

### 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

What 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.

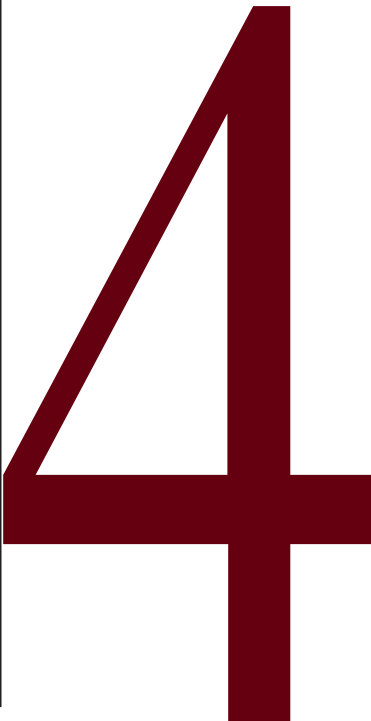
Christians committed to helping neighbors escape the grip of poverty can spark a

## *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*

**S**he 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.

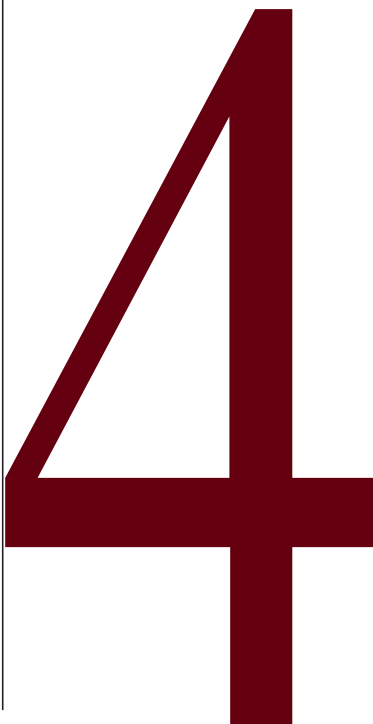
The good news is that religious leaders and communities from across the theo-

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### **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

### '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).

### **‘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

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### **'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.*

