

The Church's Complex Relationship with the Idea of Wealth and Need¹

I am very glad I was asked to use the word “complex” to talk about our theme this afternoon. Under the influence of our own moral and spiritual blindness it is very easy to be one-sided and miss a balanced and complete perspective. This is a major reason why in Evangelical theology and philosophy today we increasingly talk complementarity, meaning convictions and truth claims that we have to hold together to keep our lives in balance, convictions that might otherwise come apart. This desire has been a part of Protestantism at least since the time of Martin Luther, who sometimes used a turn of phrase that sounded completely contradictory in order to get his readers to listen carefully and to think with him. For example, in his essay “The Freedom of the Christian,” he famously wrote, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” My theses lack the eloquence of Luther, but in this spirit let me suggest for your consideration the following complementary theses:

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

Before clarifying these complementary theses, let me mention two of my background observations that inform how I think about these themes. A key ethical question running through all of western culture, including education, health care, politics, business, law, and the arts, is “what is a human being?” The West is stumbling and tripping because our culture at large does not have a satisfactory answer. As Christians we have real answers about what human nature is that are rooted in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Western culture, probably every culture, urgently needs these answers. A more adequate understanding of humanity can and should have multiple valuable functions religiously and culturally. On the one hand, a better understanding of humanity, with our created dignity and fallen shame, should provide the framework for appropriating the gospel; knowing ourselves properly should lead to knowing God. On the other hand, a better understanding of humanity should also shape how the several spheres of society function, including health care, education, business, law, and government.² In order to set the stage both for more people to come to faith in Jesus and for a

¹ Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D. This is a lightly edited version of a speech presented to the *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*, meeting at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican City, June 28, 2014. Dr. Johnson also brought official greetings to the DHI from the World Evangelical Alliance and its 600 million members.

² I am consciously using the language of “sphere sovereignty.” God has created us such that with the unfolding of history different spheres or structures of society can and should be distinct from each other. The healthy functioning of a society in its many spheres, so that we move in a healthy direction within the structures God has created, is dependent on culture, which includes customs, theories, ideas, practices, habits, role models, slogans, proverbs and more, all of which are oriented around understanding and guiding our humanness. Healthy governments and healthy economies are always dependent on a healthy culture. The biblical message should

more healthy future in society, we have to communicate our biblically informed convictions about human nature more clearly.

Background observation number two: our world around us, that is often watching Christians, assumes we do not really believe our own Christian message. People frequently assume we Christians do not believe our own words because they do not completely believe their own worldview or philosophy of life. Many of our neighbors, I believe, go back and forth between worldviews, changing them like clothes. Perhaps at university they talk as if they are rationalistic naturalists, saying that only that which is physical exists, while in private they jump into a realm of irrationality to find hope, love, and perhaps some type of faith. Some of the time our neighbors act as if they accept parts of the Christian worldview because God's general revelation is constantly impinging on human experience; at the same time the same people may profess to accept some other belief system. It seems to be impossible for people to escape this situation of being of two minds if they are created in God's image and live in God's world, but do not acknowledge God.³ But because our neighbors do not fully believe their own words, they assume we Christians do not honestly believe what we say we believe. Our world is filled with various games of manipulation, power, and control; our neighbors have to see that we have chosen not to play such games and that we honestly believe our own words.

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

Today, much more than in previous generations, thanks to modern media, we are constantly confronted with scenes of human suffering: Refugees from wars, the victims of religious persecution, honor murders, natural disasters, people dying as a result of air or water pollution, some coping with generations of hunger and poverty, human trafficking. All these scenes and more prompt a God-given sympathy reaction in the hearts of millions of people from across the globe. And even if few can formulate the words, many know that their sympathy reaction to human suffering is related to their natural awareness of God, their *sensus divinitatis*. As a part of God's direct general revelation into human consciousness, even the person who claims to be an atheist will often have both a sense of the dignity of the other and an awareness of a moral duty to help the person in urgent need, in such a manner that the sense of moral duty has a vague but real reference to God. This moral/religious sympathy reaction will often stand in conflict with the claimed worldview or religion of the person reacting. If a person is truly convinced of

always stand in a multifaceted relation with cultures. See Thomas K. Johnson, "Christ and Culture," MBS Text 79 (2007), available online at www.bucer.eu. Religions and systems of belief always play pivotal roles in cultures.

³ The everyday truths that all people learn as a result of God's general revelation provide the transcendental conditions of human life and experience even if people suppress their knowledge of God. See Thomas K. Johnson, *The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God's General Revelation*, World of Theology vol. 1 (WEA Theological Commission, 2014). Available online at www.bucer.eu.

atheistic evolution, one might be expected to say something about the survival of the fittest in reaction to human suffering, but almost no one says that. No one I have heard ever said, “we can be happy so many poor people die as a result of disasters, persecution, and pollution so that the strong can survive to perpetuate humanity.” The moral sympathy reaction of millions to others in urgent need shows that many may not fully believe their own worldviews which seem to deny human dignity. Their practiced beliefs, including their moral sympathy reactions, are better than their professed beliefs.

For us, as people of the Bible, we have always had good explanations of why we should help people in need, explanations for our moral intuitions when those intuitions are healthy. This started in creation when God created us male and female in his image. Even if we do not know all that this means, it is clear that people have a very special status and value in the universe. The status that people are created in God’s image provides an explanation for why our moral reactions to people are different from our reactions to a stone or a tree. And this theological basis for helping people in need is then emphasized at many points in the history of redemption, demonstrating how redemption is a restoration of creation. Indeed, all of redemption is God’s response to people in urgent need, and this theme is emphasized to become prominent at certain points in the history of redemption. The Exodus from Egypt shows God setting his love on poor slaves, while the wealthy, powerful army died under the water of the sea. With this background, the people of God received very high standards for care for the poor. Shortly after the Exodus they were told, “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.” (Exodus 22:25) In the Ten Commandments, the servants were specifically mentioned as not having to work on the Sabbath. And even the Old Testament institution that is sometimes called “slavery” was radically different from slavery in the surrounding nations. If properly applied, the Old Testament transformed slavery from an abuse of the poor to become a kind of safety net to keep the poor from starvation; if properly implemented, it would have led to renewed economic independence for those who passed through temporary servitude. God set high standards for protecting and restoring the poor within his covenant people. It seems to me that the protection of the poor, even the rehabilitation of the poor, was intended by God to be a distinguishing characteristic of his ancient people. The protection of the poor was emphasized much more in the Old Testament than in the other systems of law and ethics in the ancient near eastern world.⁴ In this light it was especially wicked, as Amos mentioned, for the people of Israel to sell the needy for a pair of sandals and to trample on the heads of the poor. (Amos 2:6,7)

This moral theme continued directly into the New Testament, with the care of the poor becoming a crucial theme in the relations between Jewish and Gentile believers in the first century (Galatians 2:10), so that the wealthier Gentiles assisted poorer Jews. And John wrote, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 John 3:17) This principle was practiced to the extent that it was noticed in

⁴ Compare Old Testament ethics with the Code of Hammurabi to see this contrast.

the unbelieving world. Christians have often quoted the pagan Emperor Julian (332-363) who complained that the Christian faith “was specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans [Christians] care not only for their poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render to them.”⁵ Christian care for the poor both confirmed that Christians really believed what they said they believed, challenged the belief system of the surrounding world, and thereby helped set new social standards for caring for people in need.

Whereas in the unbelieving world people often do better than they believe, so that their practiced belief is better than their professed belief and they practice sympathy though their worldview might call for ruthlessness, within the Christian churches we sometimes face the opposite problem. Our professed belief, which I just summarized, is wonderful. And at times our practice has been wonderful. But today informed people are much more aware of global human suffering than in previous generations; it fills our TVs and computer screens. Our neighbors will wonder if we really believe the poor and needy are created in God’s image if they do not see us practicing what we say we believe. The Christian community faces a continuous test on this question.

I have written and edited some philosophical materials about human rights and human dignity as based in creation and redemption, and I could wish that those materials would convince our world that God has truly given dignity to the poor and desperate. But I do not expect our books and journals to change the world very much. I think it has a far larger impact when people see Christians honestly caring for the poor and needy. And that has to be at every level, local, regional, and global. If our neighbors see that we truly care for the homeless, the boatpeople, the victims of trafficking, the refugees, and those suffering religious persecution, then they may question their secularism, which has real difficulty explaining human dignity, and consider our Creator and Redeemer. As a friend described it, caring for human needs can be the boat that carries the gospel as a passenger.

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

Probably many of us have heard the stories of the numerous generous attempts to help people in need that seem to have done more harm than good. The stories can be very discouraging. It sometimes seems like the larger the effort, the greater the problems are that we cause. The irony could easily make us bitter and disillusioned. Everywhere we turn we see examples of humanitarianism causing destructive dependence and sometimes fueling corruption. Two specialists from my church circles who have addressed this problem summarized the issue in the title of their primary book, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the*

⁵ Quoted in Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th edition, (Thomas Nelson, 2013) p. 38.

*Poor . . . and Yourself.*⁶ I will not try to summarize their important study, but I believe the key to the problem is the total picture of how people are viewed that is communicated by our activities. Do we treat people as *objects* of pity, or do we treat them as *subjects* who will make decisions and implement plans for their future based on their values and convictions? If there is even a hint that we see people as objects, this causes the poor to see themselves as even more worthless and inferior to the people helping them, causing further dependence and discouragement. In contrast, engaging people as subjects with whom we are in conversation helps them to plan a better future for themselves. Regarding a person's subjective feelings, convictions, and decisions as truly decisive is a central part of recognizing and affirming the image of God in that person. Fellowship with those in real need is part of what draws them out of their need.

Perhaps another way of saying the same thing is to notice that efforts to relieve poverty that see a lack of money as being the primary characteristic of poverty tend to cause destructive dependence and more poverty, for within this way of thinking a person's value comes from the amount of their possessions. Inadequate definitions of poverty, with terrible irony, have become causes of continuing poverty. Defining poverty primarily as the lack of money makes the poor even more dependent on and inferior to people who have money. Ideas have consequences, especially when those ideas are incarnated into the way programs and organizations are designed. The poor often feel worthless because they do not have money, that very characteristic that defines value in a materialistic society. And then our definitions of poverty, communicated by the whole way in which our anti-poverty programs and organizations are designed, confirms that people without money are, in fact, worthless.

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

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

⁶ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor. . .and Yourself*, 2nd edition (Moody, 2012).

economic relations. I would call this “economic determinism.” But when we pick up the Bible, and books inspired by the Bible, we see the opposite perception of how human life works. This sounds theoretical and impractical at first, but it is very practical long term. Within the biblical worldview, the contents of human consciousness, meaning our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, relationships, hopes, and loves, shape everything else, including economic activity. What is inside the human mind and heart, obviously including education and those contents and skills communicated by education, plays a massive role, whether contributing to poverty or to plenty, contributing to alienation from God, world, self, and other, or contributing to reconciliation with God, world, self, and others.

Please do not misunderstand at this point. This does not mean that we first discuss philosophy of life with the boatpeople before we get them shelter or medical care. It does not mean that religious education comes before taking care of the refugee. We need good distinctions between crisis intervention and long term development, and these distinctions are clarified in the better books.⁷ But whatever the situation of a person or group, part of the way to a better future will include a lot of new thinking, learning, planning and imagining a different future, all of which can best occur in relationships and dialogue with other people. Within the biblical worldview, the way to a better future almost always comes through the subjectivity of people; this means through their conscious planning, learning, and work. This requires engagement in relationship, not treating the poor as objects of our pity.

So that the educators among us see the connections I am trying to draw, let me make explicit that I am thinking of the perspective on how society works that some of us learned from Max Weber’s study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁸ Protestant theologians have long pointed out that Weber largely misunderstood Protestant theology and Calvinism; do not take that part of Weber seriously. But the Roman Catholic theologian Michael Novak has pointed out that Weber offers a real alternative to Marx in terms of the relation between the contents of human consciousness and economic development.⁹ Without looking at the details, let me suggest that religious values such as diligence, honesty, and thrift, preached initially by Christians as a work ethic, first concentrated in northern Europe and North America but now widely distributed, contributed significantly to economic growth in the developed world. Much of this work ethic got its start with directly religious motivations, such as seeing daily work as a

⁷ Again I would mention Corbett and Fikkert.

⁸ Max Weber’s study was originally published as an essay entitled *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* in 1904 and 1905 in volumes XX and XXI of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. It was republished in 1920 in German as the first part of Weber’s series *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. It was published in English as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R. H. Tawney (New York, Scribner, 1958; reprint New York, Dover, 2003). For more on using Weber’s ideas in Protestant ethics see Thomas K. Johnson, “The Spirit of the Protestant Work Ethic and the World Economic Crisis,” chapter 5 in *Christian Ethics in Secular Cultures*, World of Theology vol. 2 (WEA Theological Commission, 2014). Available online at www.bucer.eu.

⁹ See especially Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Madison Books, 1990) and Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Free Press, 1993).

place to serve God, but its influence came after it was no longer seen as a purely religious conviction and was seen as economic rationality. More pointedly for our purposes, the way out of the poverty that still gripped most of Europe and North America in 1800 came largely through values, expectations, and convictions, some seen as more religious and some as more rational, in the hearts and minds of people. It was not the result of an impersonal power of development or class struggle in which people were passive objects. So too today, the way out of terrible circumstances for most people will include their planning and efforts in light of what they know, believe, and value, even when they need a lot of help.

Reflections

Our western culture is in a difficult situation. It lacks a definition of humanness to guide education, politics, and economic life. People suspect that others do not believe their own words because they know they do not entirely believe their own words. And everyone but a psychopath has a God-given sympathy reaction to people in need. We as Christians have a large duty to show that we really believe what we say we believe about humans being created in the image of God and God's special concern for people in the most difficult situations. But the moment we treat a person as an object of concern we can hurt that person more. God has chosen to engage us through our consciousness and our subjectivity in redemption; imitating God, we have to engage people in the worst circumstances through their subjectivity, meaning through what they think, feel, and decide. Then we can begin to practice our complex Christian relationship to poverty and wealth.