discussion, and ideas for further study. We recommend printing out the guide for each person and allowing everyone time to read before the group meets. The resources here are a starting point for a further journey—where will the Spirit lead your group?



IAN SHAW

## Christians and Poverty

### DISCUSSION GUIDE

#### SOJOURNERS

3333 14th Street NW,  
Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20010  
[www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net)

# SOJOURNERS on the issues

*A discussion guide from the editors of Sojourners magazine*

To understand the “poor” in the Bible as only a reference to spiritual poverty is to miss an important part of the message. Now, as in biblical times, there is a correlation between financial poverty and spiritual poverty that cannot be dismissed simplistically. How do Christians address poverty in all its forms? Combining Bible study, social and economic analysis, and stories of real people, this collection of recent and past *Sojourners* articles is part of a series designed to spark discussion, thought, and action about how to live out God’s call for justice for all.

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## Christians and Poverty

### SESSION 1

#### *The Bible and Poverty*

- “Good News for the Poor,” by Samuel Escobar
- “‘You Shall Not Afflict...’” by Joyce Hollyday
- “Jesus’ New Economy of Grace,” by Ched Myers

### SESSION 2

#### *The Bible and Wealth*

- “Is God Really on the Side of the Poor?” by Ronald J. Sider
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#### *Solidarity or Patronage?*

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# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### SESSION I

#### *The Bible and Poverty*

- “Good News for the Poor,” by Samuel Escobar
- “‘You Shall Not Afflict...’” by Joyce Hollyday
- “Jesus’ New Economy of Grace,” by Ched Myers

**P**eruvian theologian Samuel Escobar warns readers that to understand the “poor” in the Bible as only a reference to spiritual poverty is to miss an important part of the biblical message. There is a correlation between financial poverty and spiritual poverty that cannot be dismissed simplistically. In Joyce Hollyday’s contextualizing of the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi, she highlights the plight of the most economically vulnerable, stating that our current economic system, along with the welfare system established to correct problems, have created a modern population of “widows and orphans.” Theologian Ched Myers lays out the radical economic restructuring that the prophets demanded and that Jesus practiced, inviting us all to live “Sabbath economics.”

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What Bible passages do you remember about God’s concern for those on the margins of our society? What do you think God’s expectations for us are with regard to these concerns (at both the personal and the public levels)? What steps would you suggest to begin to move toward those expectations?
2. What do you think Jesus had in mind when he commented that we will always have the poor with us? Put the claim in its broader biblical context (Deuteronomy 15, for example, observes that there should be “no poor among you”).
3. Hollyday indicates that women and children are often most severely affected by poverty. Why is this? How do patriarchal notions of male “protection” keep women from accessing the goods, services, and economic independence they need to live in dignity?
4. What should 21st-century Christians do about the biblical notion of “economic re-leveling” that is alluded to in Myers’ description of “Sabbath economics”? What are some ways this Jubilee message could be brought into our own lives, churches, and society?

#### RESOURCES

- The Sabbath Economics Collaborative helps network faith-based persons and organizations committed to economic justice and provides resources for sustainable economics and poverty reduction. They also produce resources for ongoing study through their Jubilee Workbook. ([www.sabbatheconomics.org](http://www.sabbatheconomics.org))
- *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*, by Samuel Escobar, examines the changes in Christian mission that occur when church growth shifts from the wealthy global North and West to the poor global East and South. (InterVarsity Press, 2003)
- In *Clothed With the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*, Joyce Hollyday brings to life the stories of women in the Bible by placing them in a contemporary

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context, often among women who are poor and marginalized. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)

- *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, by Ched Myers, is a 70-page booklet that details alternatives to dominant economic systems for the church. (Church of the Saviour, 2001)

- The National Women's Law Center produced a document titled *Women and Children Last—Again: An Analysis of the President's FY 2007 Budget* that specifically examines the impact of the U.S. federal budget proposal on women and girls. ([www.nwlc.org/pdf/FY07\\_BudgetAnalysis.pdf](http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/FY07_BudgetAnalysis.pdf))



### GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

by Samuel Escobar

**F**or you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been: He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Such a powerful and beautiful statement comes to us in the midst of prosaic instruction about finances in the life of the church. Paul takes us from the ordinary problems of daily life in the Christian fellowship and plunges us into the heights of poetry and the depths of theology.

Paul is not just leaving the mundane in order to have a refreshing aesthetic jump into spirituality. He is not just giving us a beautiful truth without consequences; he is rather telling us that the sublimity of the incarnation shows a pattern of action to be imitated by the Christian today.

“You know,” says Paul. The Corinthians knew that he who was rich became poor for their sake. To begin with, those who had not been able to see Jesus in Galilee received his message from those who could honestly say: “poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many; penniless, we own the world” (2 Corinthians 6:10). Just like Jesus, they too had a lifestyle marked by real poverty.

“He became poor” is not only a poetical way to express the truth of the incarnation. Jesus was literally poor.

Sociologically speaking, he was in the group that in his time could be classified as “poor.” The gospels give us insights about that poverty. He was born in a poor home (Luke 2:6-7, 24). He might not have had the asceticism of John the Baptist, but his lifestyle was still clearly the one of a “have not” (Matthew 8:19). His teaching shows a tremendous concern for the masses (Matthew 9:36-37), which in Palestine were the poor, like in the Third World today. Jesus’ style communicates well to the poor. His stories about clothes that have to be patched, men who have to borrow a loaf of bread, or women who cannot afford to lose a coin show an awareness of poverty that has come by experience. His poverty—which is real, not poetical—gives us light for a better understanding of his teaching and adds credibility to it.

Take for instance his statement “You have the poor among you always” (Mark 14:7 and parallels). It has been used to discourage efforts of assistance to the poor and efforts to change the social order. It has been misused as a cloak for blind conservatism. The circumstances in which the words were pronounced are usually forgotten, and the second part of the statement is also forgotten: “you can help them whenever you like.”

But what is worse, in the lips of the rich it really comes to mean: “You have the rich with you always.” Whenever it is used by those who have wealth, as an excuse against those who remind them of their responsibilities and those who cry for justice, the words of the Master who was poor are twisted into an instrument of appeasement by the rich and their religious ideologists.

WHY IS THE MESSAGE of a poor Galilean preacher “good news for the poor”? Does he show the poor a way of escape from their misery by providing a vision of spiritual wealth? Is the message he brings suited especially for those who live in poverty and for them alone?

We cannot stop proclaiming Jesus’ words today, only because to some people they sound like “pie in the sky.”

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### Good News for the Poor (cont.)

*How blest are you who are in need, the Kingdom of God is yours.  
How blest are you who now go hungry; your hunger shall be satisfied.  
How blest are you who weep now; you shall laugh.*—Luke 6:20-21

Blacks, Latinos, and American Indians, the poor minorities of North America, need the fire of these words to warm their hearts. Prisoners of oppressive governments need these words. Harassed and helpless masses running desperate behind messiahs of the right and the left in the Third World need these words. Indigenous peoples of South America, chased by the oil companies and their native agents, need these words.

These words of Jesus for the poor point to the fact that there is a God who sees and judges, who is not indifferent to the human drama behind their poverty. The history of the world is not in the hands of Herman Kahn, or Alvin Toffler, or super-secret intelligence agencies of the West or the East, who will get from their computers cold pragmatic devices to perpetuate the domination of the powerful and the rich.

Speaking about judgment, Jesus also said words that have to be heard today:

*But alas for you who are rich; you have had your time of happiness.  
Alas for you who are well-fed now; you shall go hungry.  
Alas for you who laugh now; you shall mourn and weep.*—Luke 6:24-25

Because of so much spiritualization we have forgotten that the people who rejoiced at Jesus' coming were the poor, the victims of a corrupt and abusive social system imposed by the Roman Empire and its native collaborators. A message about judgment and deliverance is never popular among those who benefit from the existing order, unless they repent and change.

The gospels tell us about two men who were among the rich. Though his lifestyle and belief were very unorthodox, one man, Zaccheus, confronted with the good news, repented and changed radically. The other was an articulate and morally righteous fellow, an "evangelical" in doctrine. But the existing order of which his fortune was a part was too dear to him. He did not repent. It was not that the message was not clear. He understood it quite well, but he preferred his wealth.

IS JESUS' MESSAGE, then, only for the "have nots"? Some have interpreted it that way. One of the most interesting pentecostal pastors in Chile was Victor Manuel Mora. In 1928 he founded a church to which only those who were mining workers and socialist could belong. It was a church for the poor; it proclaimed a message for the poor (see Christian Lalive d'Epainay, *Haven of the Masses*).

On the other hand, more than once I have talked with men in Latin America in the tradition of political liberalism who have said to me, "We the enlightened classes do not need religion. We approve of you preaching to the poor. They need it. For them it is the only basis for a good behavior. Protestant religion is good to save them from drunkenness, laziness, sexual abuse, and their tendency to steal." I have also heard American business people in Latin America express the same idea. They are cynical about the relevancy of Christianity for themselves, but they are very supportive of the missionary enterprise if it produces "better natives."

We have also the missionary theory of receptivity to the gospel among the poor. A very articulate presentation of it is provided by Donald McGavran, the apostle of the church growth movement, in his book *Understanding Church Growth*. In it McGavran tries to make his readers aware that the masses of the world outside North America are poor today. He goes on to show that in biblical teaching God has a special concern for the poor: "These selected passages must not be distorted to mean that

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### Good News for the Poor (cont.)

God loves the poor and not the rich,” writes McGavran. “Nevertheless, it remains true that the common people are dear to God. The fundamental thrust of God’s revelation demands a high valuation of the masses.”

In accordance with these facts, then, McGavran advocates a missionary strategy that will concentrate on the masses and not on the small middle or upper classes:

“Eurican (European and North American) churches are middle-class churches. Most missionaries are middle-class people. They have grown up with interior plumbing, electric light, and plenty of books. They ride in cars and travel to the lands of their work in jet planes. Really, in relation to the masses of the lands to which they go, they are not middle but upper-class people.”

For the most part the strategy of winning the upper classes first has not worked. They will not be won. The middle classes “have it too good.” Why should they risk losing it all to become Christians?

Although sociology and missionary history both prove McGavran’s point, the fact of belonging to the poor classes of society does not in itself make one eligible for the kingdom of God. We must discover the deeper meaning of the term “poor” in scripture and consequently the real meaning of the gospel being “good news for the poor.”

A STUDY OF THE biblical vocabulary about poverty throws helpful light on the subject (see the excellent study by A. Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh*). Initially the Hebrew words described material dispossession and stressed the need for a social conscience to help the poor and provide for their needs (Exodus 21-23; Leviticus 19, 25; Deuteronomy 15, 24). Later, poverty became equated with piety, humility, and dependence on God. Thus the psalms and the prophets are filled with expressions in which the Hebrew root for “poor” is translated as “humble” or “meek” by later New Testament writers quoting those passages (Psalm 37:11 and Matthew 5:5; Zechariah 9:9 and Matthew 21:4-5). Just before the Exile, the process culminates when the prophet Zephaniah tells us that the hope of the future, the hope of reconstruction and renewal after the national disaster, will be the poor (2:3; 3:12).

Those who were expecting the Messiah were those whose hearts could not trust anymore in human justice, human power, human wealth. Because they were victims of an order in which there was neither compassion nor regard for the poor and afflicted, they had turned their eyes upon God. By their hope and their trust in the promises of a just God, they were the only living witnesses in a world organized pragmatically around the principle of survival of the fittest. That was the social and spiritual context in which the prophets spoke clearly in favor of the poor, by stressing the justice of a God who was in favor of the poor: “Listen to this, you cows of Bashan, who live on the hill of Samaria, you who oppress the poor and crush the destitute. ... The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that your time is coming (Amos 4:1-2).

And, when the Messiah came, his words were very much in line with the psalms and the prophets and his lifestyle with that of the poor. For those who had nothing to lose but their chains his words were immediately perceived as good news. For those who had something to lose the choice was more difficult (John 12:42-43), but some chose him. The community that developed out of this evangelization took very seriously the problem of poverty and was exhorted carefully and constantly about the dangers of wealth and status (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34; 20:35; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; James).

Thus, to understand the “poor” in the Bible as only a reference to spiritual poverty is to miss an important part of the message. As in biblical times, today there is a correlation between sociological and spiritual poverty that cannot be dismissed simplistically.

Jesus Christ, the psalms, and the prophets are still a threat to the rich and the pow-

### **Good News for the Poor (cont.)**

erful. Jesus Christ still is the only power that can demythologize human idols of the right and the left. That is why, both in communist and capitalist countries, the powers that be ask for a Christian message that will make no reference to material, social, and political realities. They want a domesticated message that will not challenge executives or commissars but will only be used in church buildings to produce somnolence and inaction. And we Christians, here and there, fall into that temptation. By cutting, trimming, and twisting, we produce a gospel that is inoffensive and bland: good for marketing but in no way “good news for the poor.” Today the world is divided into rich countries and poor countries, and some of the very tensions in which we live come from that fact. Unfortunately, some of our leaders in the Christian world are rich or new rich and find it very difficult to see the world with the eyes of an African American, a Latino, a Portuguese immigrant, or an American Indian on a reservation. That is what conversion should do for them.

The same happens in the international order. How often do missionaries identify more with their rich countries than with the plights of the masses in the countries where they are serving? Repentance must come at this point. In terms of both the content of our message and our lifestyle, we have a long way to go to be really imitators of Christ’s incarnation.

Not all the poor of today automatically accept Jesus as Lord. Not all the rich of the world today automatically reject Jesus as Lord. The god of this world dominates men and women through their wealth in terms of money, power, civil or ecclesiastical prestige, status, culture, education, abilities, institutions, virtue, achievements, and so on. This god also dominates men and women through the fear of chaos, of principalities and powers, of persecution and suffering. From the god of this world, only Jesus Christ can deliver us when, like the beggar who cannot help his or her self, we extend our hand to him. But who wants to be a beggar? ■

*Samuel Escobar was president of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Canada, and a contributing editor when this article appeared in the December 1974 issue of Sojourners.*



### ‘YOU SHALL NOT AFFLICT..’

by Joyce Hollyday

*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. ... But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years; and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was bereft of her two sons and her husband. —Ruth 1:1-5*

**T**hus begins one of the most compelling narratives in the scriptures, the story of Ruth. It is a story about a radical change in social status for three women, who suddenly found themselves widows in a culture that had no place for them. Ruth’s love and loyalty for her mother-in-law, Naomi, is perhaps the message most remembered from the tale. After her husband’s death, as Naomi set out to return to Bethlehem, her home, she tearfully tried to prod Ruth to remain in Moab, where she could find security in her ties to her people and in the prospect of a new husband. In response, Ruth offered these cherished words: “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17).

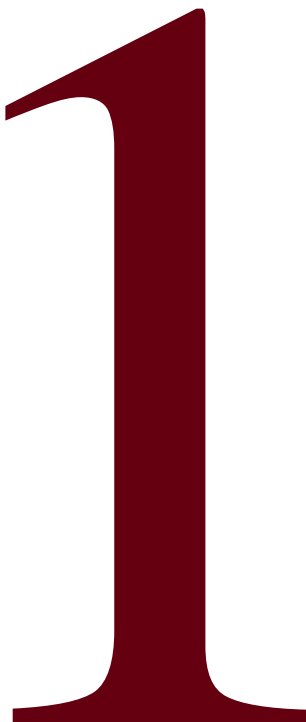
When Naomi saw that Ruth could not be swayed, the two of them traveled together to Bethlehem. They went to the fields of Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of Naomi. There Ruth gleaned among the ears of grain in order to feed Naomi and herself.

When Boaz came to the fields and saw Ruth among the stalks of grain, he inquired of his servant in charge of the reapers, “Whose maiden is this?” When the servant explained that Ruth was the daughter-in-law of Naomi, Boaz said to her, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my maidens. ... Have I not charged the young men not to molest you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn” (Ruth 2:8-9).

Ruth was deeply touched by this kindness, and equally so by Boaz’ invitation to share a meal with him and the others of his house. For his part, Boaz had been moved by Ruth’s care for her aging mother-in-law. Ruth gathered up some extra food after the meal, then gleaned in the fields until evening, and returned to Naomi to share all that she had acquired. Naomi was relieved for the protection that Ruth had been granted by Boaz and encouraged her to stay close to Boaz’ maidens, which she did until the end of the barley and wheat harvest.

Naomi then began to be concerned about Ruth’s future, saying to her, “My daughter, should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman? See, he is winnowing barley tonight. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor” (Ruth 3:1-3).

Ruth did as Naomi had counseled her. After Boaz had eaten and drunk and fallen asleep at the end of a heap of grain, Ruth went and lay near him. At midnight Boaz was startled to roll over and find a woman at his feet. When he groggily asked who she was, Ruth explained that she was there to ask him as next of kin to her deceased husband to perform his duty of marriage to her. Boaz explained that there was a nearer relative who should be offered the first opportunity to marry her, but that if he



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### 'You Shall Not Afflict...' (cont.)

refused, Boaz would be glad to oblige. So the next morning Boaz went to the city gate, where such business was customarily transacted, and talked with the next of kin in the presence of the elders.

*Then he said to the next of kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech....The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also buying Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the dead, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance." Then the next of kin said, "...Take my right of redemption for yourself, for I cannot redeem it." ... So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. —Ruth 4:3-13*

THE POIGNANT STORY reflects kindness, loyalty, and character. Ruth was a compassionate woman, considered by all to be a "woman of worth," whose loyalty to her grieving mother-in-law outweighed considerations of her own security and future. The deep love between the two women, confirmed by the anguished tears that came at the thought of their parting, was the foundation for a relationship that included great sacrifice on the part of Ruth, who left her own people and worked long hours—"from early morning ... without resting for even a moment"—gleaning in the fields to support herself and Naomi. Boaz, too, is a kind and likable character, who offered the women the sustenance of his fields, covered Ruth with his protection and invited her to his supper table, and was truly touched at Ruth's expressions of love toward him, a man well beyond her age.

But between the lines of respect and care that flowed between Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz can be found a case study of the victims of a rigidly patriarchal society. Widowhood plunged Ruth and Naomi into the class of the society's most vulnerable individuals.

In early Israel widowhood was used as an analogy of grief and desolation. The Book of Isaiah compares the period of exile to widowhood, a time of reproach when the people of Israel lived "like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit" (Isaiah 54:6). Lamentations begins by mourning the loss of Jerusalem: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become."

The grief of widowhood was not limited to the loss of a husband but included the loss of livelihood itself. Ruth was forced to glean the leftovers in the fields because she had no other option for survival apart from a husband. Early Jewish law demanded that such leftovers be kept on the stalks for the very poorest: "When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow" (Deuteronomy 24:19).

The phrase "widows and orphans" recurs throughout the scriptures as the paradigm of the most vulnerable and oppressed people in biblical times. The word "fatherless" is often substituted for "orphans," bringing home the point that children without a male parent had no secure means of survival. They are often listed with "sojourners" or "aliens," who also lived outside the normal provisions of Jewish society. Ruth bore the burden of being a widow as well as a foreigner.

TREATMENT OF WIDOWS and their children was often reprehensible. According to scripture, the proud and wicked "slay the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless" (Psalm 94:6); they "feed on the barren childless woman, and do no good to the widow" (Job 24:21). The princes "do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them" (Isaiah 1:23); they "have been bent on shedding blood... the fatherless and the widow are wronged" (Ezekiel 22:7). The widows and their children, cast off from the normal protections of the society, were defenseless against the

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**'You Shall  
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(cont.)**

violence and exploitation of the wicked and powerful.

Their vulnerability put their very lives at risk and reached every level of their existence. On a political level, women in biblical times were not even counted among persons. They were left out of the official census and considered an afterthought by the numbers keepers at such events as Jesus' feeding of the crowd with the seven loaves of bread and the fish: "Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children" (Matthew 15:38).

In the Ten Commandments, wives are listed in the 10th among possessions that are not to be coveted: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exodus 20:17). Indeed, as the story of Ruth reminds us, women were property to be bought and sold, passed on from father to husband; Boaz' first question upon seeing Ruth, "Whose maiden is this?" was a natural one for the times. Adultery was a most serious crime because it was considered a violation of a man's property rights.

Economically, women were completely dependent on men. As property, they could not own property. Possessions such as fields and herds were passed on to male heirs, and chief among women's functions was to provide those heirs. "Barrenness" or failure to produce male offspring were particular burdens of shame for women.

After a man's death, if no male heir had been produced, the law of levirate marriage prevailed: The man's brother, or next closest kin, would marry his widow to provide heirs and keep his inheritance in the family (Deuteronomy 25:5). This arrangement could be rejected by the man's kin, as in the story of Ruth, but could not be refused by the widow. We can imagine that Ruth was one of the rare women who took this matter into her own hands and one of the fortunate ones who found a kind and responsive husband. As strong a woman as she appears to have been, she recognized that the long-term survival of Naomi and herself depended on her finding a viable relationship with a man.

Divorce was also a decision over which women had no power. Their husbands could put them away for "indecency," relegating them to outcast status outside the protections of the community.

Women of such status by virtue of widowhood or divorce faced vulnerability on a sexual level as well. Three times the story of Ruth mentions her decision to work in Boaz' fields as a choice for protection from being molested. Women on their own were visible targets for rape, as the biblical record shows.

**BUT THE SCRIPTURES** also make clear that "widows and orphans" were not left without an advocate. "God executes justice for the fatherless and the widow..." (Deuteronomy 10:18); "The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners, God upholds the widow and the fatherless" (Psalm 146:8-9).

God's exhortations to the people to become advocates as well for the vulnerable are many: "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan" (Exodus 22:22); "Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17); "Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless" (Zechariah 7:10). Judgment and promise were tied up in how the people of God treated the poorest among them: "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow ... then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever" (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

Care for widows and orphans was a central sign of faithfulness to God. Not only were reapers instructed to leave grain for the gleaners, but "at the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce ... and the fatherless, and the

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widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled" (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

Institutionalized charity became the norm, and this eventually developed in the early church into a collection for maintaining widows and orphans. Care was taken, however, that no undeserving woman receive the charity of the church. The fifth chapter of 1 Timothy is devoted to a lengthy definition of "real widows" and suggests that younger widows should marry and bear children, lest they "learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busy-bodies, saying what they should not" (1 Timothy 5:13).

The letter of James, which emphasizes the important marriage between faith and works, places care for the vulnerable at the heart of salvation: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27).

BUT THE FAILURES of charity are as evident today in the United States as they were when Ruth and Naomi faced a life of desperation as widows, perhaps more so. At least Ruth found stalks from which to glean what reapers left behind. Today, marginalized women are left without even society's crumbs.

Welfare as a system has shifted poor women's dependence from men to government handouts, which shrink with each passing year. A modern population of "widows and orphans" has been created by a system that withholds support when a man is present in the home and that strikes at the roots of the family structure.

The message for us today is one that was delivered by a woman who, like Ruth, was the victim of triple jeopardy. A victim of poverty through Rome's exploitative occupation of her homeland, of racism from the surrounding culture, and sexism by a religious tradition that defined her as property, Mary was chosen to be the vehicle of God's liberation. She delivered the message that has echoed through the centuries.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God my savior,  
For you have regarded the low estate of your handmaiden....  
You have scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
You have put down the mighty from their thrones,  
And exalted those of low degree;  
You have filled the hungry with good things,  
And the rich you have sent empty away. —Luke 1:46-53*

The liberation had already begun before Jesus' eyes even saw the light of day. The message of radical social upheaval on the horizon had been entrusted to a woman—a poor Jewish woman. She was already a sign of the good news, a sign of the change that was coming and had already come.

Three decades later Jesus watched as a multitude of people stepped forward and put large sums of money into the treasury of the temple. Then a poor widow came and put in two copper coins, about a penny's worth. And he said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12:43-44).

The parable is repeated every day as poor women give generously of their whole lives to their children and people around them in need. They have the respect of Jesus, and deserve ours as well, for the sacrifices they make and the burden of vulnerability they bear.

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**'You Shall  
Not  
Afflict...'  
(cont.)**

But they do not simply wait for life to bring a better deal. Like the widow of Luke 18, they pray with persistence and hound the judge of history for justice. Jesus responds: "And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7).

The response is a promise: The day of justice is coming. ■

*Joyce Hollyday was associate editor of Sojourners when this article appeared in the March 1986 issue.*

1

### JESUS' NEW ECONOMY OF GRACE

by Ched Myers

**T**he Hebrew Bible's vision of Sabbath economics contends that a theology of abundant grace and a communal ethic of redistribution are the only way out of our slavery to the debt system, with its theology of meritocracy and private ethic of wealth concentration. The contemporary church, however, has difficulty hearing this as good news, since our theological imaginations have long been captive to the market-driven orthodoxies of modern capitalism.

Our fears have persuaded us that the biblical Jubilee is at best utopian and at worst communistic. Yet we find it awkward simply to dismiss the biblical witness, so an alternative objection inevitably arises, as if on cue: "Israel never really *practiced* the Jubilee!" If genuine, and not simply a strategy of avoidance, this challenge is best addressed by considering both the "negative" and "positive" evidence.

By "negative" evidence I mean the fact that Israel's prophets repeatedly and relentlessly criticized the nation's leadership for betraying the poor and vulnerable members of the community. This strongly suggests that the Sabbath vision of social and economic justice remained a measuring stick to which they could publicly appeal.

There can be no question that the Sabbath disciplines of seventh-year debt release and Jubilee restructuring were regularly abandoned by those Israelites who wished to consolidate social advantages they had gained. The historical narratives in the Hebrew Bible indicate that as the tribal confederacy was eclipsed by centralized political power under the Davidic dynasty, economic stratification followed inexorably. Indeed, the prophet Samuel warned that a monarchy would be linked intrinsically to an economy geared to the elite through ruthless policies of surplus-extraction and militarism (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

ISRAEL'S BETRAYAL of its Sabbath vocation became a central complaint of the prophets. When Isaiah charged the nation's leadership with robbery (Isaiah 3:14-15), he was echoing the manna tradition's censure of stored wealth in the face of community need (see also Isaiah 5:7-8; Malachi 3:5-12). Amos accused the commercial classes of regarding *shabat* as an obstacle to market profiteering and of treating the poor as an exploitable class rather than guaranteeing their gleaning rights (Amos 8:5-6; see Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 19:9-10; Micah 7:1).

Hosea laments that fidelity to international markets had replaced Israel's allegiance to God's economy of grace (Hosea 2:5). Most telling of all, however, is the tradition that attributes the downfall of Jerusalem to the people's failure to keep Sabbath: "God took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped the sword...to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land *had made up for its Sabbaths*. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years" (2 Chronicles 36:20-21; see Leviticus 26:34-35).

But there is also positive evidence that the Sabbath vision was practiced. Jeremiah blasts King Zedekiah when he reneges on his declaration of Jubilee manumission (Jeremiah 34:13-16). Naboth resists King Ahab's attempt to assert eminent domain by invoking his traditional "ancestral rights" to the land (1 Kings 21). And the reformer Nehemiah resurrects the Levitical prohibition of interest (Nehemiah 5:6-13) as well as the Sabbath strictures on commercial production, transaction, and finance (10:31).

There are also eschatological visions of Jubilee. Sabbath redistribution is remembered by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 45:8; 46:17-18; 47:13-23), and the most well-known appro-

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### Jesus' New Economy of Grace (cont.)

priation of the Jubilee vision is found in Isaiah 61:1-2: the prophetic commission that begins with a call to “bring good news to the oppressed poor” and ends with a proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor.” Of all the possibilities in his scriptures, it is *this* text that Jesus of Nazareth chose to define and inaugurate his mission, according to Luke’s gospel (Luke 4:18-19). And it is in this latter-day Hebrew prophet that the vision of Sabbath economics is wholly rehabilitated.

IT WAS THE LATE Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, in his now-classic work *The Politics of Jesus*, who popularized for my generation the notion of Jesus as a Jubilee practitioner. Yoder rightly pointed out that Luke’s gospel is organized around Isaiah’s proclamation of “good news for the poor” (Luke 7:22; see 14:13, 21). Only real debt-cancellation and land-restoration could represent *good* news to real poor people—unless we would spiritualize the entire tradition (against the specific advice of James 2:15-17). Similarly, a Jubilee gospel is usually unwelcome news to the wealthy (as in the Magnificat’s annunciation that God “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty,” Luke 1:53; see Mark 10:22). But the evidence goes far beyond a few widely acknowledged texts. In fact, a revisioning of Sabbath economics defined Jesus’ call to discipleship, lay at the heart of his teaching—and stood at the center of his conflict with the Judean public order.

The gospels agree that Jesus’ first substantive clash with the authorities arose as a result of his practice of “unlicensed” forgiving of sins, which has clear Jubilee overtones (Mark 2:1-12; John 5:9-17). Although the words “sin” (*hamartia*) and “debt” (*opheileema*) are different in Greek, there are many indications of their semantic and social equivalence in the gospels. Most of us have noted it, for example, in the Lord’s Prayer according to Luke: “Forgive us our *sins*, for we ourselves forgive everyone *indebted* to us” (Luke 11:4). Their correlation is further suggested by the fact that here and throughout the New Testament the same verb (*aphiemi*) is used to “forgive” sin and “release” from debt. Unlike our society, which refuses to see the economic dimensions of moral and criminal dysfunction, the gospels do *not* spiritualize “sin” and ignore the realities of “debt” but rather see the two as fundamentally interrelated.

We see this correlation in Luke’s version of the story of the woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus prefaces his “absolution” of the woman’s sins (verses 39, 48-50) with an object lesson describing how a creditor forgave debt (verses 41-43). Matthew does the same in his instructions on reconciliation within the community of faith: The exhortation to forgive sins “seventy times seven” (perhaps an allusion to the Jubiliary “seven times seven” of Leviticus 25:8; but also to Genesis 4:24) is illumined by a thoroughly political-economic tale about the settling of accounts in the debt system (Matthew 18:15-35).

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus identifies himself as the “Human One” who has the authority to forgive sins (debts) (Mark 2:10). Shortly thereafter Jesus instructs his disciples to help themselves to field produce, justifying it on the basis of a story about the right of hungry Israelites to food regardless of social convention (Mark 2:23-26). Then comes his punch line: “The Sabbath was created for humanity” (2:27). This is neither a proprietary statement nor a Messianic abrogation of the Sabbath discipline! Quite the contrary: It reiterates the Sabbath as part of the order of God’s good creation (Genesis 2:2-3) and confirms that its purpose is to *humanize us* in a world where so much of our socioeconomic reasoning and practice are dehumanizing. Jesus then asserts his authority to interpret true Sabbath practice (Mark 2:28). In fact, Jesus’ central struggle with the political leadership was not over theology, but over the meaning of Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; John 7:22-24, 9:14-16). This “Human One,” claiming the authority to cancel debts and restore the Sabbath, is a Jubilee figure indeed!

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### Jesus' New Economy of Grace (cont.)

Jesus' Jubilee orientation is also seen in his efforts to rebuild community between socioeconomically alienated groups. His "outreach" to tax collectors, who made their living exploiting debtors, is a case in point. Luke begins and ends his narrative of Jesus' ministry with such stories. Following Jesus' call to discipleship, Levi renounces his tax-collecting work and throws a banquet for Jesus and his clientele of "sinners" (5:27-32). Why does this provoke strenuous protests from the authorities? The answer is made explicit in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). This wealthy creditor is also invited to host Jesus—but he (rightly) understands this to mean he must first practice substantial economic reparation. It is to this program of socioeconomic "leveling" that the official adjudicators of debt object—in Jesus' day and our own.

But while Levi and Zacchaeus embrace Jubilee liberation through redistribution, another man with "much property" rejects it (Mark 10:21-23). Jesus expects his followers to enter into the new economy of grace. Interestingly, the formulaic discipleship phrase "they *left* and followed" (Mark 1:18-20; Luke 5:28) uses the verb *aphiemi*, which we have seen also means to forgive sin or cancel debt. Jesus promises that whoever *leaves* "house or family or fields" (the symbols of the basic agrarian economy: site of consumption, labor force, site of production) will receive the same back "hundredfold" (Mark 10:29-30).

Discipleship thus means forsaking the seductions and false securities of the debt system for a recomunitized economy of enough for everyone. In such an economy, which Jesus calls the "kingdom," there are no longer any rich and poor—by definition, therefore, the rich "cannot enter" it (Mark 10:23-25). So contrary is this vision to our accepted horizons of possibility, however, that disciples ancient and modern have difficulty truly believing (10:26).

Jesus' call for radical social restructuring at all levels, from the household (Mark 3:31-35) to the body politic (Mark 10:35-45), is summarized by the Jubilee ultimatum: "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31). He typically chooses the venue of table fellowship in order to both show and tell object lessons that illustrate this. Meals lay at the heart of ancient society: Where, what, and with whom you ate defined your social identity and status. Thus the table was a "mirror" of society, with its economic classes and political divisions.

In the extended banquet story in Luke 14, Jesus systematically undermines prevailing conventions and proprieties while advocating a new "table" of compassion and equality. The opening episode deals (not surprisingly) with a dispute over the Sabbath practice (Luke 14:1-6). Next comes Jesus' attack on the dominant system of meritocracy, with its hierarchies, prestige posturing, and ladder-climbing, and his invitation to "downward mobility" (verses 7-11). He then offends his host by criticizing his guest list, rejecting the reciprocal patronage system of the elite and calling instead for a focus upon "those who cannot repay" (verses 12-14). The series concludes with Jesus' pointed little fable about an exemplary host who finally understands the bankruptcy of meritocracy and decides instead to build a Jubilee community with the poor and outcast (verses 15-24).

THERE IS NO THEME more common to Jesus' storytelling than Sabbath economics. He promises poor sharecroppers abundance (Mark 4:3-8, 26-32) but threatens absentee landowners (Mark 12:1-12) and rich householders (Luke 16:19-31) with judgment. In order to teach the incompatibility of the economy of grace with the dictates of "Mammon," Jesus spins a parable that portrays a hapless middleman caught in the brutal logic of the debt system, a man who decides to "trade" instead in Jubilee-style debt release (Luke 16:1-13). When faced with a dispute over inheritance rights, Jesus counters with a parable about the folly of storing up wealth (remember the manna!) and then exhorts us to learn the lessons of grace and subsistence from the

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### Jesus' New Economy of Grace (cont.)

“great economy” of nature (Luke 12:13-34; see James 5:1-6).

The notorious parable of the talents (pounds) shows how Sabbath perspective as an interpretive key can rescue us from a long tradition of both bad theology and bad economics (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-28). This story has in capitalist religion been interpreted allegorically from the perspective of the cruel master (= God!), requiring spiritualizing gymnastics to rescue the story from its depressing conclusion that the haves will always triumph over the have-nots (Matthew 25:29). But it reads much more coherently when turned on its head and read as a cautionary tale of realism about the mercenary selfishness of the debt system. This reading understands the servant who refused to play the greedy master's money-market games as the hero who pays a high price for speaking truth to power (Matthew 25:24-30)—just as Jesus himself did.

In light of this evidence, it should come as no surprise that the archetypal manna story, which represents the foundation for Sabbath economics, should have a central place in Jesus' consciousness. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus must face again the wilderness temptation concerning bread and sustenance (Matthew 4:1-4 = Deuteronomy 8:2-3 = Exodus 16). At key junctures he re-enacts that wilderness feeding—and all who participate “have enough” (Mark 6:42; 8:8). And at the heart of the prayer he teaches his disciples is this double petition: “Give us enough bread for today, and forgive us our debts as we forgive others” (Matthew 6:11-12).

These are some of the “Jubilee footprints” in the Jesus story. It is important to note that the early church that produced these gospels also *practiced* Sabbath economics. The most obvious example—similarly maligned or ignored by modern exegetes—is the Acts account of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the Jubilee-tinged celebration of *Shavuot* (Acts 2). This occasions a portrait of the church's first experiment in wealth redistribution, echoing the manna story with the report that “assets were distributed to any as had need” (Acts 2:45, 4:35). Similarly, central to the itinerant ministry of the apostle Paul was his invitation to the new Gentile churches to learn Sabbath economics by practicing interchurch mutual aid. Significantly, in his most elaborate articulation of this commitment (2 Corinthians 8-9), the *one* scriptural justification Paul employs is a citation of the manna story: “As it is written, ‘Those who had much did not have too much; and those who had little did not have too little’ (2 Corinthians 8:14-15)!”

BIBLICAL INTERPRETERS skeptical of the Jubilee tradition have not found evidence for its practice because they have not been looking for it. But once we restore Sabbath economics to its central place in the Torah, we hear its echoes *everywhere* in the rest of scripture. The standard of economic justice is woven into the warp and weft of the Bible; pull this strand, and the whole fabric unravels.

If we are going to dismiss the Jubilee because Israel practiced it only inconsistently, we should also ignore the Sermon on the Mount because Christians have rarely embodied Jesus' instruction to love our enemies. But it is time to move beyond such rationalizing theology in our churches. We must rediscover the gospel as good news for the poor, and the economic disciplines of *shabat* as the path of humanization.

Fortunately, the “subversive memory” of Jubilee has kept erupting throughout church history—among early monks, medieval communitarians, and radical reformers. Even with the ascendancy of modern capitalism—with its fierce antipathy toward Sabbath economics—this vision has not been extinguished. We see it in tracts by the 18th-century “leveler” Thomas Spence in his struggle against the move to enclose (i.e. privatize) the Commons in early industrial England: “Since then this Jubilee/Sets all at Liberty/Let us be glad/Behold each man return to his possession.” And we hear it in the 19th-century spirituals of African slaves sung in American fields: “Don't you

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### **Jesus' New Economy of Grace (cont.)**

hear the gospel trumpet sound Jubilee?"

Those of us who would insist that the Bible's ancient socioeconomic and spiritual disciplines remain relevant today have hard work to do. We must diligently and creatively explore what contemporary, concrete analogies might exist to Jubilee practices of old. The task is as imperative as it is daunting; the alternative is the "capital-olarchy" of the runaway global economy. In all of this, the church can help nurture commitment and creativity by promoting "Sabbath literacy," a spirituality of forgiveness and reparation, and practical economic disciplines for individuals, households, and congregations.

"Who, then, can be saved?" (Mark 10:26). Mark's epilogue to the call of the rich man (Mark 10:17-25) anticipates our incredulity: Does Jesus *really* expect the "haves" (that is, us) to participate in Sabbath wealth redistribution as a condition for discipleship? Can we imagine a world in which there are no rich and poor? To the disciples' skepticism, and to ours, Jesus replies simply: "I know it seems impossible to you, but for God all things are possible" (10:27). In other words, economics is ultimately a theological issue. And this is why our churches must talk about it, and talk about it in light of our unique tradition of Sabbath economics. ■

*Ched Myers was a writer, teacher, and activist based in Los Angeles, and a Sojourners contributing editor, when this article appeared in the July-August 1998 issue.*



### SESSION 2

## *The Bible and Wealth*

- “Is God Really on the Side of the Poor?” by Ronald J. Sider
- “Jesus Visits the Hamptons,” by Will Willimon
- “Tax the Rich,” by William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins

Few things rob humans of their dignity more than poverty. While many theologians have made the case that God has special concern for the poor, Ronald J. Sider argues we must be careful to acknowledge that God is not partial to any group of people but loves each person, regardless of economic status. Yet in the gospels Jesus strongly presses the rich, Will Willimon writes, in a way that should challenge us today to reflect on wealth and its effect on relationship with God and the poor. William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins examine the biblical and moral limits imposed on absolute private ownership of wealth and property in the context of the “estate tax,” the United States’ only levy on accumulated wealth.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways has your economic status affected your relationship with God? How has economics affected relationships in your church—between members and in your neighborhood or town? Have you ever felt personally challenged by Jesus’ teachings on wealth? Create a family “wealth history,” examining what personal initiatives, social policies, or circumstances led your family to accumulate or lose wealth.
2. Willimon would agree with this quote about luxuries: “It is a pleasure to live with them and a tragedy to live for them.” How do you understand affluence or luxury in your own life? How is luxury presented in the media and in advertising? What are the connections between luxury and leisure?
3. Is it your experience that contemporary Christians are unwilling to criticize capitalism? What do you think of the Pope John Paul II’s statement, “A balanced and well-regulated world market can bring with prosperity the development of culture, democracy, solidarity, and peace. But one can expect very different effects from an unbridled market that, under the pretext of competitiveness, prospers by exploiting people and the environment to excess”?
4. Why has the repeal of the federal estate tax become such a “hot ticket” item for many Christians? Consider the intent behind the years of Jubilee and years of debt release in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15. Comment on how these passages speak to the U.S. government’s efforts to repeal the estate tax.

### RESOURCES

- Ronald J. Sider has several books on Christians and wealth and poverty. His breakthrough book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (reissued by W Publishing Group, 2005) examines the movement from affluence to generosity, and *Just Generosity* (Baker Books, 1999) looks at what it will take to overcome poverty in America.
- *Wealth and Our Commonwealth: Why America Should Tax Accumulated Fortunes*, by William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins, argues that individual wealth is a product not only of hard work and smart choices but also of the society that provides the fer-



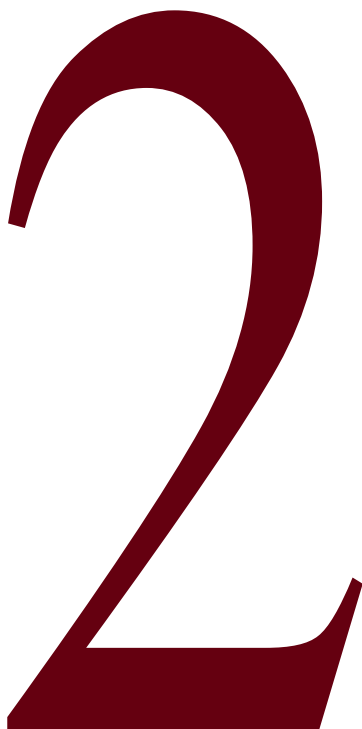
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## *Christians and Poverty*

tile soil for success. (Beacon Press, January 2003)

- *Ministry of Money* is a Christian ministry that encourages persons to become free from their attachment to cultural values regarding money and to live out joyfully God's call for their lives and resources. It offers retreats, a monthly newsletter, and excellent resources. ([www.ministryofmoney.org](http://www.ministryofmoney.org))

- *Affluenza* is a groundbreaking film that diagnoses a serious social disease—caused by consumerism, commercialism, and materialism—that has a devastating impact on our families, our communities, and the environment. This PBS special also has a Web site ([www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza](http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza)) with numerous resources on the topic. You can order the DVD through Bullfrog Films ([www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com)).



### IS GOD REALLY ON THE SIDE OF THE POOR?

by Ronald J. Sider

**I**s God, as some liberation theologians suggested in the 1970s, biased in favor of the poor? The Bible has a clear answer. God is not partial. God has the same loving concern for each person created. For precisely this reason, God cares as much for the weak and disadvantaged as for the strong and fortunate. In contrast to the ways you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to take a special interest in the poor and oppressed.

Might there in fact be some important sense in which one should say that God is on the side of the poor? I want to examine four strands of biblical teaching related to this question.

The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches a fundamental point that we have often overlooked. At the crucial moments when God displayed mighty acts in history to reveal God's nature and will, God *also* intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed.

God displayed power at the Exodus in order to free oppressed slaves. When God called Moses at the burning bush, God's intention was to end suffering and injustice: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7-8).

Now of course the liberation of oppressed slaves was not God's only purpose in the Exodus. God also acted because of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God wanted to create a special people to whom God's self could be revealed. The liberation of a poor, oppressed people, however, was right at the heart of God's design (Exodus 6:5-7).

The preamble to the Ten Commandments, probably the most important portion of the entire law for Israel, begins with this same revolutionary truth. Before God gives the two tables of the law, Yahweh identifies God's self: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Deuteronomy 5:6, Exodus 20:2). Yahweh is the one who frees from bondage. The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed.

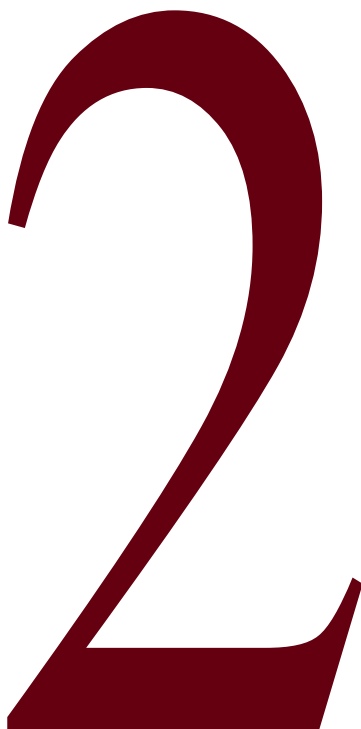
The Exodus was certainly the decisive event in the creation of the chosen people. We distort the biblical interpretation of this momentous occasion unless we see that, at this pivotal point, the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.

WHEN THEY SETTLED in the promised land, the Israelites soon discovered that Yahweh's passion for justice was a two-edged sword. When they were oppressed, it led to their freedom. But when they became the oppressors, it led to their destruction.

When God called Israel out of Egypt and made the covenant with them, God gave them God's law so that they could live together in peace and justice. But Israel failed to obey the law of the covenant. As a result, Israel was destroyed, and God's chosen people were sent into captivity. Why?

The explosive message of the prophets is that God destroyed Israel not just because of idolatry but also because of their economic exploitation of the poor.

The middle of the 8th century B.C. was a time of political success and economic prosperity unknown since the days of Solomon. But it was precisely at this moment



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### Is God Really on the Side of the Poor? (cont.)

that God sent the prophet Amos to announce the unwelcome news that the northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed. Penetrating beneath the facade of current prosperity and fantastic economic growth, Amos saw terrible oppression of the poor. He saw the rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (2:7). He saw that the affluent lifestyle of the rich was built on oppression of the poor (6:1-7). Even in the courts the poor had no hope, because the rich bribed the judges (5:10-15).

God’s word through Amos was that the northern kingdom would be destroyed and the people taken into exile (6:4-7; 7:11, 17). Only a very few years after Amos spoke, it happened just as God had said.

We must not ignore other very important factors. The prophet Hosea (a contemporary of Amos) disclosed that the nation’s idolatry was another cause of impending destruction. But the catastrophe of national destruction and captivity reveals the God of the Exodus still at work correcting the oppression of the poor.

CHRISTIANS BELIEVE that God revealed God’s self most completely in Jesus of Nazareth. How did the incarnate one define his mission?

His words in the synagogue at Nazareth, spoken near the beginning of his public ministry, still throb with hope for the poor. He read from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

After reading these words, he informed the audience that this scripture was now fulfilled in himself.

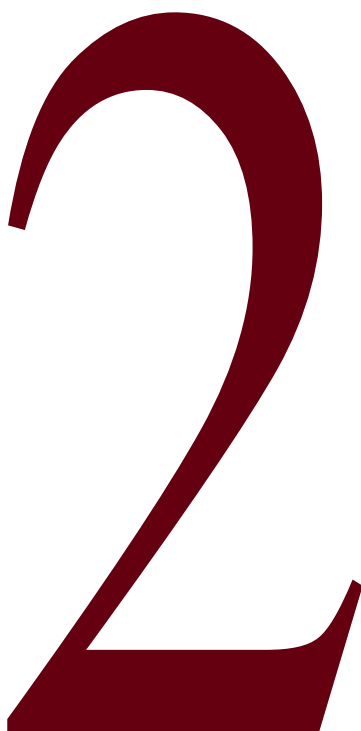
Some avoid the clear meaning of Jesus’ statement by spiritualizing his words. Certainly, as other texts show, he came to open our blinded hearts, to die for our sins, and to free us from the oppression of guilt. But that is not what he means here. The words about releasing captives and liberating the oppressed are from Isaiah. In their original Old Testament setting, they unquestionably referred to physical oppression and captivity.

Jesus’ actual ministry corresponded precisely to the words of Luke 4. He spent most of his time not among the rich and powerful in Jerusalem, but among the poor in the cultural and economic backwater of Galilee. He healed the sick and blind. He fed the hungry. And he warned his followers in the strongest possible words that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation (Matthew 25:31-46).

At the supreme moment of history, when God took on human flesh, we see the God of Israel still at work liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning God’s people to do the same. That is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor.

Not only does God act in history to liberate the poor, but, in a mysterious way that we can only half fathom, the sovereign of the universe identifies with the weak and destitute. Two proverbs state this beautiful truth. Proverbs 14:31 puts it negatively: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker.” Even more moving is the positive formulation: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord” (19:17). What a statement! Helping a poor person is like helping the creator of all things with a loan.

BORN IN A SMALL, insignificant province of the Roman Empire, Jesus was first visited by shepherds, persons viewed as thieves by Jewish society. His parents were too poor to bring the normal offering for purification. Instead of a lamb, they brought two pigeons to the temple. Jesus was a refugee (Matthew 2:13-15) and then an immigrant in Galilee (Matthew 2:19-23). Since Jewish rabbis received no fees for their



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teaching, Jesus had no regular income during his public ministry. Nor did he have a home of his own (Matthew 8:20). Jesus also sent out his disciples in extreme poverty (Luke 9:3; 10:4).

His identification with the poor and unfortunate was, he said, a sign that he was the Messiah. When John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the long-expected Messiah, Jesus simply pointed to his deeds. He was healing the sick and preaching to the poor (Matthew 11:2-6). Jesus also preached to the rich. But apparently it was his particular concern to preach to the poor that validated his claim to messiahship.

Only as we feel the presence of the incarnate God in the form of a poor Galilean can we begin to understand. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

If this saying of Jesus is awesome, its parallel is terrifying. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (v. 45). What does that mean in a world where millions die each year while rich Christians live in affluence? What does it mean to see the Lord of the universe lying by the roadside starving and walk by on the other side? We cannot know.

We can only pledge, in fear and trembling, not to kill him again.

JESUS’ STORY OF the rich man and Lazarus echoes and illustrates a third teaching prominent throughout scripture: The rich may prosper for a time, but eventually God will destroy them; the poor, on the other hand, God will exalt.

Mary’s Magnificat puts it simply and bluntly: “My soul magnifies the Lord. 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 1:46-53). And James’ letter is a constant theme of biblical revelation: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you” (James 5:1).

Why does scripture declare that God regularly reverses the good fortunes of the rich? Is God engaged in class warfare? Actually, our texts never say that God loves the poor more than the rich. But they do constantly assert that God lifts up the poor and disadvantaged. They insist that God casts down the wealthy and powerful—precisely because they became wealthy by oppressing the poor and because they failed to feed the hungry.

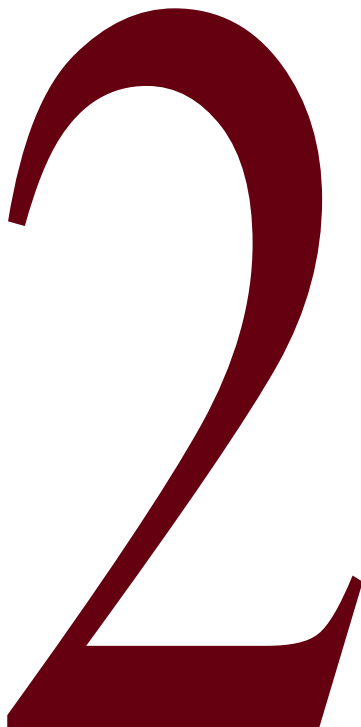
Why did James warn the rich to weep and howl because of impending misery? Because they had cheated their workers: “You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (James 5:3-5).

God does not have class enemies. But he hates and punishes injustice and neglect of the poor. And the rich, if we accept the repeated warnings of scripture, are frequently guilty of both.

Through the prophets God announced devastation and destruction for both rich individuals and rich nations who oppressed the poor (Jeremiah 22:13-19; Amos 6:4-7; Jeremiah 5:26-31; Isaiah 1:21-26). Nowhere is this clearer than in Isaiah. Through Isaiah God declared that the rulers of Judah were rich because they had cheated the poor (Isaiah 3:14-25).

Sometimes scripture does not charge the rich with direct oppression of the poor. It simply accuses them of failure to share with the needy. But the result is the same.

The biblical explanation of Sodom’s destruction provides an illustration of this terrible truth. If asked why Sodom was destroyed, virtually all Christians would point



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### Is God Really on the Side of the Poor? (cont.)

to the city's gross sexual perversity. But that is a one-sided recollection of what scripture actually teaches. Ezekiel shows that one important reason God destroyed Sodom was that it stubbornly refused to share with the poor: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them, when I saw it" (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

The text does not say that they oppressed the poor. It simply accuses them of failing to assist the needy.

Affluent Christians remember Sodom's sexual misconduct and forget her sinful unconcern for the poor. Is it because the former is less upsetting? Have we allowed our economic self-interest to distort our interpretations of scripture? Undoubtedly. But precisely to the extent that our affirmation of scriptural authority is sincere, we will permit painful texts to correct our thinking. As we do, we will acknowledge that the God of the Bible wreaks horrendous havoc on the rich. But it is not because God does not love rich persons. It is because the rich regularly oppress the poor and neglect the needy.

Since God cares so much for the poor, it is hardly surprising that God wants God's people to do the same. God's command to believers to have a special regard for the poor, weak, and disadvantaged is the final theme of biblical literature I want to explore.

Equal justice for the poor in court is a constant theme of scripture (Exodus 23:6; Psalm 72:1-4; Amos 5:10-15). Widows, orphans and strangers also receive particularly frequent attention (Exodus 22:21-24).

The Bible specifically commands believers to imitate God's special concern for the poor and oppressed. In the Old Testament, Yahweh frequently reminded the Israelites of their former oppression in Egypt, when Yahweh commanded them to care for the poor (Exodus 22:21-24; Deuteronomy 15:13-15). Jesus taught his followers to imitate God's mercy in their lending as well (Luke 6:33-36).

When Paul took up the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, he pointedly reminded the Corinthians that the Lord Jesus became poor so that they might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). When the author of 1 John called on Christians to share with the needy, he first mentioned the example of Christ: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Then, in the very next verse, he urged Christians to give generously to the needy. It is the amazing self-sacrifice of Christ which Christians are to imitate as they relate to the poor and oppressed. We have seen that God's word commands believers to care for the poor. In fact, the Bible underlines the command by teaching that when God's people care for the poor, they imitate God. But that is not all. God's word teaches that those who neglect the poor and oppressed are really not God's people at all—no matter how frequent their religious rituals or how orthodox their creeds and confessions.

God thundered again and again through the prophets that worship in the context of mistreatment of the poor and disadvantaged is an outrage. Isaiah denounced Israel (he called it Sodom and Gomorrah!) because it tried to worship Yahweh and oppress the weak at the same time: "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. ... Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:10-15).



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

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### Is God Really on the Side of the Poor? (cont.)

God wants justice, not mere religious rituals, from such people. “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17; also 58:3-7).

NOR HAS GOD changed. Jesus repeated the same theme. He warned the people about the scribes “who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers” (Mark 12:38-40). Their pious-looking garments and frequent visits to the synagogue were a sham. Like Amos and Isaiah, Jesus announced God’s outrage against those who try to mix pious practices and mistreatment of the poor.

But he was even more blunt, and sharp. To those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners, he will speak a terrifying word at the final judgment: “Depart from me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). The meaning is clear and unambiguous. Jesus intends his disciples to imitate his own special concern for the poor and needy. Those who disobey will experience eternal damnation.

But perhaps we have misinterpreted Matthew 25. Some people think that “the least of these” (v. 45) and “the least of these my brethren” (v. 40) refer only to Christians. This exegesis is not certain. But even if the primary reference of these words is to poor believers, other aspects of Jesus’ teaching not only permit but *require* us to extend the meaning of Matthew 25 to both believers and unbelievers who are poor and oppressed. The story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29ff) teaches that anybody in need is our neighbor. In light of the parable of the Good Samaritan and other clear teachings of Jesus, one is compelled to say that part of the full meaning of Matthew 25 is that those who fail to aid the poor and oppressed (whether they are believers or not) are simply not the people of God.

Lest we forget the warning, God repeats it in 1 John 3:17-18. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (see also James 2:14-17). Again the words are plain.

What do these words mean for Western Christians who demand increasing affluence each year while fellow Christians in the Third World suffer malnutrition, deformed bodies and brains—even starvation? The text clearly says that if we fail to aid the needy, we do not have God’s love—no matter what we may say. It is deeds that count, not pious phrases and saintly speeches.

But the question persists. Are professing church believers no longer Christians because of continuing sin? Obviously not. Christians know that sinful selfishness continues to plague them. We are members of the people of God not because of our own righteousness but solely because of Christ’s death for us.

But that response is inadequate. All the texts we have explored surely mean more than that the people of God are disobedient (but still justified all the same) when they persistently neglect the poor.

Certainly none of us would claim that we are fully implementing the biblical call to side with the poor. And we cling to the hope of forgiveness. But there comes a point (thank God, for God alone knows where) where neglect of the poor is no longer forgiven. It is punished. Eternally.

Is it not possible that large numbers of Western Christians have reached that point? North Americans earn 14 times as much as the people of India, but we give a tiny amount to the church, and most churches spend much of that pitiful pittance on themselves. Can we seriously claim that we are imitating God’s concern for the poor and the oppressed?

God is not biased. But neither is God neutral in the struggle for justice. The Bible

# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## *Christians and Poverty*

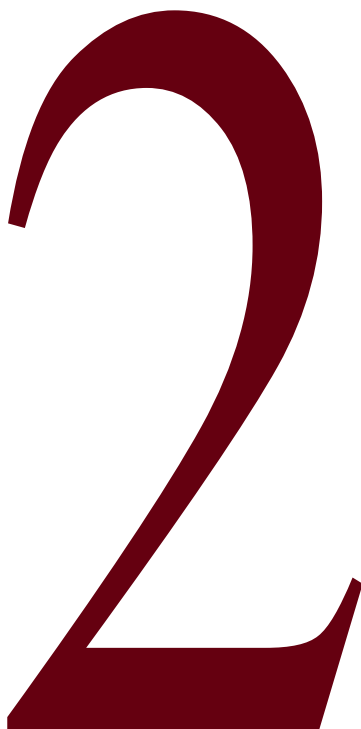
### **Is God Really on the Side of the Poor? (cont.)**

clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is at work in history casting down the rich and exalting the poor. Why? Because the rich have failed to aid the needy. Or because they have often become rich, as scripture points out, precisely because they have oppressed the poor. The God revealed in scripture is on the side of the poor precisely because God is *not* biased, precisely because God is a God of impartial justice.

God longs for the salvation of the rich as much as for the salvation of the poor. God desires fulfillment, joy, and happiness for all creatures. But that does not contradict the fact that God is on the side of the poor. Genuine biblical repentance and conversion lead people to turn away from all sin—including economic oppression. Salvation for the rich will include liberation from their injustice. Thus God's desire for salvation and fulfillment of the rich is in complete harmony with the scriptural teaching that God is on the side of the poor.

God's concern for the poor is astonishing and boundless. We can only begin to fathom the depth of God's identification with the poor as we see it disclosed in the incarnation. His passion for justice compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals who oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Consequently, God's people—if they are indeed God's people—follow in the footsteps of the God of the poor. ■

*Ronald J. Sider was part of the Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown in Philadelphia when this article appeared in the October 1977 issue of Sojourners.*



### JESUS VISITS THE HAMPTONS

by Will Willimon

**S**ome time ago I was returning from a preaching gig in the Hamptons, home of Martha Stewart, Steven Spielberg, and numerous others of the very rich. There I had seen homes with two bedrooms on the market for \$6 million, a house with a 200-car garage, and other architectural obscenities. But we had a wonderful weekend among the beautiful people of the Hamptons, and no one walked out of my sermon on Sunday. As my wife and I flew back to drab Durham, North Carolina, I asked her, “Would you please explain to me what Jesus has got against rich people? I like rich people. I’ve met some great people who are rich. What’s the problem with Jesus?”

Well, like it or not, built right into the fabric of the gospel and the practice of the Christian faith, there seems to be a deep suspicion of, even a hostility toward, the prosperous. I would have a much better time visiting the Hamptons if I were not forced to take Jesus with me.

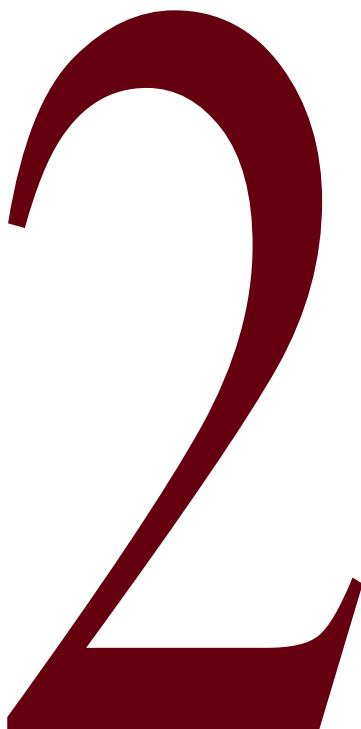
As G. K. Chesterton said, “It may be possible to have a good debate over whether or not Jesus believed in fairies. It is a tantalizing question. Alas, it is impossible to have any sort of debate over whether or not Jesus believed that rich people were in big trouble—there is too much evidence on the subject and it is overwhelming.”

There is a peculiar pastoral burden of having to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified in the midst of a nation of prosperity, particularly if the affluent are among us when we preach. Most of us preachers (to the discredit of the American church) preach to relatively affluent congregations. Jesus makes a prickly pulpit partner when in the pews sit those for whom he appears to have had deep antipathy.

We were guests at an affluent Episcopal parish (a tautology?) in the mountains of western North Carolina, where rich people go to retire. We made our way through a parking lot of Cadillacs and Lincolns. The liturgy went well enough until we got to the sermon. The lectionary’s assigned text was from 1 Kings, the reign of King Solomon. The priest told us that Solomon was the world’s wisest man, king at a time when Israel at last stood at the summit of national development. No longer was Israel jerked around by larger nations. Israel had a big army and lots of chariots. The economy was booming. A great temple was being built as a sign of national prosperity. Then he paused and said, “And yet Israel learned that the reign of Solomon was a time when the nation was as far from the heart of God as it could get.” Then the preacher hammered us for our stock portfolios, our pointless leisure, and problems with our spoiled children.

Where else but church would you get a read like that on a “well-functioning economy”?

The plight of the poor becomes particularly problematic in a time of prosperity. Recent books by Michael Lewis and Dinesh D’Souza celebrate the lives and psyches of the New Economy’s millionaires, seeing them as irrefutable evidence that America never had it so good. Yet a great 2001 book by Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, portrays an America many of us do not know. Ehrenreich, who holds a Ph.D. in biology, wondered what America is like seen from the bottom up, as a member of the “working poor.” Leaving her home in Key West, she traveled from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, working in low-paying jobs, determined to live on what she earned. Twelve million women have been pushed into the labor market by welfare “reform”; how do they survive on the wages of the unskilled—at \$6 to \$7 an hour, only half of what is considered a living wage?



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### Jesus Visits the Hamptons (cont.)

As a waitress in Florida, Ehrenreich's name is suddenly transformed to "girl," and the manager explains that he won't take the trouble to learn her name because people in jobs like hers only work for a few weeks anyway. She records what it is like to get down on your knees and scrub toilets in a hotel where the rooms cost more for a night than she took home in pay for a week of work. She shares her budget, showing how it was impossible to make ends meet—even with careful management, good health, and no kids—on the wages that she earned. Even when she works two jobs, seven days a week, she almost winds up in a shelter for the homeless. In Maine, she stretches to get housing for \$675 per month and is still called "trailer trash." As Ehrenreich says, the laws of supply and demand have been reversed. Rental prices skyrocket, but wages never rise. Jobs are relatively plentiful, but it takes more than one to survive. Behind those trademark Wal-Mart vests, she discovers, are the borderline homeless.

After her experience, she wrote that the working poor "are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high."

One of the most revealing things in Ehrenreich's book is what it's like constantly to be reminded that you are poor in an America where—according to the TV advertisements and sitcoms, the radio commercials, and the movies—everyone is doing just great. Invidious comparison is a particular burden that must be borne by the poor in our culture. I remember hearing a sociologist note that poverty in a culture like ours is particularly cruel not only because the gap between the rich and the poor is so great but also because the gap is so constantly self-evident. In cultures where there are large, visible numbers of the poor, poverty seems less dramatic, more a part of life than a judgment upon you as a person.

A man in my church, after telling me of the hardships his family endured during the Great Depression, concluded by saying, "Despite it all, it wasn't so terrible, because everybody, at least everybody we knew, was poor. When everybody's poor, it doesn't hurt so much to be poor."

TODAY, EVEN SOMEWHAT compassionate politicians plead for the "working poor," as if simply to be poor were not a sufficient cause of concern. Just as we once made a distinction between the "deserving poor" and those shiftless, worthless, welfare cheaters who were just "poor," now we distinguish between the blessed "working poor" and all the others. We imply that we have a social responsibility to the "working poor" while the rest of those who, for whatever reason, don't work can be left to forage as best they can for themselves. This we call "compassionate conservatism."

Conservatism it may be, but whatever it is it doesn't sound Christian. Built right into this faith is God's concern for, blessing of, and promises made to the poor. If you are going to be a bona fide member of the Animal Protection Society, then you must cultivate a prejudice against the mistreatment of cats. If you are going to be a Christian, then there is no way to avoid a tendency toward condemnatory judgment of the rich and gracious, charitable compassion for the poor.

Therefore, in our land of relative prosperity and governmentally sanctioned greed, I see the following agenda for biblical Christians:

1. We must cultivate, in our churches and ourselves, a deep suspicion that affluence is a spiritually debilitating and morally dangerous condition. During the campaign debate over doing away with the inheritance tax, I recalled a statement by Augustine that anyone who inherits a great fortune has committed robbery—if not by



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## *Christians and Poverty*

### **Jesus Visits the Hamptons (cont.)**

himself, then at least by his father. A great fortune, unearned through hard work, reasoned Augustine, means that someone is living off unjust gain. Christianity and material prosperity are bad bedfellows.

2. Politicians often put a happy face on everything, telling us that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that if you are not doing well economically, then there must be something wrong with you. Therefore, Christians must practice resistance through a studied determination to notice, to care for, and to stand with the poor among us. They represent a visible, undeniable minority report on how well our society is doing.

3. One of the greatest gifts we have to offer this aggressively materialistic culture is a prophetic Christian critique of the present order. We created this economy; God did not. We have decided to reward some people and types of work and not others. A “fully functioning economy” is to be measured by factors greater than the aggrandizement of the few. It falls to Christians to be among those who point this out.

4. Finally, we preachers must preach the doctrine that, no matter what we do or don't do, God will finally have God's way with the world. God will get the world God intended. That, scripture suggests, involves good news for the poor and less than good news for the rich. Whether God's news is for me good or bad depends to a great extent on where I happen to be when I get the news.

On the first Sunday of the school year, we had a group of students over to our home after the university chapel service. We had a picnic for them, then some lingered to play basketball or to talk. I sat on our patio with one student. He said, “Dr. Willimon, thanks for having us over to your home. This is the first time I've ever been in a faculty home.”

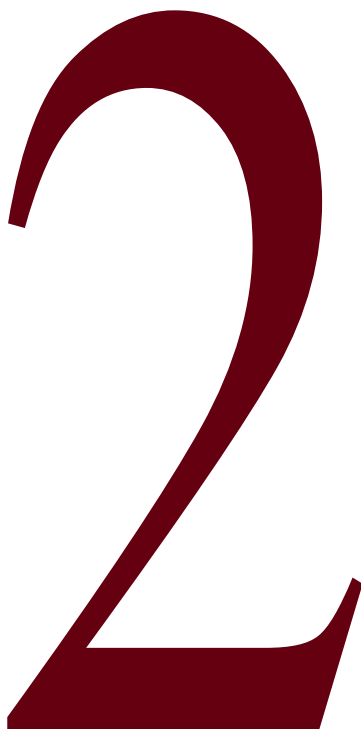
“That's a disgrace,” I said. “I think that we faculty ought to have students in our homes as often as possible.”

“Well, few faculty think that way, I can tell you,” said the student. “And you have a beautiful home,” he said. “Let me ask you, do you feel at all guilty being a Christian and living in such a nice house? How have you thought about that?”

And I responded, “Now I'm remembering why it was not such a great idea to invite you people over to my house.”

Such are the challenges of attempting to be Christian in the midst of affluence. ■

*Will Willimon, the author of more than 50 books, was dean of the chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University when this article appeared in the March-April 2002 issue of Sojourners.*



### TAX THE RICH?

by William H. Gates Sr. and Chuck Collins

*“We believe that permanent repeal of the estate tax would be bad for our democracy, our economy, and our society. Repealing the estate tax, a constructive part of our tax structure for 85 years, would leave an unfortunate legacy for America’s future generations.”* —from “A Call to Preserve the Estate Tax,” a 2001 statement signed by more than 1,200 prominent business leaders and high-net-worth individuals—people who would likely pay the tax.

In the last several years, Congress has debated whether to eliminate the federal estate tax—or “death tax”—our nation’s only levy on accumulated wealth. The paltry debate over elimination of the tax has not grappled adequately with the negative consequences of repealing the estate tax. One hundred years ago, during the first Gilded Age, we had a rigorous debate about the dangers of concentrated wealth in a democracy. The debate over the estate tax goes to the heart of the question of “what kind of country do we want to become” and ethical questions about society’s claim upon the accumulated fortunes of the wealthy.

Ten years ago, a number of wealthy families—including the heirs to the Mars and Gallo fortunes—began bankrolling a campaign for wholesale repeal of the tax. Instead of revealing the true beneficiaries of repeal—households in the top 1 percent of wealth holders—they put forward a media campaign representing farmers and small-business owners as injured parties to the tax. Much of this mythmaking, however, has obscured the dangerous impact of eliminating the tax.

Proponents of repeal argue that the estate tax is un-American, that it punishes success and discourages parents from passing on wealth and businesses to their children. They successfully included elimination of the estate tax in President Bush’s Tax Relief Act of 2001, through which the estate tax would gradually be phased out and then repealed for one year in 2010. Now repeal advocates are pressing to permanently eliminate the estate tax.

**WHY PRESERVE THE** estate tax? The tax generates substantial revenue to pay for government. These funds are raised from those most able to pay—households in the richest 1 percent. Between now and 2009, the amount of wealth exempted prior to paying the tax will rise to \$3.5 million. Based on recent IRS data, that means that only about 6,000 estates a year will pay the tax, with an average estate valued at more than \$21 million. Eliminating the revenue from the estate tax will shift the tax burden off those most able to pay onto everyone else or lead to cuts in services for those most in need.

Many states have state-level inheritance or estate taxes that are linked to the federal estate tax. Repeal of the federal estate tax may lead to a severe drop in revenue for states—an estimated \$5 billion—at a time when they can ill afford the loss. Almost every state in the country is grappling with severe budget deficits and many are cutting lifeline social programs for low- and middle-income people.

The estate tax serves as a catalyst for charitable giving. Many people give to their religious congregations, community organizations, and other charities regardless of the tax advantages. But evidence suggests the estate tax encourages wealthy households to give even more, particularly households with wealth higher than \$20 million. Bequests motivated by the estate tax go toward creation or capitalization of foundations, medical and research organizations, and religious organizations. A U.S.



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### Tax the Rich? (cont.)

Treasury Department report estimates that charitable giving will drop by \$6 billion a year without an estate tax incentive.

The estate tax is part of our country's historic response to excessive inequality. The American experiment is rooted in a suspicion of concentrated wealth and power and in the rejection of aristocracy. The estate tax was established in 1916 as a populist response to the excesses of the Gilded Age. At a time when the gap between the very rich and everyone else is once again at historic levels, it seems un-American to eliminate the one tax that discourages the build-up of dynastic wealth holdings.

SOCIETY HAS AN enormous claim upon the fortunes of the wealthy. This is rooted not only in most religious traditions, but also in an honest accounting of society's substantial investment in creating the fertile ground for wealth-creation.

One of the dominant myths of our time is the "great man" theory of wealth creation—the notion that one's individual success is rooted entirely in one's own effort. You can hear these sentiments in debates over taxes: "I made this money on my own" and "The government has no right to my money." It is important to affirm and celebrate the role of the individual in the creation of wealth and successful enterprises. One significant reason that some people accumulate great wealth is through their hard work, creativity, tenacity, and sacrifice. Individuals do make a difference.

Yet it is equally important to acknowledge the role of a wide variety of influential factors such as luck, privilege, other people's efforts, and society's investment in the creation of individual wealth. The notion of a "self-made millionaire" or "I made this money without any help" is hubris. It is an example of extreme individualism that runs counter to ethical and religious traditions.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all affirm the right of individual ownership and private property, but there are moral limits imposed on absolute private ownership of wealth and property. Each tradition affirms that we are not individuals alone but exist in community—a community that makes claims upon us. The notion that "it is all mine" is a violation of these teachings and traditions.

In the Jewish tradition of *tzedakah*, owners of property are required to care for those in need. This is not a matter of charity or choice—it is an obligation. Individual wealth is provided by God, observes business ethicist Meir Tamari, and it is not meant only for the needs and wants of the private owner but also to satisfy the needs of the poor. Tamari believes society acquires a property right in the wealth of the individual to provide, through compulsory acts of taxation, the social and charitable needs of its members.

The moral basis of welcoming and providing for the stranger is in the Hebrew people's experience of being strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt. This memory acknowledges that the Hebrew people would still be oppressed and in Egypt but for the grace of God. The notion "this is all mine" is inconsistent with Jewish law and may be the sin related to the mark of the "people of Sodom." Tamari observes, "The Sodomite view of absolute private property rejects any obligations to assist others, which is contrary to the Jewish concept of limited private-property rights."

THE MUSLIM APPROACH to charity includes *zakat*, a compulsory component, and *sadaqa*, voluntary giving. *Zakat* is rooted in the individual's obligation as a member of a community. The prophet Muhammad wrote, "Like the organs of the body, if one suffers then all others rally in response." Joseph Singer, author of *The Edges of the Field: Lessons on the Obligations of Ownership*, notes that *zakat* "represents the unbreakable bond between members of the community." Since all wealth is owned by God and held by humans in trust, owners of property are not allowed to consider their interests alone.



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### Tax the Rich? (cont.)

This notion is similar to the principle of stewardship in the Christian tradition. Riches are granted as a gift from God and humans are expected to be responsible stewards of this wealth, including sharing it with those less fortunate. Author and Harvard professor Peter J. Gomes notes, “Upon those who have wealth, there is a burden of responsibility to use it wisely and not only for themselves.” The wealthy must be “generous in proportion to their wealth” because “to whom much is given much is expected.”

The Catholic bishops have reiterated the notion that there is a “social mortgage on capital”—another way to express society’s claim. They affirm the importance of private property and ownership as opposed to statist or collectivist approaches. Yet they balance fundamental American aspirations of freedom and obligation with society’s claim on capital.

Support of private ownership does not mean that anyone has the right to unlimited accumulation of wealth. Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute or unconditioned right. No one is justified in keeping for her exclusive use what she does not need, when others lack necessities. In the American bishops’ pastoral *Economic Justice for All*, they noted, “[Owners and managers] have benefited from the work of many others and from the local communities that support their endeavors.” Pope John Paul II, in the *Encyclical on Human Work*, wrote that capital “is the result of work and bears the signs of human labor.” Those who have labored hold a claim to accumulated wealth and capital.

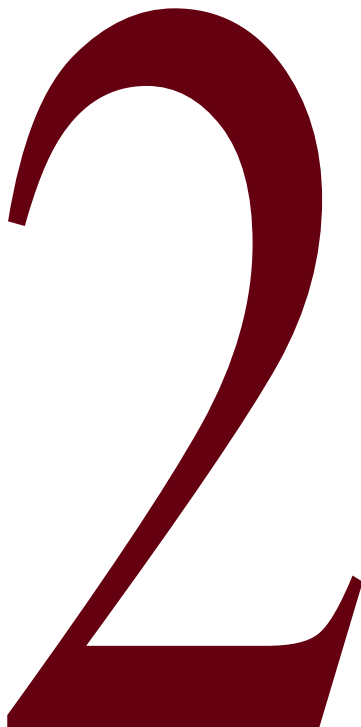
AS AMERICANS WE are more inclined to enshrine individual success and undervalue these other components in wealth building. But for the good of the country, we need to better account for the true origins of wealth and success.

Consider the many components of the social framework that enables great wealth to be built in the United States: a patent system, enforceable contracts, open courts, property ownership records, protection against crime and external threats, public education, and so on. Even the stock market is a form of society-created wealth, providing liquidity to enterprises. When faith in the system is shaken, as in the last year, it is clear what happens to individual wealth.

This is a matter that goes beyond the discussion of the estate tax. We must recognize that society has a legitimate claim upon the wealth of the wealthy. It is not simply a matter of charitable giving to institutions that have made a difference to us, such as schools and libraries. It is also an obligation to pay taxes, to pay for the public institutions that foster equality of opportunity, and to give others the opportunities that we’ve had. It goes to the heart of how we think about ourselves, as individuals and as a society.

Society’s claim on individual accumulated wealth is a fundamentally American notion, rooted in recognition of society’s direct and indirect investment in an individual’s success. In other words, we didn’t get here on our own. ■

*William Gates Sr.—whose son is Microsoft founder Bill Gates—was co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Chuck Collins was co-founder of United for a Fair Economy and Responsible Wealth when this article appeared in the January-February 2003 issue of Sojourners.*



### SESSION 3

## What Role Should Government Play?

- “‘Nothing Shall Make Them Afraid,’” by Jim Wallis
- “Do We Care Enough?” by Ronald J. Sider
- “Time to End Poverty,” by Sen. John Edwards
- “Priorities for the Poor,” by Elizabeth Green

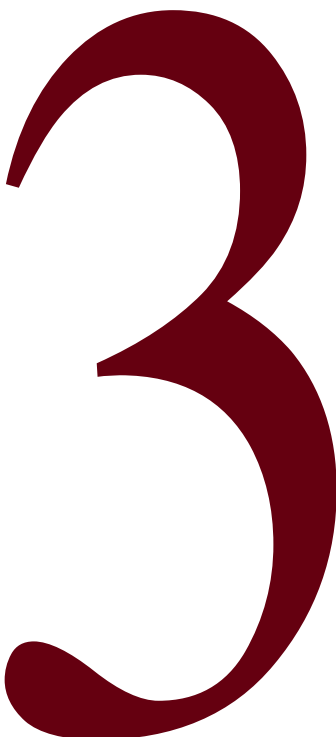
Jim Wallis asserts that the biblical prophets—such as Amos and Isaiah—have a lot to say about the role of government and national spending priorities. Evangelicals for Social Action founder Ronald J. Sider discusses why “sin makes government intervention in the economy necessary,” and former Sen. John Edwards examines the state of the American Dream by looking at the country’s treatment of millions of people who live at the margins and below. Elizabeth Green brings to light the details of everyday poverty in the United States.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does lack of access to adequate food, clean water, housing, health care, and the basic necessities of life contribute to conflict and violence? How might this be corrected?
2. Identify five facts about poverty that you think are central to the problem of economic disparity. Do the same with five facts about wealth.
3. How would you rewrite Micah 6 to address today’s economic situation? If you were to make Micah’s address to Congress, what points would you make? What would you emphasize?
4. In what contexts do you have conversations with people of different socioeconomic classes? Explore the definitions and indicators of class and the ways in which income and wealth are distributed. Talk about these issues in light of the accounts in Acts 2:38-47, Acts 4:31-37, and Acts 5:1-11.

### RESOURCES

- The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities provides current information on the federal budget, as well as a breakdown of how federal priorities affect state level funding. ([www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org))
- In his article “A Sign of Spiritual Distress,” Ben Cohen, co-founder of Ben and Jerry’s Homemade, Inc., explains how a democracy is revealed in its spending priorities. (*Sojourners* magazine, May-June 1999; [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net))
- The Local Initiatives Support Coalition assists resident-led, community-based development organizations to transform distressed communities and neighborhoods into healthy ones by mobilizing businesses, government, and philanthropic support. ([www.lisc.org](http://www.lisc.org))
- Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities works to reduce military spending to better fund social services and education to the end of reducing poverty. ([www.sensiblepriorities.org](http://www.sensiblepriorities.org))
- In “40 Acres and a Mortgage,” Franklin D. Raines, former Fannie Mae CEO, argues that centuries of denying African Americans opportunities to gain assets and build

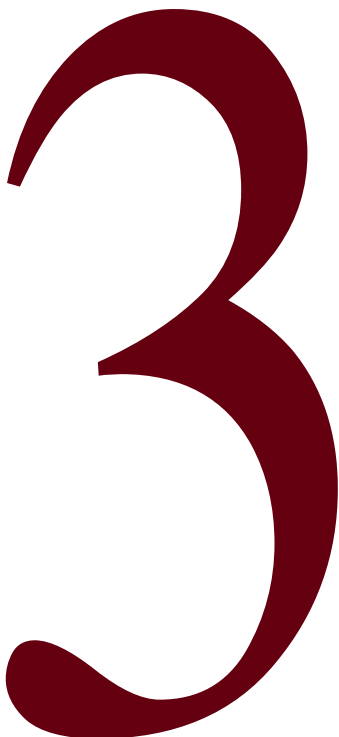


# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## *Christians and Poverty*

wealth have created cycles of poverty that African-American families have only recently started to break. (*Sojourners*, September-October 2002; [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net))

- In *Under the Overpass: A Journey of Faith on the Streets of America*, Michael Yankoski describes his time living as a homeless person in six American cities over a five-month period and the effect this had on his Christian faith. (Multnomah Publishers, 2005; [www.undertheoverpass.com](http://www.undertheoverpass.com))



### ‘NOTHING SHALL MAKE THEM AFRAID’

by Jim Wallis

**B**eing a new father has changed a lot of things in my life, including my schedule of travel—I try not to be gone now for more than a night or two at a time. My son Luke is now 4 (and a half!). He has a new brother who is now 3 months old, so Luke is a big brother. When I’m traveling, Luke and I talk on the phone—often two or three times each day.

I was on the road a few months ago, and I had already talked with Luke twice, but he left a voicemail in my hotel room. After all, two hours had passed, and many things had happened! It was a nice surprise when I got back to the room and eagerly listened to his little voice. He told me all the things he had been doing since we last talked. Then he did his familiar sign-off, one that warms his mother’s heart and mine: “Daddy, I love you, I like you, and you’re incredible.” It’s the kind of affirmation we all need, maybe what God would want to say to us. But it is often hard to receive, and far easier from a 4-year-old.

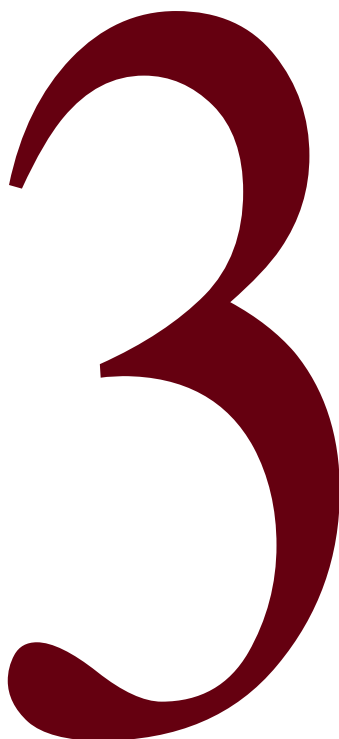
But then, Luke said something he’d never said before. Out of the blue, my 4-year-old son said, “Daddy, don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid.

I heard his mother take in her breath in the background. Where does a little child find those words? Don’t be afraid. These, of course, were Jesus’ most frequent words to his disciples—his most common instruction. “Be not afraid,” he told us over and over again.

We’ve just been through a war. The war with Iraq was argued and justified mainly on the basis of fear. Trappist monk Thomas Merton said it well years ago: “The root of war is fear.” Since Sept. 11, our nation has been terrified. Even now, in victory, Code Orange has become a way of life. We are afraid, and with some good reason. But there is a huge difference between prudent action, against real dangers, and living in fear. Fear can cause us to give up important things, to accept other things that violate our own best values, to spend virtually all of our resources to make us feel more secure—even at the expense of everything else—in ways that may, in fact, make us more insecure. But, as I travel around post-war America, I believe we are also a nation hungry for peace. What are, as Jesus asks, “The things that make for peace”?

My favorite prophet these days is Micah, who took up the questions we face of war and security, poverty and peace. Those running the nation believe that only unquestioned military superiority, and nothing else, can bring us security. But the 8th-century Micah offers us another view. He offers another vision. “He shall judge between many nations and shall arbitrate between strong peoples far away. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But, they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”

Several millennia later, Pope Paul VI paraphrased Micah when he said, “If you want peace, work for justice.” The assertion is that the possibilities for peace, for avoiding war, depend upon everyone having enough, having a little vine and fig tree. The insight from Micah is both, I would suggest, prophetic and practical for us in these days. If the tremendous imbalances of this planet could be leveled out just a little, nobody would have to be afraid. Micah knew it was the great imbalances and fears that lead to war.



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## *Christians and Poverty*

### **'Nothing Shall Make Them Afraid' (cont.)**

Micah knew that we will not beat our swords into plowshares, we will not overcome war, we will not prevent further wars, until everyone has their own vine and fig tree—their own little piece of the global economy, their own small stake in the world, their own share of security for themselves and their families. Because when you have a little patch on which to build a life, nobody can make you afraid—or at least it's much harder. What 8th-century-B.C. Micah understood is that there is no security for ourselves until there is security for others. Prophetic, but practical. A spiritual reality that is more true today than perhaps ever before. Micah suggests that our weapons cannot finally protect us—only a world in which most people feel secure will be safe for ourselves and our children.

Micah urges us to go deeper, to the resentments and the angers and the insecurities and the injustices embedded in the very structures of today's world. Micah knew the cruel connection between poverty and war. The connections between global poverty, injustice, resentment, and terrorism are painfully clear. But even here, at home, we don't understand the message of Micah. What makes for true security? What is real national security?

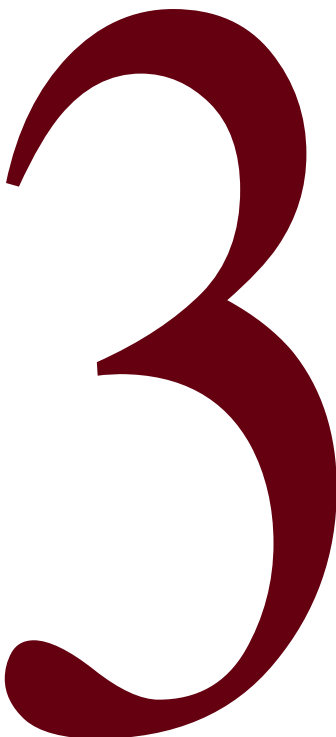
PART OF MY JOB is to read federal budget and tax resolutions. It has not been pleasant reading in these last few weeks. Because the cost that will pay for war in Iraq will be measured now in the loss of health care for millions of poor American children, in our inability to provide the education that frees inner-city youth from the prison of poverty, in the shame of women and children living in shelters, and in the alarming percentage of people in this richest nation in the world still going hungry.

The most telling criticism of President Bush's faith-based initiative was that it could easily silence the prophetic voice of the faith community. Many of us who supported expanding partnerships between religious organizations and federally financed social services also said we would continue to evaluate all of the administration's policies by how they affect the poor. We promised to challenge excessive tax cuts and budget priorities that primarily benefit the wealthy and deprive us of resources to fight poverty.

The time for that challenge has clearly come. Congress recently approved nearly \$80 billion requested by the administration as the first payment for the war with Iraq. Then they agreed to a budget resolution containing increased spending for the military while resources for important domestic programs are falling below the amount needed even to maintain current social services in a rapidly deteriorating economic situation. And then, they approved a \$350 billion-dollar tax cut which will give households with incomes over \$1 million a year an average of \$93,500 while providing little or no relief to low-income working families. A single mother with two children making \$18,000 gets absolutely nothing. Perhaps most outrageous is the revelation that the child tax credit for most low-income families was dropped in order to free more funding to cut the dividend tax.

This will effectively prevent almost 12 million children, one in every six in America, from receiving any benefit. Middle- and upper-middle-income families will see an increase in their child tax credits from \$600 to \$1000, but low-income families and their children will be systematically excluded. The inclusion of these families in child tax credit benefits was in the Senate package but was stripped out in the conference committee, reportedly to make room for more dividend and capital gains tax cuts.

Government spending programs sometimes provoke legitimate concerns about effectiveness. This was not a government spending program. It was a child tax credit that would have put money directly into the hands of our poorest mothers and fathers, trying desperately to raise their children. "These are the people who need it the most



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### **'Nothing Shall Make Them Afraid' (cont.)**

and who will spend it the most,” said Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), whose provision to include low-income families was dropped from the final bill. Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-ME) voted against the bill, calling the omission “ill-founded” and “unfair.” So what does such a clear and revealing decision tell us?

Apparently, what is good for middle- and upper-income families and children is *too* good for the poor. Apparently, stimulating the economy with middle-class mall shopping is a good thing, but helping the grocery budget for low-income single moms is not. Apparently, reducing taxes on stock dividends and capital gains for our wealthiest citizens was the highest priority for the congressional leaders, and there was simply no room left, under the tax cut ceiling, to do anything for poor families. Apparently, the Republican preference of putting money back into people’s hands, rather than spending it on government programs, doesn’t apply to the poor. We do have our priorities after all.

IF BIBLICAL PROPHETS like Amos and Isaiah had read this week’s news about what happened to child tax credits for low-income families, they would surely be out screaming on the White House lawn about the justice of God—and be quickly led away by the Secret Service.

Let’s tell it like the prophets might have: The decision to drop child tax credits for America’s poorest families and children in favor of further tax cuts for the rich is morally offensive. It is blatant disregard of the poor and an outrageous bias toward the rich. In religious terms, the exclusion of any benefits for poor children in the new tax bill should be named as a political sin. And those politicians who utter the words of religion and faith, yet supported this exclusion of the poor, deserve to be called hypocrites. The White House, which approves all these choices, engages in moral doubletalk when it espouses faith-based initiatives and then allows the abandonment of poor families. The Republican House and Senate leaders who, with the support of the administration, made these choices against the poor should be ashamed of themselves.

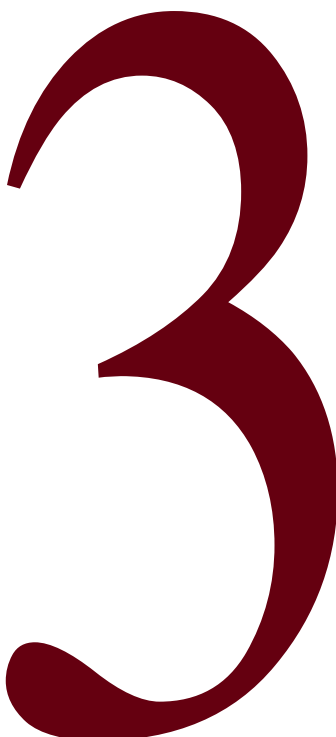
But there is more at stake than a child tax credit.

Even the president’s faith-based initiative is being sacrificed at the altar of tax cuts. The Senate finally passed the CARE Act by an overwhelming bipartisan vote, including restoring over \$1 billion dollars to the Social Services Block Grant—funds that assist state and local social service providers. Incredibly, the same day the White House announced it would oppose that funding. Once again, the budget priorities of the administration do not match its rhetorical promise of a faith-based initiative to reduce poverty. The faith-based initiative is in danger of becoming a hollow program that merely provides equal access for religious groups to the crumbs falling from the federal table. Faith-based organizations know that crumbs and prayers are insufficient to seriously reduce poverty.

In a letter we delivered to the White House in 2003, we said that “the lack of a consistent, coherent, and integrated domestic policy that benefits low-income people makes our continued support for your faith-based initiative increasingly untenable.” And we reminded them that, when the president announced the faith-based initiative, he pledged that: “I want to ensure that faith-based and community groups will always have a place at the table in our deliberations.”

And, we said, “Mr. President, it’s time to bring faith-based organizations to the table where policy decisions are being made. We are concerned that the needs of poor people in America seem to have little influence in the critical policy decisions your administration is making.”

VIRTUALLY EVERY STATE in America is suffering terrible budget deficits. But the federal budget offers little relief and no solutions except suggested further cuts to crit-



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### **'Nothing Shall Make Them Afraid' (cont.)**

ically needed domestic poverty programs, child health care, and education. Only a holdout by moderate Republican senators over the administration's objections secured \$20 billion over 2 years in the tax cut bill. The drastic state budget cuts will be acutely felt by faith-based service providers, which will bear the brunt of increased poverty in their communities.

Two years ago, the president said, "Government has an important role. It will never be replaced by charities. Yet government must also do more to take the side of charities and community healers and to support their work. Government must be active enough to fund services for the poor—and humble enough to let good people in local communities provide those services." Some of the "good people" running these programs are now angry and feel betrayed, having to cut their budgets and lay off staff in the face of growing needs and diminishing resources.

Unless the current domestic priorities are turned around, the truth is that hungry people will go without food stamps, poor children will go without health care, elderly will go without medicine, and school children will go without textbooks—so that the taxes of the wealthiest Americans can be further reduced. That is morally intolerable to us, and the religious community will not accept it.

The consequences of these actions are becoming a silent war, felt most severely in the poorest parts of the United States, where low-income families are desperately clutching onto the bottom rungs of the failing economy. Indeed, America's poor are no longer even a part of the administration's rhetoric. In his inaugural speech, President Bush said, "America, at its best, is compassionate. In the quiet of American conscience, we know that deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation's promise." But "compassionate conservatism" seems to have lost its moral compass, and is in danger of becoming compassionless conservatism.

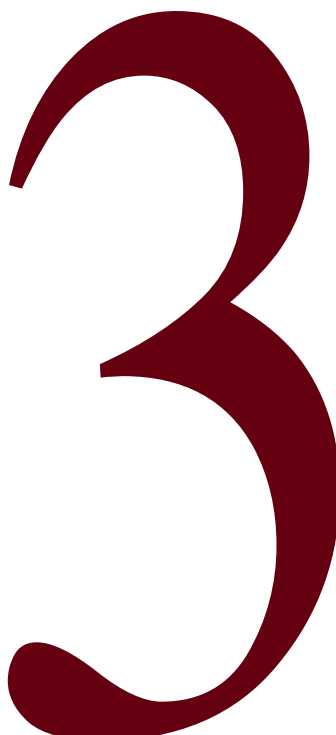
Paying for war by cutting needed spending for the poor while giving unneeded tax cuts to the rich is morally unconscionable. The federal budget's priorities are a disaster for the poor, a windfall for the wealthiest, and thus directly conflict with biblical priorities. Budgets are moral documents. They reveal the priorities of a family, church, city, or nation. Let me say this in my clearest evangelical language: This federal budget is unbiblical.

A MODERN PROPHET a lot like Micah once said, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a nation approaching spiritual death." So said the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

War and security, our being afraid, are indeed pushing poor people off the agenda. Call to Renewal hosts a regular dialogue in the Senate—Republican, Democrat, top staff people who care about these issues—and they agree: There is little space, there is no room, to talk about what's happening to America's poor.

Just ask all the heads of those faith-based organizations in every community. Ask how they are faring. Ask faith-based organizations across this country, which are all struggling for survival. You know! The consequences of these actions, these budget resolutions, have become a silent war against those who live in the poorest parts of this nation.

I am convinced that the critical task of poverty reduction will not be accomplished without a spiritual engine. History is always changed by social movements with a spiritual foundation. Such an enormous task requires qualities that are specifically religious, I would suggest, especially the energy of hope. The real battle today is not between belief and secularism, as some say. The real battle is between hope and cynicism. The prophets begin with critique and judgment, but they always end in hope.



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

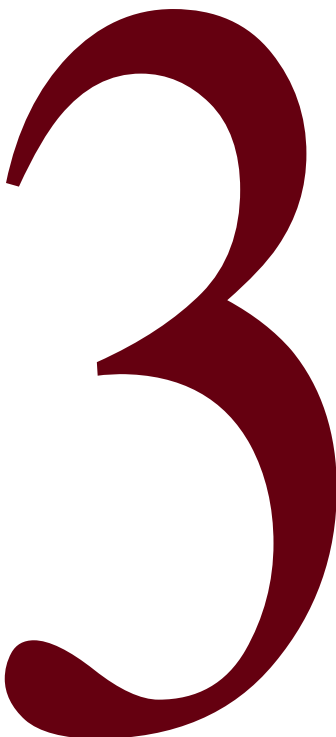
## *Christians and Poverty*

### **‘Nothing Shall Make Them Afraid’ (cont.)**

Listen to Micah—the promise of God’s purposes being fulfilled in history. Hope is not a feeling; hope is a decision. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, says the book of Hebrews, the evidence of things not seen. Or, my best paraphrase, hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change.

Hear the voice of a child—“Don’t be afraid.” Hear the voice of a prophet named Micah, saying don’t be tempted by your military might and power, but rather do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Hear Jesus—Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. ■

*Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners. This is adapted from a speech Wallis gave for Call to Renewal’s Pentecost 2003 event at National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C.*



### DO WE CARE ENOUGH?

by Ronald J. Sider

**T**he great evangelist Paul spent much of his time over several years collecting an international offering for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8-9). For his work, he found a norm (2 Corinthians 8:13-15)—equality of basic necessities—articulated in the Exodus story of the manna in which every person ended up with “as much as each of them needed” (Exodus 16:17-18).

Throughout scripture we see the same standard. When people cannot care for themselves, their community must provide a liberal sufficiency so that their needs are met.

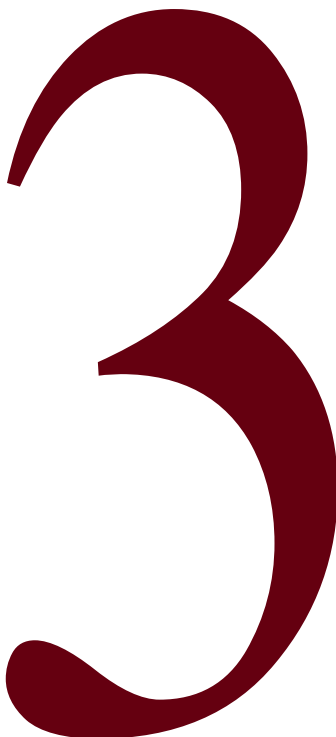
At different points in the biblical text it is clear that the family has the first obligation to help needy members. In the text on the Jubilee in Leviticus 25, the first responsibility to help the poor person forced by poverty to sell land is the next of kin in the extended family (Leviticus 25:25, 35). But the poor person’s help does not end with the family. Even if there are no family members to help, the poor person has the legal right to get his land back at the next Jubilee (Leviticus 25:28). Similarly, 1 Timothy 5:16 insists that a Christian widow’s relatives should be her first means of support. Only when the family cannot support her should the church step in. Any policy or political philosophy that immediately seeks governmental solutions for problems that could be solved just as well or better at the level of the family violates the biblical framework that stresses the central societal role of the family.

But what role should government play? ... Sin makes government intervention in the economy necessary. When selfish, powerful people deprive others of their rightful access to productive resources, the state rightly steps in with intervening power to correct the injustice. When other individuals and institutions in the community do not or cannot provide basic necessities for the needy, government rightly helps.

This teaching on the role of government applies not just to Israel but to government everywhere. The ideal monarch was to be a channel of God’s justice (Psalm 72:1), and God’s justice extends to the whole world (Psalm 9:7-9). All legitimate rulers are instituted by God and are God’s servants for human good (Romans 13:1, 4). In this passage, Paul states a positive reason for government (government acts “for your good”) before he specifies its negative function (“to execute wrath on the wrongdoer”). Romans 13 is structurally similar to Psalm 72:1 in viewing the ruler as a channel of God’s authority. All people everywhere can pray with the Israelites: “Give the king your justice, O God.”

Government is an aspect of community and is inherent in human life as an expression of our created social nature. Governmental action to empower the poor is one way we promote the common good and implement the truth that economic justice is a family affair. However, when indirect approaches are not effective in restraining economic injustice, providing economic opportunity to all, or providing care for those who cannot care for themselves, the state rightly acts to demand patterns of justice and provide vital services.

Does the biblical material offer a norm for distributive justice today? Some would argue that the biblical material applies only to God’s covenant community. But that is to ignore the fact that the biblical writers did not hesitate to apply revealed standards to persons and societies outside Israel. Amos announced divine punishment on the surrounding nations for their evil and injustice (Amos 1-2). Isaiah condemned Assyria



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### Do We Care Enough? (cont.)

for its pride and injustice (Isaiah 10:12-19). The Lord of history applies the same standards of social justice to all nations.

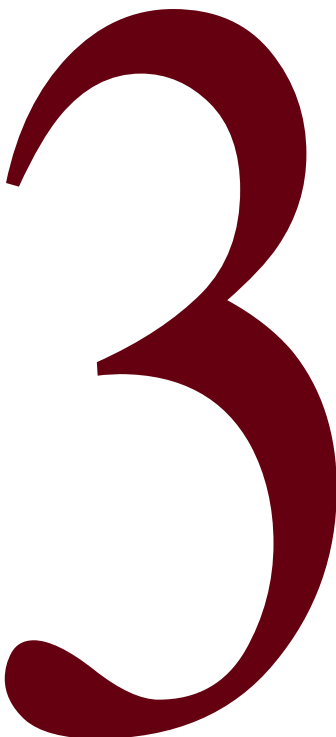
THE TRADITIONAL criterion of distributive justice that comes closest to the biblical paradigm is distribution according to needs. That is not to ignore the important truth that bad choices rightly have negative economic consequences. Nor is it to forget that the able-bodied have an obligation to work to earn their way. But it does mean that a theology of distributive justice grounded in scripture places much more emphasis on structural arrangements that guarantee basic needs for life in community than do other views.

The biblical material provides at least three norms pertaining to distribution of resources to meet basic needs:

1. Normally, all people who can work should have access to the productive resources so that, if they act responsibly, they can produce or purchase an abundant sufficiency of all that is needed to enjoy a dignified, healthy life in community.
2. The difference in wealth between the rich and the poor dare not become so great that inequality of wealth, and therefore power, lead to oppression.
3. Those who cannot care for themselves should receive from their community a liberal sufficiency of the necessities of life provided in ways that preserve dignity, encourage responsibility, and strengthen the family.

Those three norms are modest in comparison with some ideals presented in the name of equality. At the same time they demand fundamental change in our nation. If God's Word is true, then the United States today stands in blatant defiance of God's norms for society. Anyone who seeks to be biblical must demand an end to the scandal of poverty in the richest nation on earth. ■

*Ronald J. Sider was a Sojourners contributing editor, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, and publisher of Prism magazine when the article containing this selection appeared in the September-October 1999 issue of Sojourners. It is an excerpt from Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America (Baker Book House, October 1999).*



### TIME TO END POVERTY

by Sen. John Edwards

**P**overty is one of the great moral issues of our time. It cuts to the heart of America's great promise: that anyone who works hard and plays by the rules will have the opportunity to build a better life for themselves and their family. And I believe that the American people are ready to do something about it, if our leaders are willing to ask them.

You can tell a lot about people by how they treat their neighbors in need. And I believe that you can tell a lot about a country's character by how they treat millions of people who live at the margins and below: Do we send them to the shadowy corners, or do we bring them to the center of our lives? We know in our hearts that, in a country of our wealth and our prosperity, to have so many Americans live lives of endless struggle is wrong.

America is a place that believes in ascension, that one person can rise from very little to transform this world. It comes from that eternal belief that we all have the same worth. But the best evidence of America not living up to its ideals is the more than 36 million Americans who live in poverty every day. There are children who have no real hope simply because of where they're growing up. There are people who are working two jobs, and they still can't make rent. And too many families are spending the night in shelters across this country.

OUR LEADERS today want us to believe that each of us is out there on our own. If you make it, that's your success. If you don't, that's your failure.

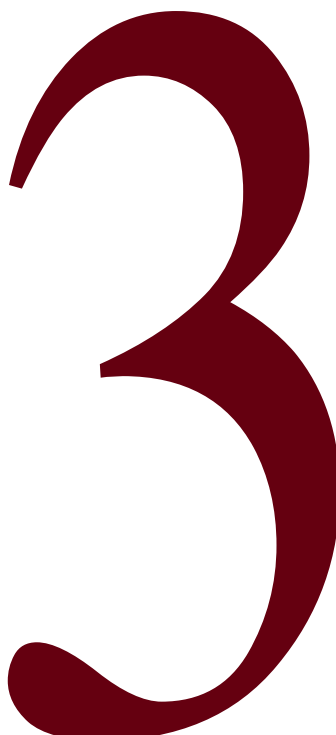
But we know that's not true. The truth is nobody succeeds in America alone. They succeed because America protects private property. They succeed because America has public schools and universities that give everyone the tools to get ahead. And, of course, they succeed because of three very important virtues: hard work, self-discipline, and responsibility. But nobody goes it alone, and everybody has a responsibility to help everyone else get ahead.

The American people believe in the dignity that comes from hard work. And they understand that some people do everything right and the decks are still stacked against them.

It is time for us to go out and encourage more Americans to be a part of a cause that's bigger than themselves. It is time to end poverty in America. It may seem like an impossible goal, but that's what the skeptics said about all of our other great challenges. If we can put a person on the moon, conquer polio, and put libraries of information on a chip, then we can end poverty for those who want to work for a better life.

We know that the Bible tells us the poor will always be with us. Some people hear that as an excuse for inaction. I believe it is a call for us to act and a call for us to serve. My family and my faith didn't teach me to turn my back on a friend or neighbor in need. They taught me to open the door, let them in, and help them get back on their feet. And millions are calling for help right now. They don't want a free ride. They just want a chance: a chance to work, buy a home, take care of their family, and live the American dream. ■

*Sen. John Edwards was director of the Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, when this article appeared in the September-October 2005 issue of Sojourners. He was presented with Call to Renewal's 2005 Joseph Award, which honors individuals who faithfully use their position of influence to benefit those in poverty.*



### PRIORITIES FOR THE POOR

by Elizabeth Green

**H**urricane Katrina showed us the depth of poverty in America. Even the mainstream media, not normally a voice for the “least of these,” reported on the vast needs of the poor with increasing alarm. But will we follow through with greater attention to the policy decisions that impact poor families?

For many, poverty is the grinding constant of daily life—it does not merely surface in times of tragedy or emergency. And not only is poverty a continual reality for many, it is growing. Our nation’s spending and policy priorities do not seem to account for this.

The U.S. Census Bureau released its 2005 annual report, and the statistics were grim: Poverty numbers had increased again. In 2004, 1.1 million more people fell into poverty, with 37 million total living in poverty in the United States, according to the Coalition on Human Needs.

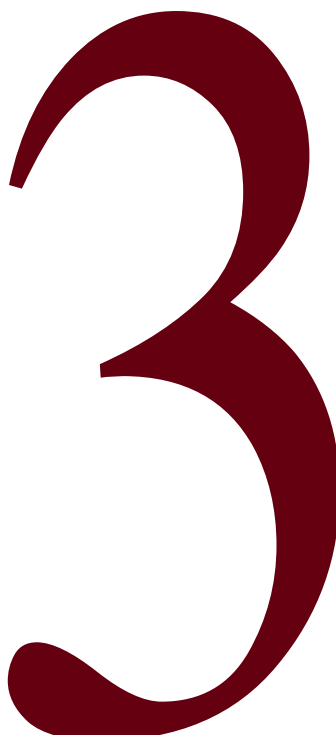
There are also in 2006 more people without health insurance (a rise from 45 million uninsured in 2003 to 45.8 million in 2004), and more children in poverty than ever before—17.8 percent of all of America’s children were poor in 2005, a total of more than 13 million children.

What does it say about our national priorities when poverty rises for four straight years while national leaders pass tax cuts that primarily benefit the wealthiest of our society? During the crisis in the Gulf Coast states, at a time of emergency and tragedy, our nation’s lack of concern for the poor was very clear. But how have we considered the poor in other, more ordinary times?

It is clear that our national budget and spending priorities do not reflect the gospel’s call to include the needs of poor people in our understanding of the common good. Many cuts in the federal budget have come at the expense of low-income families—such as the 2003 tax cut, which removed the low-income child tax credit from the bill at the last minute, excluding almost 12 million children from that benefit. Furthermore, the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts and their subsequent extensions, which primarily benefit the wealthiest Americans, will cause the national deficit to increase tremendously—which affects all of us, but the poor first. At the same time, programs that keep many low-income families out of poverty are in danger—programs such as Food Stamps, Medicaid (health insurance for low-income families and kids), and housing vouchers that increase stability.

In addition to social cuts, Congress continues to cut taxes for the wealthy. We are ignoring the realities of these needs and how best to meet them if we do not stand up against both types of cuts. We must also speak out against repeal of the estate tax, which would cost an additional \$1 trillion over 10 years. And efforts to privatize Social Security, if successful, would further increase the national debt by a significant margin. With the deficit averaging roughly \$300 billion a year, we must examine how we invest in—or ignore—the common good.

Low-income families are hurt first and suffer the greatest damage in times of tragedy and disaster. In the aftermath of Katrina, people in poverty have had a much more difficult struggle in rebuilding, since many lack insurance and other supports that wealthier Americans often take for granted. Those with better means often have contingency plans—*freedom to choose*—in time of emergency. Too many low-income people simply have no choice, no alternatives, and no emergency income. They lack a living family income that would meet needs such as transportation, hous-

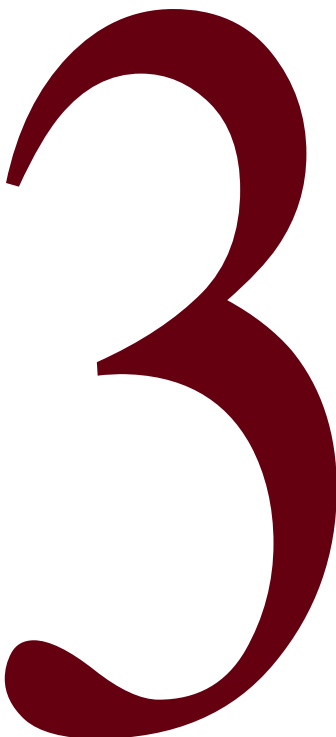


### **Priorities for the Poor (cont.)**

ing, and health care. They are left with whatever policies and priorities accompany—and also precede and follow—times of devastation.

People of faith must use moments when poverty is in the national spotlight to call for a change in our country's priorities for the common good. Will we accept federal budgets that provide tax benefits to the wealthiest while deeply cutting vital programs for the poor, and all of us? Or will we make use of opportunities to call for morally grounded budget and tax policies that help families escape the growing vise of poverty in times of crisis and "normalcy"? ■

*Elizabeth Green was public policy associate for Call to Renewal when this article appeared in the Sept. 15, 2005, issue of SojoMail.*



### SESSION 4

## *Solidarity or Patronage?*

- “An Active Faith,” by Yonce Shelton
- “Giving ‘Burger King Mom’ a Voice,” by Jim Wallis
- “Behold, the Treasure of the Church,” by Ched Myers

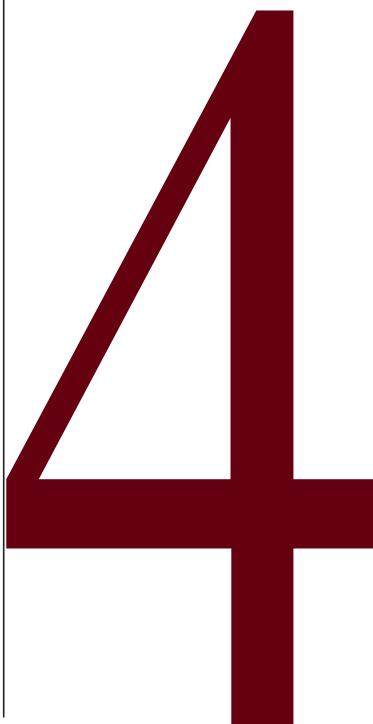
**W**hat does it mean to balance charity for the poor with economic justice for all? Call to Renewal policy director Yonce Shelton asks why Christians should become involved with political activism if donating to a local food bank or homeless shelter seems to help people more directly. Jim Wallis discusses the fact that many low-income breadwinners must hold down multiple jobs just to survive. Ched Myers reminds us that Jesus refused to patronize those who were poor, marginalized, or sick. Instead, he invited them to a new life, which included participating in their own liberation.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Organized religion has traditionally been the sphere in which the causes of the poor are championed. Why is this? What do you know about the history of the U.S. church’s involvement in the abolition of slavery, women’s rights, child work laws, and the civil rights movement?
2. How do you think people of faith should balance personal responsibility and social justice? What are the values that need to be instilled at the family and communal level? How do those values translate into public policy? Should religious ethics be applied to government in a pluralistic democracy? If so, to what extent?
3. Why isn’t work working in America today? Consider conducting a survey in your church to determine how many people are overworked and how many are underworked. How many are living paycheck to paycheck, no matter what their income bracket?
4. Reflect on the story of St. Lawrence the Deacon in Myers’ article. What does it mean for the “poor”—or marginalized or outcast or sinner—to be the “treasure of the church”? What implications does this have for our own church’s economic and social priorities?

### RESOURCES

- The Coalition on Human Needs is an alliance of national organizations working together to promote public policies that address the needs of low-income and other vulnerable populations. They provide budget analysis and suggestions for taking action. ([www.chn.org](http://www.chn.org))
- *Cloud of Witnesses*, edited by Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday, tells the stories of Christians who have been advocates for the poor and marginalized. (Orbis, 2005)
- Bread for the World’s “Offering of Letters” campaign has informational and advocacy resources that congregations or organizations can use for education and action to end hunger. ([www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org))
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s report “Double Jeopardy: The High Cost of Being Poor” is an excellent guide to how economic systems make it easy to be rich and are stacked against those who are poor. ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org))



### AN ACTIVE FAITH

by Yonce Shelton

**W**hy should Christians become involved with political activism when donating to a local food bank or homeless shelter seems to “do more”? Why should Christians try to influence public policy in a political system that is intimidating and frustrating, when they can “see” the benefits of volunteer efforts? Simply put, helping low-income people is not an either/or proposition. It requires a commitment to charity and justice.

The impact of charity often can be immediately observed. But securing justice requires long-term vision. Fostering justice comes by changing inequitable political and social systems that oppress, as Jesus said, “the least of these.” To believe in the need to promote only charity *or* justice, ignoring the other’s place in Christian theology, is to view the plight of poor people with one eye closed. Ultimately, to reduce the need for charity there must be increased focus on changing systems and policies that undercut the legitimate needs of low-income people.

Relying only on either charitable giving or political activism allows Christians to avoid thinking critically about the realities of our social and political systems. Narrowing our scope of concern to one at the expense of the other can produce a level of comfort and familiarity that sanitizes other social realities. Jesus did not seek such naïve comfort.

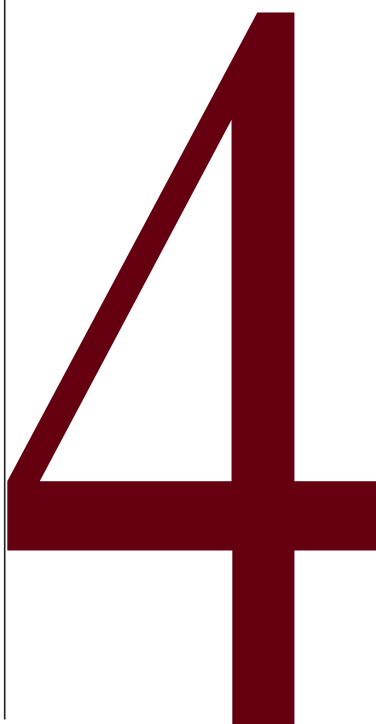
We cannot ignore the charge to feed those in need (Matthew 25:34-40). Sometimes this means we act by literally feeding the poor; sometimes it requires that we act to feed by changing the way a system operates. Regardless, we cannot use the coming kingdom and its perfection as an excuse to ignore injustice in the here and now. As John Howard Yoder put it, “the church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately.”

If we are able to justify acts of charity but wash our hands of public policy, then it is time to question our understanding of Christian faith. From a theological point of view, political activism is just as imperative as charity. Without a change in laws and practices that harm poor people, we can never hope to stem the need for charity.

Working for justice is hard because it requires us to evaluate—from a theological perspective—government, elected leaders’ priorities, and, most important, our priorities. Thinking as Christians about politics challenges our very being. Unless we work for justice through social change, the need at food banks, homeless shelters, and low-income medical clinics will only increase. Is allowing this to happen consistent with Christian faith, when our democracy affords the opportunity to change systems and rules that contribute to poverty? At a bare minimum, Christians should regard voting as a reflection of a theology that cares for the poor.

Real progress in reducing social ills cannot be made only by volunteering and making donations. Charity is needed, but true justice requires a different kind of commitment—a commitment to change. Charitable giving cannot meet all the housing, clothing, food, and medical needs of families struggling with poverty. Nor should Christians expect it to.

Christians committed to helping neighbors escape the grip of poverty can spark a

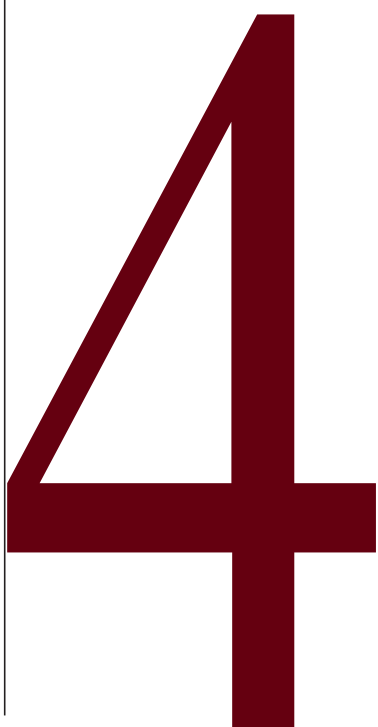


## *Christians and Poverty*

### **An Active Faith (cont.)**

movement for change. The fuel to sustain such commitment is in our theology and in Christ's examples of charity and justice. Will we tap into the power of our identity and witness, incorporating Christ's example to change the face of poverty in this country? Will we continue to toss crumbs from the table to poor people instead of giving them a seat at that table? ■

*Yonce Shelton is director of public policy for Call to Renewal, a faith-based movement to overcome poverty. This article appeared in the January 2004 issue of Sojourners.*



### GIVING 'BURGER KING MOM' A VOICE

by Jim Wallis

She was working the drive-through window at four in the afternoon. But whenever there was a lull between orders, the young woman returned to a table in the corner of the local Burger King. Three kids were sitting there, with schoolbooks, papers, and pencils all spread out, doing their homework. And mom was helping as best she could while keeping straight the orders for Whoppers, fries, and chicken nuggets. Given her low wages, this single mother was no doubt balancing more than fast food and homework; she was also deciding between paying the rent, going to the doctor and getting prescriptions when somebody gets sick—or worrying about winter boots for her kids. I call her “Burger King Mom.”

“Soccer moms” and “NASCAR dads” have received much attention in recent election campaigns. But who will speak to or for Burger King Mom? She may live in a red or blue state, but neither party is much interested in her or her family’s issues. She is part of the low-income demographic most unrepresented in U.S. politics, with the lowest levels of both voter registration and turnout—and with a high percentage of immigrants. Many low-income people have a hard time connecting to voting: It’s too complicated; there are too many other things to worry about; and there is too little reason for confidence that the outcome will make much difference for them.

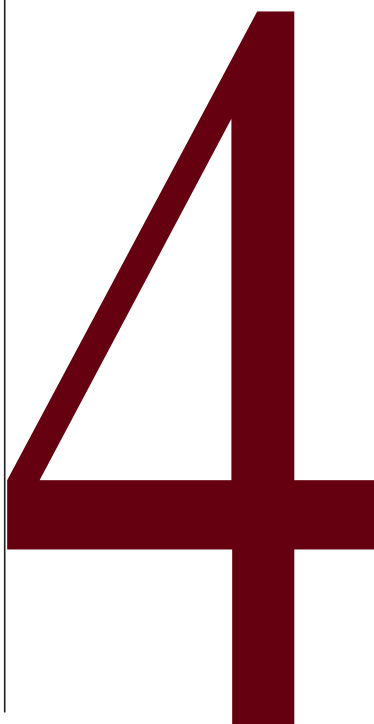
The Republicans look after their wealthy constituents, and the Democrats want to be the champions of the middle class. Neither makes a priority of the needs of the poor. Is that because the problems of poverty are disappearing in America? Hardly. The poverty rate (including that for children) rose in 2002 and 2003. More people than ever are without health insurance. Increasing numbers of people can’t find affordable housing. The minimum wage hasn’t been raised since 1997.

George Bush’s faith-based initiative has been reduced to a photo op, while domestic spending that most affects the poor has been drastically cut in favor of war, homeland security, and tax cuts that mostly benefit the rich. The media have yet to report on the condition of low-income American families, who have also become the casualties of war.

We need to redefine the poverty issue as one of growing income inequality in America, and one that increasingly affects working families. American inequality is in 2004 greater than at any time since the roaring injustice of the 1920s or the rampant wealth and poverty of the Gilded Age in the 19th century. The Bush administration’s tax policies seem deliberately aimed at returning to the wealth distribution of those periods. But, especially since the 1990s, both parties are following the dictates of their corporate donors more than the dictates of compassion or justice. The Republicans run as compassionate conservatives and then govern as corporatists, while the Democrats run as populists, then also govern as corporatists.

Most Americans believe that if you work hard and full time, you should not be poor. But the truth is that many working families are, and many low-income breadwinners must hold down multiple jobs just to survive. With stagnant wages in an economy that is growing for some but clearly not for others, more and more people and their children are simply being left out and left behind. What is at risk is the reality of a genuine opportunity society and the ethic of work when work no longer is enough to support a family.

The good news is that religious leaders and communities from across the theo-



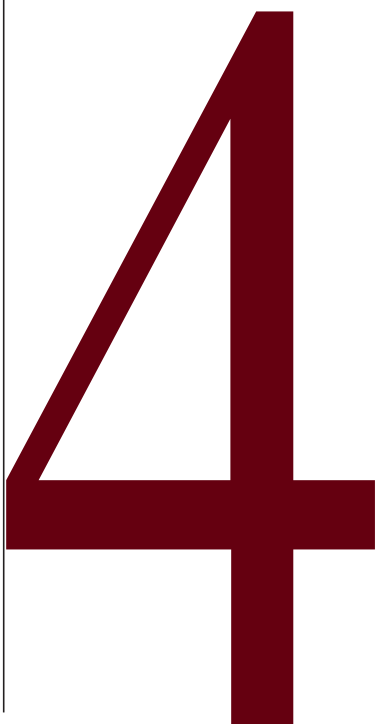
# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## *Christians and Poverty*

### **Giving 'Burger King Mom' a Voice (cont.)**

logical and political spectrum are responding to the vacuum of political leadership on poverty and income inequality. In fact, poverty is becoming the defining moral issue for many in the faith community—including evangelicals and Pentecostals as well as Catholics, mainline Protestants and the black churches. While divided on other issues such as gay marriage and abortion, some church leaders are displaying a determined “unity” to make poverty a religious issue in elections. Maybe Burger King Mom will have somebody speaking for her and her kids after all. ■

*Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners. This article appeared in the June 4, 2005, issue of SojoMail.*



### ‘BEHOLD, THE TREASURE OF THE CHURCH’

by Ched Myers

**T**he 1996 dismantling of the welfare system has engendered the most thorough reassessment concerning the role of the religious community in the delivery of public social services since the New Deal. The dramatic shift from entitlements to block grants has opened up unprecedented opportunities for churches to receive public funds to administer programs such as Welfare to Work.

In the public discourse, the role of faith communities in social welfare, which until recently was mostly the domain of conservative intellectuals and a few other organizations such as Call to Renewal, has now become quite a hot topic. This was reflected in the comments of then-Vice President Al Gore: “Let us put the solution that faith-based organizations are pioneering at the very heart of our national strategy. If you elect me your president, the voices of faith-based organizations will be integral to the policies set forth in my administration.”

If the emergence of this theme now represents political capital in Washington, D.C., it is a decidedly mixed blessing for churches. We can take this opportunity to explore the twin dangers that face the churches’ response to this historic moment:

*Overcommitment.* In our enthusiasm to “step into the breach” to serve the abandoned poor, we need to be careful not to over-commit or over-represent the capacity of churches to fill the gap, nor should we absolve government of its public responsibilities.

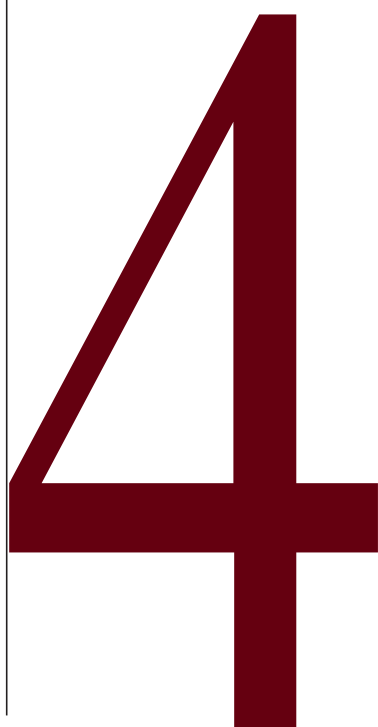
*Undercommitment.* Neither should churches undercommit by neglecting the profound needs among former welfare recipients in this time of transition, excusing ourselves from setting up programs because we are underfunded and unprepared.

In attempting to navigate between these two errors, however, a third problem arises that is perhaps the most serious of all. This is the temptation for churches to simply reproduce welfare’s “service delivery franchise” without correcting its most odious characteristics.

The old welfare system was flawed because it bred dependence and disempowerment among the poor. It was fundamentally a system of patronage, where the institutions and professionals delivering services had all the power and resources, while the service recipients were treated as “clients.” The worst thing churches can do is become opportunistic in the “poverty industry.” To be sure, operating as brokers provides opportunities to enhance church program funding or infrastructure, or to grow membership, or to increase political access. But these are not good reasons to deliver services. Churches must serve the needy because of their sense of justice and at the same time must work to build a broad-based social movement to *end poverty*.

The deeper theological issue, then, concerns not *whether* but *how* our churches should engage welfare reform. I am concerned not so much with finding analogues to contemporary welfare reform in the Bible but rather with reflecting on how the Bible might help us interpret our responsibilities for welfare reform.

CHURCHES MUST approach the poor not as entrepreneurs but from a commitment to solidarity with those who have been left on the margins of society. The old story of



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### 'Behold, the Treasure of the Church' (cont.)

St. Lawrence the Deacon is germane. He and nine companions of the early church were convicted of treason by the Roman authorities, but because Lawrence was the treasurer of the Church of Rome he was spared immediate execution. It seems that the authorities believed that the Church was fabulously wealthy (they were a few centuries too early!). So they commanded Lawrence to go away and bring back the treasures of the Church. "Give me two or three days," he replied, "and I will bring them here for you." Three days later Lawrence returned. "Where is the treasure?" the Romans demanded. Lawrence led them to the entrance of the hall and threw open the great doors leading to the courtyard. Outside was assembled a great crowd of poor, blind, and crippled humanity. "Behold, the treasure of the church," said Lawrence. He was taken away to be tortured, then roasted alive on a gridiron.

This brings us to the most oft-quoted and misunderstood biblical text in the debate over the church's relationship to the poor: Mark 14:7. This text has notoriously been used by politicians and preachers alike to justify the existence of poverty, as if Jesus is stipulating its inevitability as a condition of nature or, worse, as a divine plan. In fact, the text is emphatic: "For the poor will always be *with you*, and whenever you will you can do the right thing by them." In other words, this is a statement about the social location of the church, and Lawrence the Deacon exegeted it well.

This is confirmed by the fact that this saying of Jesus alludes to the Deuteronomic tradition of Sabbath-year debt release (Deuteronomy 15:1-18). Such legislated social disciplines of wealth restructuring in Israel were intended as a hedge against the tendency of human societies to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few, creating hierarchical classes with the poor at the bottom. The vision was that if "Sabbath economics" was practiced, "There will be no one in need among you" (Deuteronomy 15:4). But the practical Deuteronomist, anticipating rightly that the people would forever be hedging on the demands of social justice, adds that compassion is the plumb line of the law: "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, I command you: Open your hand to the poor" (Deuteronomy 15:11).

JESUS MODELS FOR the church how to be prophetic in work with the marginalized. In Mark 1:40-45 we have the first detailed account of a healing by Jesus, and it sets the pattern for every subsequent healing episode in the gospel. The leper represented the archetypal social outcast due to impurity. The extensive Levitical regulations regarding leprosy (Leviticus 13-14) revolved around two stipulations. First, the impurity was communicable. Second, a priest must preside over ritual cleansing. Both principles are challenged here. This episode is constructed around Mark's repeated use of the Greek verb "to declare clean."

The drama begins when the leper *dares* Jesus to assume the priestly prerogative and declare him clean (Mark 1:40). This may explain why "Jesus' guts were churning" (Mark 1:41)! Rather than performing a ritual, however, Jesus simply *touches* the leper and declares him clean. According to the purity code Jesus should have contracted the impurity; instead, Mark tells us that the declaration was effective (Mark 1:42). The purity code has been subverted by Jesus' willingness to have social contact with the leper. But the aftermath is the key to the story, as Jesus "snorts with indignation" and dispatches the man to the priests (Mark 1:43). The mood implied here is one of protest, not cooperation.

The man's task is to help confront the system that keeps him marginalized (Mark 1:44). He is instructed to submit to the Mosaic ritual in order to "witness against them," a technical phrase in Mark for confronting one's opponents (Mark 6:11, 13:9). The priests would hardly accept Jesus' authority to declare this leper clean! Unfortunately, the mission aborts: The leper goes public, and Jesus is forced to lie low (Mark 1:45).

# SOJOURNERS on the issues

## Christians and Poverty

### 'Behold, the Treasure of the Church' (cont.)

This episode sets the tone for Jesus' ministry: His healings always involve more than liberation of the individual "victim." He also challenges the *cause* of the disease. This story articulates a "triangle of power," involving relationships between 1) Jesus and the leper in a relationship of intervention, 2) the leper and the priestly establishment in a client/patron relationship, and 3) Jesus and the priestly establishment in a relationship of challenge.

Jesus refuses to patronize the leper, instead inviting him to participate in his own liberation. This approach is later made explicit in his well-known commendation to the poor who take initiative: "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34, 10:52). Jesus is clearly operating in the prophetic tradition, which both advocates on behalf of the poor *and* strategically confronts those in power with the demands of justice.

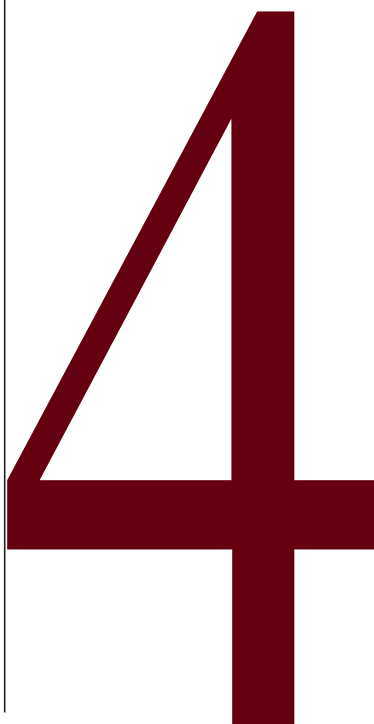
THERE IS ALSO A place for what we might call the "principled pragmatism" of the apostle Paul. Paul understood that the cornerstone of social stratification was the Roman system of patronage, which functioned in economic, social, and political spheres. In fact, the lack of a social safety net made personal patronage a practical necessity for the poor.

It was expected that Paul would support his pastoral ministry in Corinth by positioning himself as an "in-house philosopher" sponsored by a wealthy patron. Paul, however, refused to become a client of the rich. Instead, he insisted on supporting himself through a trade (1 Corinthians 9; see also 1 Thessalonians 2:9). For this he was severely criticized by the Corinthian aristocracy, both for offending the patron class and for lowering his prestige by working with his hands.

Paul, however, recognized patronage as the glue that held in place all the oppressive relationships of the empire. Following the Christ who had been executed by that empire, Paul instead embraced the status of a "slave" (the lowest social class), in order that he might serve all people equally, un beholden to those of high political or economic standing (1 Corinthians 9:18-23). Paul expected the Christians in Corinth to reflect new, revolutionary social relationships in their community life. When they simply reproduced the divisions of the Hellenistic society around them, he was outraged—as in the example of how the Lord's Supper was practiced (1 Corinthians 11).

In almost every epistle, Paul mentions the collection he was orchestrating among his churches on behalf of economically disadvantaged Christians in Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, we encounter his most elaborate discussion of that project. Paul there uses a variety of rhetorical strategies to persuade the Corinthians into this project of wealth-sharing, because he is concerned that they will interpret his appeal according to the expectations and conventions of patronage. But it was precisely the unequal nature of such a relationship that Paul wished to avoid. He was asking for Christian solidarity, not patronage (2 Corinthians 9:5-7).

For this reason, the term that is repeated 10 times in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is "grace" (Greek *charis*). Paul, the great apostle of "grace alone," here makes it clear that it is not just a theological concept but includes the practice of economic sharing (2 Corinthians 8:4, 6-7, 19), which practice Christ modeled (2 Corinthians 8:9). "Not that others should be relieved and you afflicted; rather, it is a matter of equality. So in this time your surplus should help their lack so that their surplus might help your lack—in order that there may be equality" (2 Corinthians 8:13 and following). Then, in his only scriptural warrant for the collection project, Paul directly evokes the old wilderness manna story: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (2 Corinthians 8:15, which quotes Exodus 16:18; see also Acts 4:34 and following). This very text is the foundation for the Jubilee tradition in the Hebrew Bible. Paul was pragmatic in invoking the economics of mutual



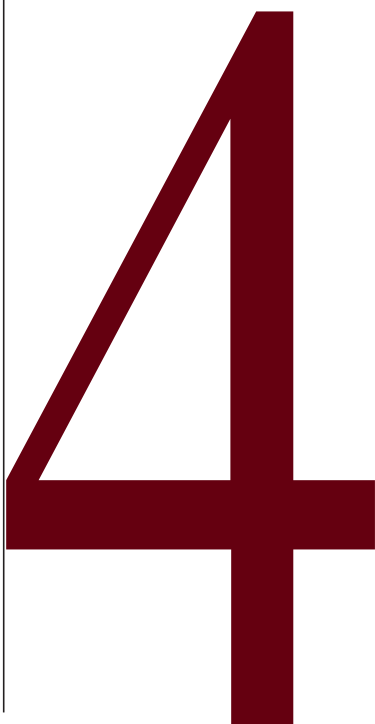
## *Christians and Poverty*

### **'Behold, the Treasure of the Church' (cont.)**

aid and principled in rejecting the practice of patronage.

Our churches can do no less than practice solidarity with those increasingly left behind by the globalizing economic order. Our challenge is to work for the empowerment of the poor in our prophetic engagement with the dysfunctional "poverty industry." And it is to be principled in our pragmatism as we seek to participate in the complex realities of welfare reform, public policy, and service delivery. ■

*Ched Myers, a Sojourners contributing editor and author of *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, was completing a fellowship in urban theology at Claremont School of Theology when this article appeared in the September-October 1999 issue of Sojourners.*



# SOJOURNERS on the issues

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