

WEIGHTIER MATTERS

An Essay Concerning the Tendency of Conservative Presbyterians, And the American Church At-Large, to Neglect Ministries of Justice and Mercy

Part 3 of 4

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As previously mentioned, unfortunately the financial and charitable practices of the church and those outside the church are nearly indistinguishable. Perhaps the only silver lining around this lamentable cloud is that the church no longer has to conduct its own research to gather information about the spending habits of its members, rather it can simply use the research others have gathered pertaining to the spending habits of the average American. *The Overspent American*¹ by Juliet Shor is an example of that silver lining. Shor first notes that the spending practices of the typical American no longer reflects a keeping-up-with-Jones' attitude. Rather, the typical American now strives to emulate the richest 20% of Americans in an attempt to associate themselves, through their clothes and other goods, with a chosen reference-group — no matter how wide the income gap is between them and their chosen group. This has drastically affected our attitude about what we consider to be necessities for living. For example, 27% of all households that make over \$100,000 feel that they can't buy everything that they need. Thirty-nine percent of households who make between \$50,000 and \$100,000 feel the same way. Also, consider the fact that households who make between \$50,000 and \$100,000 have the largest percentage of credit card debt. "Overall, half of the population of the richest country in the world say they cannot afford everything they really need. And it's just not the poorer half²." Different reference-groups include, "middle Americans, twenty-somethings, upscale urban Asians, top-one percenters, and senior sun-seekers³." According to Shor, we are on a consumer escalator and we always feel the need to go just one floor higher. The rapid and continual growth of new and more advanced goods, when combined with our addictive tendencies, has set us on a course not unlike a drug addict. We are in a constant search for a bigger and better high. Shor notes that despite the attempts of people to be counter-cultural, the bond between material goods and personal identity remains strong. This bond fuels the race to continually purchase the latest items in an attempt to maintain our identification with our desired reference-group. In an attempt to prove that image matters, Shor and some of her former Harvard students studied the cosmetics purchasing habits of women. Her team selected four cosmetic items: lipstick, eye-shadow, mascara, and facial cleanser and ranked them according to their use in public. It was determined that lipstick is most likely to be used in public and facial cleanser is least likely. The research results reflect Shor's thesis that the more visible a product is, such as lipstick, the more willing women are to pay for expensive top-end brands. As a result of its frequent use in public, a vast majority of women buy top-end lipstick as an attempt to communicate their desired social status and personal identity but they buy low-end facial cleanser because it is rarely used in public. This is ironic for two reasons. First, expensive top-end lipstick contains

¹ Harper Collins, 1998.

² Shor p. 6.

³ Shor p. 11.

less product as compared to its cheaper competitor. Second, *Consumer Reports* recently tested the quality of cosmetic products and discovered that there is a minimal difference in quality between top-end and low-end lipstick but that there is a large quality difference between top-end and low-end facial cleaners⁴. For male and female both, the more visible the product the more likely you are to buy top-end products despite any lack of variance in quality. To put it differently, we buy our underwear at Wal-Mart and our jeans at the GAP – although even this trend is changing as our society becomes more naked⁵. Shor's research also showed that as the cost of a cosmetic product increases so does demand for that product. Of course Shor's results are equally applicable to men. Both genders are equal participants in the national obsession to attain flat abs, big biceps⁶, perfect hair and designer clothes⁷.

We have become a “see-want-borrow-and buy” society⁸. Credit cards allow us to instantly purchase nearly any item. As a result our lives have become more oriented around purchasing. It's becoming increasingly harder to socialize without spending money. Those who choose to budget and couples who have only one income are feeling “a basic social alienation from being left out of the ongoing national shopping spree⁹. As one stay-at-home mother remarked, ‘It's hard, though, because you see other people who have that new car or go out and they buy their clothes at Jacobson's instead of Target. And you got to keep saying, ‘But you're staying at home with your kids.’ I mean, you have to keep saying it to yourself¹⁰.’ Perhaps Shor's most significant finding is that **70% of the people polled on the streets and campuses of America considered the typical American to be “very materialistic” but only 8% of those polled considered themselves to be materialistic¹¹.**

What can we learn from all of this? First and foremost, we as the American church need to admit our disposition to lie about our own materialism. We need to reconsider what constitutes the necessities of life as well as surrender the need to emulate and identify with our individual reference-groups. We should reconsider everything through kingdom eyes- the amount and type of clothes we buy, the size of our homes¹² and where they are located, the

⁴ Shor p. 52-53. Shor's findings did not hold true when I asked four female co-workers about their spending habits on lipstick and facial cleanser. My four co-workers bought both top-end lipstick and facial cleanser. They also said that low-end lipstick often leaves an unwanted taste in their mouths.

⁵ The May 2003 issue of *Men's Journal* has a feature article on the recent explosion of hot-tub sales. Why the sudden increase? Hot-tub = the perfect reason to take your clothes off.

⁶ Speaking of big, I've seen on TV that the latest cosmetic surgery fad is to have plastic curves inserted into your butt-cheeks in order to make them bigger and rounder. I'm vain enough to understand why people have cosmetic surgery. Again, the church has an opportunity to be a place that accepts, no matter how hard it may be, the limits of our natural beauty – or lack thereof. In her book, *Redeeming Eve: Finding the Hope Beyond the Struggles of Life* (Baker, 2002), Heather Webb comments, “A healing woman pays attention to the issues that can exist beneath the surface of her relationships with other women. One issue that needs to be examined is that of competition. Our society feeds women's fears and insecurities by setting us up in comparative relationships with one another: ‘How do I compare to fashion models or the ‘in’ styles?’ For a consumer society, the manufactured ‘need’ to look a certain way ensures a long line at the beauty counter or even plastic surgeon's office. Comparing women to what they are ‘supposed to be’ can be demeaning; moreover, it sets women against one another.” P. 159.

⁷ See Part Three.

⁸ Shor p. 74.

⁹ According to Shor, women with graduate degrees shop more than any other female demographic. Women with undergraduate degrees are a close second (p. 76).

¹⁰ Shor p. 103.

¹¹ Shor p. 83.

¹² The size of the average house has doubled in the past 50 years and yet the size of the average family has decreased.

amount of money we spend on our cars, lawns, pets, etc¹³. The March 7, 2003 edition of *USA Today* reports that 62% of American households own a pet and they will spend \$31 billion this year on veterinary care, food and supplies¹⁴. This is up from \$17 billion in 1994. To put these figures into perspective, only \$10 billion in aid would provide care for 12 million AID's orphans in Africa as well as provide antiretroviral drugs for another 10 million Africans¹⁵. Considering that 74 million people have AIDS and that the CIA predicts an explosion of AIDS in India, Russia, China, Ethiopia and Nigeria¹⁶, shouldn't we think twice about the money we spend on pets? The American church has the financial resources help so many desperate people. A July 2001 issue of *Newsweek* documents the wealth of American evangelicals. *Newsweek* reports that American Christian pop-culture is a 3 billion dollar business. In 2000 American Christians spent 747 million dollars on albums – the same amount necessary to cancel the debt's of 22 African nations¹⁷. Other Christian pop-culture paraphernalia such as embroidered Bible covers, specialty Bibles, bumper stickers and fish magnets account for tens of millions of dollars annually. We expend huge amounts of time and money on the practice and appearance of personal piety but we neglect justice and mercy. It would be the height of folly to believe that we are not capable of becoming - or that we have not already become? - 21st century Pharisees who "know" Scripture¹⁸ but we choose to ignore the needs of those around us. "It is important for professing Christians today to ask themselves how many unused surplus goods, property or investments they accumulate without any thought for the needy of the world¹⁹." The need for self-reflection is especially needed among Presbyterians and other Reformed communities due to our long tradition of affirming, and rightly so, the inherent goodness of the material/created world. Again, we are right to enjoy the goods of this world but we must hold on to them with a light grip.

¹³ "A survey of expenditures in the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated that Americans spent annually twice as much on cut flowers as on oversea Protestant ministries, twice as much on women's sheer hosiery, one and a half times as much on video games, one and a half times as much on pinball machines, slightly more on the lawn industry, about five times as much on pets, one and half times as much on chewing gum, almost three times as much on sweets, seventeen times as much on diets and diet-related products, twenty times as much on sports activities, approximately twenty-six times as much on soft drinks, and a staggering 140 times as much on legalized gambling activities... In its most dramatic and obscene form, the question is whether the labor and resources of the Third World nations should contribute more to the opulence of America's cats and dogs than to the elementary good health of Third World humans." Blomberg p.18-19.

¹⁴ The Dogmopolitan company sells custom pet furniture in the \$350 to \$2,000 price range. Is it possible to justify buying a suede couch with medical-grade orthopedic foam cushions for your pet? I am a dog lover but even during my short life I have noticed a shift in the treatment of pets. When did professional grooming for pets move into the mainstream?

¹⁵ www.datadata.org

¹⁶ For more information see *The aWAKE Project: Uniting Against the African AIDS Crisis*. Edited by Kate Eture. W Publishing, 2002.

¹⁷ Many, if not all, indebted African nations are required to use nearly all of their revenues for interest payments from their international loans. This perpetuates the poverty cycle because it prevents these nations from investing in education, medical facilities and infrastructure. For a very brief and balanced analysis of the African debt debate see Appendix C.

¹⁸ Ironically, despite the constant call for quiet-times and Bible study groups, my grandpa and uncle, both of whom are reformed pastors, report that Biblical illiteracy is a serious problem. I believe that this can be easily remedied by better teaching in Sunday school along with suggesting better reading materials. Most popular Christian books simply don't teach basic doctrine and almost never teach Biblical theology. Books such as: *Concise Theology* by J.I. Packer; *The Time is Fulfilled* by F.F. Bruce; *Designed for Dignity* by Richard Pratt; *According to Plan and Gospel and Kingdom* by Graeme Goldsworthy; *The Symphony of Scripture* by Mark Strom; *Looking to the Rock* by Alec Motyer; and *Reading the Bible for All It's Worth* by Gordon Fee can provide excellent learning opportunities. I believe doctrine is much easier to learn and apply once a person begins to understand the meta-narrative Scripture, i.e., the kingdom of God.

¹⁹ Blomberg p.119.

Wealth in and of itself is not sinful²⁰. Indeed God gives wealth as a gift to be enjoyed. Wealth allows us to live a more abundant life by increasing enriching opportunities such as travel and education. It has the value of enabling us to be righteous by providing for the needy. “The issue is not how much a person makes. Big industry and big salaries are a fact of our times, and they are not necessarily evil. The evil is in being deceived into thinking a \$100,000 salary must be accompanied by a \$100,000 lifestyle. God has made us to be conduits of grace. The danger is in thinking the conduit should be lined with gold. It shouldn’t. Copper will do²¹.” Jesus asked for daily bread not daily cake. As demonstrated above, **wealth becomes dangerous when we begin to orient our lives around efforts to protect and increase our wealth as a means of gaining security and significance rather than using it as a medium for loving God by loving neighbor.** This warning is especially poignant today considering that the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of the world is taking place as baby-boomers continue to inherit the vast wealth of their WWII generation parents. We are called to be responsible and merciful stewards who are willing to take risks for the sake of serving God and neighbor.

Shor suggests nine ways, five of which I will summarize, to help people get off the consumer escalator. The *first* principle is to control our desire for more by staying away from places where you are tempted to spend, by immediately throwing out mail order magazines, and by looking at an item’s durability and usefulness rather than its novelty²². Think about the consequences of a purchase. Will it require or tempt you to spend more? For example, a boat requires a trailer as well as a vehicle that has the power to pull it. It may also require you to rent dock space. Buying a larger TV may tempt you to buy a new sound system to accompany it. Shor uses a story by the 18th century French philosopher Denis Diderot as an illustration. Diderot’s story is titled “Regrets on Parting with my Old Dressing Gown.” Diderot describes the transformation that took place after a friend gave him a very expensive dressing gown as a gift. Diderot immediately threw out his old gown in anticipation of the pleasure of wearing his newer, more luxurious garment. After having done so, he soon became aware of the vivid contrast in grandeur between his new gown and the simple furnishings in his house. He slowly began to replace his old, well-worn and cherished furniture and clothes with more fashionable replacements. After Diderot had transformed his home and wardrobe he realized that his once warm and cozy house had become obnoxious to him. He greatly missed the easy and simple pleasures of his old gown and furnishings²³. Shor’s *third* principle is to gather as a community and voluntarily place limits on goods such as agreeing to spend only x amount of dollars on birthday gifts and evenings out on the town, and attending or renting only second-run movies²⁴. The *fourth* principle is to share specialty items that are usually used infrequently such as lawn mowers and chainsaws. The *fifth* principle is to become educated consumers

²⁰ In the book of Proverbs the term “rich man” is a negative term but the term “riches” is not (18:23, 28:6, 28:11, 28:20).

²¹ Piper p. 173.

²² Personally, I think any couch that you can’t sleep on is better used as fuel for your fireplace. Don’t get me started about useless bed and couch pillows.

²³ Shor p. 145.

²⁴ My grandfather recently told me that he can’t recall ever sending or receiving birthday cards as a child. They were simply too expensive. Even the valentines that he exchanged with the other students in his small country school were second-hand. It was a symbol of status if you received an unused valentine from your crush. We must remind ourselves that no generation on earth has every experienced the amount of luxury we enjoy and don’t think twice about. People can a have lived happily without leather coaches, plasma TV’s and new valentine cards.

by considering the moral implications of our purchases²⁵. In 1996, Nike spent 2 million dollars a day on advertising for their women's apparel yet they paid their female Vietnamese workers only \$1.60 a day²⁶. As Americans we must take ownership of the fact that we consume a hugely disproportionate percentage of the world's resources. We should also begin to teach responsible financial habits to children, and adults if need be, throughout their schooling. They should be taught the basics of budgeting, giving, the nature of compound interest and general economic theory²⁷, including the effects of unchecked capitalism. The *ninth* principle (the fifth of which I am mentioning) is to de-commercialize holidays by placing spending limits on gifts and symbols and decorations²⁸. Although I believe this last principle can be helpful, there is Biblical precedent for giving and enjoying elaborate celebrations. These celebrations were the exception but nonetheless they are viewed favorably in Scripture. We must remember that Jesus turned water into the finest wine²⁹ and ate with the rich so frequently that he was labeled a glutton and a drunkard³⁰. Spare no expense to celebrate joyful occasions! Our Savior asks only that we invite those who are unable to pay us back to "participate" in our feasts – and there are many we can invite both globally and locally.

²⁵ "In light of the numerous Two-Thirds World countries today, not least in Latin America, in which vast tracts of land are owned by a handful of wealthy people, or in many instances, large multi-national corporations that fail to pay decent wages to their laborers, would-be Christians need to reflect long and hard on [James 5:1-6]. To what extent do we tacitly endorse such injustice by our purchases from such companies, often without even being aware of their practices, or by supporting politicians who promise tax cuts for the upper and middle classes, when programs helping the needy at home and abroad are slashed in the process and not likely to be replaced by private sector equivalents? To what extent do the well-to-do Christians in the West and North live lives little different from those described in 5:1-6... even if we plead innocent of the more blatant form of oppression described in this text." Blomberg p. 158.

²⁶ Shor p. 154. I recognize that due to the complex financial composition of today's businesses it is hard to identify the "owner" of a particular good or service and even harder to learn about the character of their financial practices.

²⁷ Shor p. 157.

In his book, *The Way of the Modern World or Why It's tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist*, Craig Gay provides an excellent understanding of the implications of modern economic practices. Gay writes, "Needless to say, the practical rationalization of modern economic life has greatly enhanced the *plausibility* of worldliness in contemporary society and culture. Not only has the market system's remarkable productivity tempted us to locate more and more of our aspirations in this world; but the alchemy and 'absolutely general instrumentality' of monetary abstraction have largely evacuated the world of all meanings and values save those which we choose to attribute to it. It is no wonder that the New Testament considers the love of money to be the root of many evils, for it insidiously encourages us to substitute our own humanly created 'values' for those of God's good creation. By exalting the practical-rational pursuit of self-interest, furthermore, the logic of the market is intrinsically resistant to substantive religious critique. Indeed, to suggest that economic affairs ought to be disciplined by religious understanding is, from the modern point of view, to pose a somewhat irrational threat to productivity and consumption and thus to experience of well being.

And so we face quite a dilemma with respect to the practical rationalization of economic activity in modern society. On the one hand, the process has proven tremendously productive and we have come to depend upon its continuing productivity. On the other hand, this productivity appears to be intrinsically and perhaps inextricably linked to the secularity and impersonality of contemporary culture. The practical, subjectivistic, egocentric, and individualistic orientation toward the world which [Max] Weber contended is sadly incapable of making sense of the world in any humanly meaningful way now presents itself – with the formal force of law, and with the theoretical support of any number of compelling modern ideologies – as the only rational way forward, as our fate. While Weber may well have overstated the matter by contending that the modern situation has become a kind of 'iron cage,' it is at the very least an ironic one." Gay p. 173. Gay, Craig M. *The Way of the Modern World of Why It's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist*. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1998.

²⁸ Shor p. 161. I believe this encourages creativity and thoughtfulness. Last Christmas my mother gave me an old issue of *Life* magazine that she had bought for a dime. I'm still enjoying reading through the old articles and looking at the advertisements of an older generation.

²⁹ John 2:10

³⁰ Matt. 11:19

According to *The World Christian Encyclopedia* (2000 Edition)³¹:

- 2 billion people live in poverty (a daily wage of under 2 dollars)
- 1.1 billion live in extreme poverty (a daily wage of under 1 dollar)
- 2.2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water
- 700 million children are sick
- 30 million people, of which 18 million are children under the age of five, die from hunger each year
- 700 million people are shanty-town or slum dwellers
- 120 million are street children.

These numbers are horrific and most often leave us feeling powerless and guilty. We must fight against our habit of using our feelings of powerlessness as an excuse not to act. Greed, along with the complexities of foreign trade relations and diplomacy, combined with cultural differences sadly prevent immediate national relief but these barriers do not mean that relief is impossible. There are reputable organizations that seek to meet the needs of the world's poor by providing basic necessities such as clean drinking water³². **We must stop living as though these people do not exist.**

Locally, according to 1999 U.S. Census Bureau statistics³³,

- 12 percent of Americans, 33,899,812 people, live in poverty³⁴
- Of that 12 percent: 34 percent are 17 years old or younger
- 32 percent are members of a married-family
- 41 percent, 14,167,861 people, are members of all other types of families
- Of those 14.16 million people 7 percent live in homes with a male householder and no wife present while 34 percent live in homes with a female householder with no husband present

Keller, sighting a 1995 *Parade Magazine* article, reports that 42 percent of American children grow up in low-income homes and 23 percent of American children grow up in poverty³⁵.

The gap between rich and poor has continually grown over the last 29 years, both globally and in America. In 1995 it was calculated that the wealth of the world's 387

³¹ As sighted by www.urbana.org/_articles.cfm?RecordId=436

³² World Vision is only one of dozens of organizations. www.worldvision.org

³³ <http://factfinder.census.gov>

³⁴ In 1999 a family of four making \$17,029 or less was considered to be living in poverty. This comes to \$46.65 per day. While we must never trivialize the suffering of these 33 million people, we must remind ourselves that "poverty" in America is a dream for at least 2 billion people across the globe. This should put all of our perceived necessities in to perspective.

³⁵ According to the 1995 *Parade* article, a family of four making less than \$14,800 was considered to be in poverty while the same size family making \$23,380 or less was considered a low income home. A study by the National Center for Children in Poverty titled, *One in Four*, begins as follows: "In the United States, distinguished by its extraordinary wealth, there are six million poor individuals known to few others but their families. They cannot vote, they cannot work, most do not even go to school. They are America's youngest poor – children under age six." Keller p. 19. My research through the U.S. Census Bureau web page put the number of poor under the age of six at 4.1 million. Due to the nomadic and non-participatory survey/census tendencies of the homeless and poor, their population figures have always been nebulous and debated.

billionaires, a vast majority of which were American, equaled the combined income of the bottom 45% of the world's population³⁶. "The average income among the wealthiest one-fifth of U.S. households rose 45 percent from 1967 to 1995. By comparison, in the poorest households income only increased by 19 percent³⁷." Many Americans have experienced this growing gap first-hand. Recent economic trends such as globalization has led to a huge loss of production jobs that had traditionally paid a living wage for workers who did not have a college or even high school education. The result has been a growing divide between well paid skilled labor and unskilled, low paying labor. It's as if the middle has been removed, or more specifically, the middle has been computerized or exported. Many people are faced with the decision of working for minimum wage or not working at all – with little if any difference in the results of that decision, i.e., Keller estimates that in 1997 an average family provider would have to earn at least twice the minimum wage to afford a two-bedroom apartment. This sad reality is changing the demographics of the average homeless person. A shelter operator in New Orleans comments, "Most of the folks we deal with day in and day out are from the fringe of the middle class. Many owned homes before the big lay-offs. None had ever known real want before. What we're seeing is a change in the structure of American society so fundamental that no one will remain unaffected³⁸." A pie-chart of America's poor/quasi-homeless would be sliced in the following way: 33% are poor children; another 33% consists of working adults who are unable to make a living wage; 16% consists of the elderly and the mentally and physically ill; only the final 16% represents what most people consider to be the average poor person – single parents with children at home or able body people who are unwilling to work. But even among this 16% there are many who suffer from disabling emotional/social difficulties³⁹. "Families with children are currently the fastest growing group of the homeless population, approximately 40 percent. Thirty-five percent of homeless women and children are fleeing abuse, 25 percent of the single adult homeless population suffer from some form of manageable mental illness, and 22 percent of the general homeless population likely suffer from a substance abuse disorder⁴⁰." The practice of gentrification (the act of purchasing cheap inner city property by wealthy "outside" buyers for the purpose building high-income apartments or homes on the newly renovated property) has also increased the number of homeless⁴¹. Women, especially divorced women with children, are particularly vulnerable to poverty and homelessness. In her book, *The Divorce Revolution*, Leonore Weitzman states that a man's standard of living typically increased by 42% during the year following a divorce while a woman's standard of living decreased 73% during the same year – even when including child support and alimony payments⁴². Even those who attempt to escape from the harsh realities of poverty and family decay, such as first generation college students, are often pulled back into the chaos. For example, Ulrich Boser wrote an article in the March 31, 2003 edition of *U.S. News and World Report* reporting that a disproportionately large percentage of

³⁶ Blomberg p. 18.

³⁷ Keller p. 23.

³⁸ Keller p. 18.

³⁹ Keller p. 19.

⁴⁰ Keller p. 18.

⁴¹ Keller p. 18.

⁴² Keller p. 21. While divorce is never ideal, a September 1997 U.S. Department of Commerce/Bureau of the Census brief (CENBR/97-1) reported that among single-parent households "children living with a divorced parent typically have a big edge over those living with a parent who has never married – an even bigger edge if that parent is the father." These children have better educated parents; are less likely to live in rented homes, and less likely to live below the poverty line during their lives.

minority college students do not graduate within six years⁴³. These students often have to leave school to serve as household caretaker due to a crisis in the family, such as illness or death of a single parent. Those who should serve as caretakers, namely husbands and fathers, are absent.

There are many other groups of people existing on the periphery of society who need our mercy and support -- such as the 1.9 million⁴⁴ prisoners in our correctional facilities and 7 million migrant workers currently living in America. The ministry of visiting inmates behind prison walls can be very intimidating and may not be suitable for everyone but everyone has an opportunity to help. Prison Fellowship has numerous programs to help inmates and their families⁴⁵. One means of helping is by serving as an advocate on their behalf. A recent Amnesty International press release demonstrates the need for our advocacy. The press release headline reads, "USA: Death by Discrimination – Time to Halt Executions." Amnesty International reports,

"Blacks and whites are victims of murder in almost equal numbers in the USA, but 80 percent of the more than 840 people executed since judicial killing resumed in 1977 were put to death for murders involving white victims. Most murders in the USA involve perpetrators and victims of the same race, yet nearly 200 African Americans have been executed for the murder of white victims – *15 times as many as the number of whites put to death for killing blacks* (emphasis mine), and at least twice as many as the number of blacks executed for the murder of other blacks. African Americans account for 12 percent of the populations, but more than 40 percent of death row and one in three of those executed...At least on in five of the African Americans executed since 1977, and a quarter of the blacks put to death for killing whites, were tried in front of all-white juries...When outgoing Illinois governor George Ryan commuted the death sentences of 167 people in January, he cited the failure of past Illinois legislatures to fix the state's problems with the death penalty. He stressed that these flaws went beyond Illinois's notorious record of wrongful convictions, and into questions of arbitrariness, with race being one of the ingredients⁴⁶."

Migrant workers often live in deplorable conditions with no immediate means of obtaining basic medical care⁴⁷ and housing. If we are profiting from their labor shouldn't we also take an interest in their well being? The church must begin to reach out to these people by asking them what their needs and sharing our tables with them.

⁴³ Only 39% of Black students and 42% of Hispanic students who begin an undergraduate degree graduate within six years as compared to 57% of white students and 60% of Asian students. See *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* by John McWhorter (Perennial, 2000) for an engaging look into 21st century Black American culture.

⁴⁴ Census provided by the U.S. Department of Justice as of June 30, 2000.

⁴⁵ www.prisonfellowship.org. See *When God Goes to Prison* by Daniel Brook in the May/June 2003 edition of *Legal Affairs* magazine for an account of innovative prison ministries sponsored by Prison Fellowship.

⁴⁶ <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGAMR510572003>. Although I believe that the mandate found in Genesis 9:6 demands the execution of murderers (See *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* by Geerhardus Vos, Banner of Truth: 1996, p. 53-54), surely the evidence of such massive discrimination is not God-honoring justice.

⁴⁷ "The uninsured are disproportionately Hispanic. Among the 41 million people without health insurance in 2001, 30 percent were Hispanic. Overall, 33 percent of Hispanics do not have coverage compared to 19 percent of blacks and just 10 percent of non-Hispanic whites." www.newstrategist.com/hottrends/

In his book, *Reefer Madness*, Eric Schlosser reports the plight of immigrant workers, specifically farm workers in California. Schlosser writes,

“The hourly wage of some California farm workers, adjusted for inflation, have dropped more than 50 percent since 1980. Migrants are among the poorest workers in the United States. The average migrant is a twenty-nine-year-old male, born in Mexico, who earns less than \$7,500 a year for twenty-five weeks of farmwork. According to one estimate, his life expectancy is forty-nine years...No deity that men have ever worshiped is more ruthless and more hollow than the free market unchecked; there is no reason why shantytowns should not appear on the outskirts of every American city. All those who now consider themselves devotees of the market should take a good look at what is happening in California. Left to its own devices, the free market always seeks a work force that is hungry, desperate, and cheap – a work force that is anything but free⁴⁸.”

Broad statistics are almost always one step removed from our daily reality. A person can often learn of people who can benefit from MJM by simply observing their surroundings and taking an interest in those around them. My recent five-month job search as well as my present job as a case manager in an in-patient hospital psychiatric unit has revealed worlds of needs that I did not know existed. I began my job search by visiting local temp agencies. As I recall, I visited three different agencies and I was the only white person looking for work in each agency. I know that the current economy has affected people of every race, but I can't explain why I happened to be only white person looking for temporary work in those stores those days. Through a friend, I found temporary work as a tax preparer at two local tax offices. Both offices were located in low-income neighborhoods. I didn't know so many people are unable to fill out a simple tax form. Most of our customers used our service because of our rapid refund option but there is a need for volunteers to help others, who need every cent of their return, to file a basic tax return. When eating lunch with my current co-workers, John and Mary, I learned about the frustrations of child-support payments. John is a re-married father who gladly sends child support payments but due to the implementation of a faulty computer system his payments had recently not been recorded by the state. Mary is a single mother who must constantly fight to receive child-support payments from her ex-husband. Both John and Mary have spent long afternoons in courtrooms waiting for their chance to plead their cases. John, who ended up spending a couple of days in jail for his “failure” to pay child-support despite his ex-wife's testimony that she had received payments, told me about a watching man plead his case before the judge. The man was \$75 dollars short in his payments but promised he would pay the balance. Both John and Mary assured me that a anyone who has sat in the courtroom to waiting to plead their own case is able to recognize the difference between a defendant who is sincerely trying to meet their child-support obligations and a defendant who is trying to con the court. John believed this man was sincere but the judge did not and sentenced him to six months in jail. John said he could see the hope drain from the man's body. Being in jail for six months meant the loss of his current job and apartment as well as trying to survive incarceration. I wonder if that man ever considered asking a local church for help? Mary works 3 part time jobs. She says that she is among the group of people who are hardest hit. She's not poor enough to qualify for the aid of a court

⁴⁸ Schlosser p. 79,108.

appointed attorney but she's not rich enough to pay for professional legal advice and services. She feels like she has no support or advocate. Concerning my current experiences with the mentally ill, I've learned that if it were not for government resources and funding at least 35% of the patients which have been in our hospital's psychiatric unit would be homeless and completely forgotten about. When I've talked with county mental health officials about their needs and how charities can meet those needs, they've told me repeatedly that there is a housing shortage for the severely mentally ill. One worker told me, "If you want to help, please tell someone to buy houses so these patients can have a place to live and be cared for." Many patients are surprised when I advise them to go to a local church and make their needs known. They have never considered the church as a place that would offer them aid. **Every church member should be prepared to offer help to anyone who asks.** This doesn't mean that every church should operate a homeless shelter but it does mean that every church should have a potent response to those in need even if it is only knowing what community resources are available.