

WEIGHTIER MATTERS

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

Part 4 of 4
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We end where we began – sola Scriptura, semper reformada and the pulpit. The faithful preaching of scripture is the God given means of correction for his people. To preach faithfully pastors must attend to all of God's word, i.e., the first 39 books matter as much as the last 27 books¹. By preaching the whole counsel of God church members will be continually challenged with God's desire for his people to mirror himself by exercising justice and mercy. The implications of God's word concerning this matter are enormous.

Consider the Eucharist. Blomberg notes that Paul's warning in 1 Cor. 11 concerning those who partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner is spoken to those who eat and get drunk while others go hungry. Blomberg adds,

“Obviously, few if any contemporary worship services have this exact problem [(eating and drinking too much)] with the Lord's table. But once one understands that the gluttony and drunkenness described take place during a larger communal meal at the expense of the needy Christian in their midst, then 'eating and drinking unworthily' applies in our modern culture to any who continue glibly to partake of the Lord's Supper, yet who have no track-record in their own lives of giving from their surplus possessions to the poor. The question of who should not take the Lord's Supper in any given church could be revolutionized if we began to obey Paul's words and apply them as they were intended in their original context².”

Consider a typical church's staff and facilities in light of the role of the priesthood in the Old Testament the actions of the elders in Acts 6. **How is it that churches have staff positions for almost “need” under-the-sun but not for organizing MJM?** As stated above, our church activities, no matter how well they are coordinated and executed, are repulsive to God if we have no desire for mercy. Also, ponder the fact that between the years 1984 and 1989 American Christians spent \$15.7 billion on building new church facilities. Granted, new construction is needed to accommodate growing congregations but let's be honest - an overwhelming majority of building projects are unnecessary. For example, the church I attend may send \$200,000 dollars to construct a courtyard with a fountain. “More than a decade ago, nearly 200 million of the world's poor professed some form of Christianity. And, to the extent

¹ In addition to taking the initial step of merely preaching from the Old Testament, pastors must not neglect the ethical content of Old Testament passages as they strive to articulate a Christocentric/redemptive-historical interpretation.

² Blomberg p. 188.

that they become aware of our lifestyles through television or foreign visitors, they often wonder why we in the West seem to care so little about their plight³.” What if we stopped building gyms and started using that money to build soup kitchens, food pantries, showers and washing/drying machines, and office space to address the medical, legal, sociological (language training) and spiritual needs of the disenfranchised?

Consider our occupations and financial practices in light of the book of James. This brother of Jesus directed his harshest words to the rich who were oppressing the poor through denying them their wages while they themselves hoarded riches⁴. We must not secure our own wealth at the expense of the powerless or condone others who do. This may require some to change professions or pass on lucrative investment opportunities. A recent article in my local newspaper reported on the success of payday loan offices in low-income neighborhoods⁵. Although these stores appear to be small-time operations, minister Marvin Richmond of the Coalition for Responsible Lending noted that, “There’s so much money being made on small loans, it’s only a matter of time before big banks start getting into it, too.” Perhaps those in the church who have money skills can create loan offices that are will not take advantage of the poor. We must be willing to disrupt the political and financial norms of our communities for the sake of the powerless, even if it results in less prosperity for us. In fact, it is very likely that such activity will do exactly that. We should not be surprised if our actions disrupt the profits of others just as what happened in Acts 19:23-41. “Any Christianity worth its salt will be a challenge to the pocketbook, the flag and the shrine⁶.”

Consider how a greater practice of MJM will strengthen the church’s witness. Christ said that it would be through the expression of unity between the members of his body that the world would come to know that the Father⁷. Is there any greater expression of unity than to share our possessions with those in need? We are constantly lamenting how the church is losing its influence in our society. Perhaps we can reverse that trend through MJM. While looking back on the apostolic age by means of the book of Acts, St. John Chrysostom wrote, “It is no for lack of miracles that the Church is staid, it is because we have forsaken the angelic life of Pentecost...If we lived as they did, with all things common, we should soon convert the whole world without any need of miracles at all⁸.”

Consider how the scriptural truths of moving beyond the tithe to giving from our abundance, and of heavenly rewards could transform our charity towards others. The tithe can be a deceptive way of measuring our generosity. Blomberg writes,

“It seems significant that [other than Luke 11:41-42 and Matthew 23:23] no other New Testament text explicitly commands [tithing], while the principles of generosity and sacrifice [in other New Testament texts] suggests that different people should give varying percentages based on their varying circumstances. Those who are at least reasonably well off should give considerably more than a

³ Blomberg p. 18.

⁴ James 5: 1-6.

⁵ Let us Prey: Rent-A-Bank here to stay. Greensboro News & Record. March 9, 2003. B1. Lorraine Ahearn.

⁶ Blomberg p. 173.

⁷ John 17:23

⁸ True Prayer. p. 88.

tenth of their gross income to God's work. 'We must even go a step farther: **the demand that the Christian tithe can even become a dangerous thing, for it permits the false conclusion that the problem of Mammon has been met and conquered** (emphasis mine)⁹.'"

Many in the church are confused about heaven. Contrary to popular belief, after we die we won't be angels or ghost-like spirits that sing in a choir loft for eternity. Instead, we will have new bodies that will live forever on a new earth and have new hearts that will be fully pure just as Christ is pure¹⁰. Heaven is the promise land and Christ continually beckons us to invest in that future by increasing the size of our heavenly reward. Yes, Christ will administer heavenly rewards¹¹. No, everyone does not receive the same portion. No, rewards do not entail justification through works. As Berkhof reminds us, "Our good works will be the measure of our gracious reward, though they do not merit it¹²." God isn't opposed to our storing up treasure. But he graciously advises us to invest wisely – in eternal rewards that cannot be lost, stolen or destroyed¹³. Should we be motivated by the desire of increasing our heavenly reward? Yes! Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously¹⁴.

Consider the effects of reminding ourselves that we are citizens of the Kingdom of God first and secondarily citizens of America and the larger global community. This will be, as it has been for Christians in every century, an unpopular position considering the recent wave of Americana and the unfortunate belief of some that America and the Kingdom are synonymous¹⁵, i.e., God always favors the U.S.A. American is not and has never been God's chosen nation, though, as mentioned earlier, God is free to punish any nation for their inhumane practices¹⁶, or, conversely, bless them for their practice of peace and mercy.

⁹ Blomberg p. 136.

¹⁰ This is the simple answer to the question If we were unable to met the requirements of the first/old covenant what hope do we have that we won't also fall short in the second/new covenant? The answer is that our hearts will be fully renewed and thus there will be no covenant disobedience.

¹¹ "It is also evident from Scripture that there will be degrees in the bliss of heaven, Dan. 12:3; II Cor. 9:6. Our good works will be the measure of our gracious reward, though they do not merit it. Notwithstanding this, however, the joy of each individual will be perfect and full" (Berkhof p. 737).

"Scripture also teaches that there will be *degrees of reward for believers...* But we must guard against misunderstanding here: Even though there will be degrees of reward in heaven, the joy of each person will be full and complete for eternity... It would be morally and spiritually beneficial for us to have a greater consciousness of this clear New Testament teaching on degrees of heavenly reward. Rather than making us competitive with one another, it would cause us to help and encourage one another that we all may increase our heavenly reward, for God has an infinite capacity to bring blessings to us all... Moreover, in our own lives a heartfelt seeking of future heavenly reward would motivate us to work wholeheartedly for the Lord at whatever task he calls us to, whether great or small, paid or unpaid. It would also make us long for his approval rather than for wealth or success. It would motivate us to work at building up the church on the one foundation, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-15)" (Grudem p. 1144-1145).

¹² Berkhof p. 737.

¹³ Luke 12:33.

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 9:6.

¹⁵ The June 2, 2003 edition of *Newsweek* magazine carries an article titled *A Very Mixed Marriage*. Authors Howard Fineman and Tamara Lipper describe how American Evangelicals who insist that the divine promises of the Abrahamic covenant prohibit a modern Palestinian state are pressuring American and Israel-ly (sp?) leaders to reject Bush's 'Road Map' to peace - a plan that I believe offers real hope for the end of hostilities.

¹⁶ During the Civil War, leaders from both sides claimed divine favor, President Lincoln, however, thought differently. Lincoln is quoted as saying, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side." By means

Americans have indeed suffered much and sacrificed many sons and daughters in our campaigns to protect and liberate others from tyranny but we must admit that many of our foreign policy decisions have been and continue to be principally driven by the desire to protect and expand our wealth¹⁷ rather than protecting and enlarging the freedom of others¹⁸. Let's accept the reality that, morally, Americans and their elected leaders are a mixed bag and that we are hardly the beacon of light we pretend to be¹⁹. Our moral ambiguity also pertains to the domestic policies advocated by both democrats and republicans. Both parties are guilty of corruption²⁰. While *government can and should serve as a means of providing for and*

of his second inaugural address Lincoln made it known that he considered the Civil War as God's punishment for the evil of slavery.

Concerning the current phenomena of pro-military and pro-God sentiment, I'm reminded of the ending of an editorial that my grandpa wrote: "Historians have discovered an old sentry box (where guards could have a little respite from the rotten weather) dated over a century ago with these words,

"God and soldier men both adore
in times of trouble, but then no more.
For when the war is over, and the wrong is righted,
God is forgotten and the soldier slighted."

¹⁷ The May/June 2003 edition of *Foreign Policy* features an article titled *Ranking the Rich: The First Annual CGD/FP Commitment to Develop Index Ranks 21 Rich Nations on Whether Their Aid, Trade, Immigration, Investment, Peace-Keeping, and Environmental Policies Help or Hurt Poor Countries*. The Index cites Japan and America as the two largest cash contributors but they ranked last and second to last. Why? Japan ranked 21st because of their high interest loans. America ranked 20th because our aid is often 'tied-aid' which means that the nation who receives cash aid is required to spend the cash on goods and services from the donor nation. "In the late 1990's, the U.S. Agency for International Development reassured the U.S. Congress that almost 80 percent of the agency's aid resources went to purchase U.S. goods and services... For all their chest thumping about foreign aid, rich nations take it all back – and then some – through protectionist trade policies. The value of annual agricultural subsidies in rich nations is more than three times the yearly aid flow to poor countries, causing heavy losses to producers in the developing world. The most protected industries in high-income economies include agriculture and textiles,, precisely the sectors where many poor countries tend to be most competitive."

¹⁸ After recently reading Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* I cannot over emphasize my gratitude for living in a country with large freedoms and the nobility of fighting on behalf of others who live under despotism. I am glad that I am an American.

In the book *Inside Islam*, contributor Fareed Zakaria, while in no way condoning terrorism, explores the reason for the recent rise in Arab hatred toward America. Zakaria notes, "[Arab's] look at American policy in the region as cynically geared to America's oil interests, supporting thugs and tyrants without hesitation... In my view, America's greatest sins toward the Arab world are sins of omission. We have neglected to press any regime there to open up its society. This neglect turned deadly in the case of Afghanistan. Walking away from that fractured country after 1989 resulted in the rise of bin Laden and the Taliban. This is not the gravest error a great power can make, but it is a common American one. As F. Scott Fitzgerald explained of his characters in *The Great Gatsby*, 'They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed things up and creatures and then retreated back into their money, or their vast carelessness... and let other people clean up the mess.' America has not been venal in the Arab world. But is has been careless." *Inside Islam: The Faith, The People, and the Conflicts of the World's Fastest-Growing Religion*. Editors: John Miller and Aaron Kenedi. Marlowe & Company: New York, 2002. *Why They Hate Us*. Fareed Zakaria, p. 235-260, p. 253-254.

¹⁹ The May/June 2003 edition of *Foreign Policy* includes an article by Minxin Pei titled *The Paradoxes of American Nationalism*. Pei writes, "Any examination of the deeper sources of Anti-Americanism should start with an introspective look at American nationalism. But in the United States, this exercise, which hints at serious flaws in the nation's character, generates little enthusiasm... Americans not only take enormous pride in their values but also regard them as universally applicable. According to the Pew Global Attitudes survey, 79 percent agreed that 'It's good that American ideas and customs are spreading around the world'; 70 percent said they 'like American ideas about democracy.' These views, however, are not widely shared, even in Western Europe, another bastion of liberalism and democracy. Pew found that, among the Western European countries surveyed, less than 40 percent endorse the spread of American ideas and customs, and less than 50 percent like American ideas about demoncray."

²⁰ The common evangelical belief that democrats are "bad" and republicans are "good" is unintelligent and naive. Each party is diverse in their moral composition and, on a whole, each needs the other to balance their respective agendas. I'm guessing that most people reading this essay are republicans and may disagree with the preceding sentences. In his book, *Reefer*

*protecting the poor*²¹, Blomberg and Keller both note that recent social and political solutions have not succeed²². Ultimately, our loyalty and hope lies with neither party, nor any government body. Keller writes,

“Francis Shaeffer said Christians may be at times, ‘cobelligerents’ with the Left of Right, but never allies. ‘If there is social injustice, say there is social injustice. If we need order, say we need order...But do not align yourself as though you are in either of these camps: You are an ally of neither. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is different from either – totally different.’

The ideology of the Left believes big government and social reform will solve social ills, while the Right believes big business and economic growth will do it. The Left expects a citizen to be held legally accountable for the use of his wealth, but totally autonomous in other areas, such as sexual morality. The Right expects a citizen to be held legally accountable in areas of personal morality, but totally autonomous in the use of wealth^[23]. The North American ‘idol’ – radical individualism – lies beneath

Madness, Eric Scholsser provides some food for thought by providing some examples of the republican party’s tendency toward simplistic and double-standard policies: Gary Martin was arrested in 1997 for possessing 4 ounces of pot. Twenty-years earlier Martin had been severely beaten during a robbery and consequently suffered permanent brain damage which caused a series of strokes that ultimately lead to the amputation of his left leg. Martin smoked pot to relieve the “phantom pain” from his amputated leg. Scholsser comments,

“Those who suffer most from the war on marijuana tend to be poor or working-class people. Unlike members of the upper middle-class, they cannot avoid prison by hiring costly attorneys or enrolling in private drug treatment programs before trial. They are often devastated by the loss of state or federal benefits that can follow a marijuana arrest... After being arrested [Martin] was evicted from his apartment at a special housing complex for the elderly and disabled. None of the doctors or nurses treating Martin were warned that he might be evicted. They would have lobbied the authorities on his behalf. ‘Kicking this guy out of his apartment for pot,’ said Tom Condon, a reporter for the *Hartford Courant*, ‘was just pathetic.’”

Schlosser compares Martin’s case with three other marijuana possession arrests in which the three culprits were sons of prominent republicans, all of whom advocated severe prison terms for drug possession: John Baker, son of future Secretary of State James Baker; Danny Burton, son of Congressman Dan Burton; and Congressman Randy Cunningham’s son were arrested in separate and unrelated incidences for possessing and selling between a quarter of an ounce and 400 pounds of pot. Each son received only a fraction of their mandatory sentences (p. 51-52). Corruption exists on both sides of the political divide.

²¹ Read *Why We Must Feed the Hands That Could Bite Us* by Jared Diamond (www.washingtonpost.com) for an interesting argument concerning the benefit of increasing foreign aid.

²² “In both North America and Western Europe, three economic impasses suggest the failure of all major social and political proposals or systems to date. First, poverty is increasing, with average income levels falling, gaps between the rich and poor widening, and personal and national indebtedness, rising, all despite significant increase in per capita production. Second, notwithstanding the efforts of various environmental groups, including some who gain notoriety because of their idiosyncratic protests or connection of ecological issues with ‘earth-worship’, all of the following problems have grown worse: the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, acid rain, the loss of biodiversity and farmable land, the amount of toxic chemical waste, deforestation, pollution of the sea, depletion of available energy resources and the overall deterioration of human health. Third, again irrespective of the major political systems and despite temporary local reversals, the number of unemployed people, particularly in Europe, continues to skyrocket.” Blomberg p. 18.

²³ Schlosser begins the conclusion to his book with the following two paragraphs:

“The chief business of the American people is business,’ President Calvin Coolidge once said. The quote succinctly expressed his worldview. Coolidge believed that factories were temples where workers must worship, that small government was always the best government, that corporations should remain unfettered by regulation, that taxes should always be low. His presidency lasted from 1923 until 1929, a period of alcohol prohibition, rapid economic growth, and middle-class prosperity. It was an era in which free market values reigned supreme. The Great Depression left Coolidge’s reputation in tatters. He became a figure of ridicule, his policies abandoned by the New Deal, his outlook derided as narrow, conformist, simplistic, and cold. ‘How

both ideologies. A Christian sees either 'solution' as fundamentally humanistic and simplistic.

The cause of our worsening social problems are far more complex than either the secularist of the Right or Left understand. We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with powers and principalities!...There is great social injustice – radical prejudice, greed, avarice – by those with the greatest wealth in the country (and sadly, within the evangelical church itself). At the same time, there is a general breakdown of order – of the family and the morals of the nation. There is more premarital sex (and thus there are more unwed mothers), more divorce, child neglect and abuse, more crime. Neither a simple redistribution of wealth nor simple economic growth and prosperity can mend broken families; nor can they turn low-skilled mothers into engineers or technicians.

Only the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, and the millions of 'mini-churches' (Christian homes) throughout the country can attack the roots of social problems. Only the church can minister to the whole person. Only the gospel understands that sin has ruined us both individually and socially. We cannot be

can they tell?' Dorothy Parker said, after being informed of Coolidge's death. He was widely remembered as one of America's worst presidents – until January of 1981. That month a portrait of Thomas Jefferson was removed from the Cabinet Room at the White House and replaced by a portrait of Calvin Coolidge. The newly elected president, Ronald Reagan, considered him a personal hero, and ever since, the number of Coolidge fans has grown.

"The business philosophy espoused by Coolidge and revived by Reagan has the marketplace at its core. In such a scheme, any constraints placed upon businessmen are denounced as limitations of freedom. Antitrust laws, worker safety laws, environmental laws, and minimum-wage laws are considered impediments to the necessary workings of the market. The stand in the way of efficiency. They pose a fundamental threat to society --and yet concentrated economic power does not. 'There is nothing written in the sky,' declared William Baxter, head of the Justice Department's Antitrust Division during the Reagan years, 'that says the world would not be a perfectly satisfactory place if there were only a hundred companies.' So long as these multinationals competed with each other, Baxter thought that having all economic activity controlled by a hundred chief executives shouldn't be a problem. This unwillingness to limit corporate behavior on moral grounds has been accompanied, however, by a government crusade to judge, condemn, and punish individuals for their alleged moral failings. The freedom to buy and sell goes only so far. Certain things cannot be sold because they are immoral, while other things – such as the exploitation of illegal immigrants, their poverty and poor health – hardly raise a moral qualm." (p. 213-214.)

The actions of clean-cut political conservatives can be as deviant as any less impressively dressed criminal -- and much more devastating. The infamous Enron Corporation (a former clearinghouse for who's who among republicans) created nearly 900 overseas subsidiaries for the purpose of tax evasion. Between the years 1996-2000 Enron did not pay income tax during four of those years but yet collect almost \$400 million in tax refunds. It estimated that the illegal tax evasive practices of some of America's most notable companies result in \$4 billion dollars of lost tax revenues per year. While keeping that \$4 billion in mind, consider Schlosser's following thoughts on the plight of immigrant workers, "The passage and enforcement of strict labor laws could do more to solve the problems caused by illegal immigration than any crackdown on the border between Mexico and the United States. Adjusted for inflation, the value of the U.S. minimum wage has declined by about 37 percent since 1968. A significant increase in the minimum wage, combined with tough penalties for companies that violate labor laws, would greatly improve the lives of the poorest Americans. Shifting the punishment from undocumented workers to their employers is bound to have a noticeable effect. The former have every incentive to break the law; the latter have much more to lose. *The legal status of workers is not of central importance – wages and working conditions are* (emphasis mine). If the current abuse of illegal immigrants is allowed to continue, the United States soon won't have to import a foreign peasantry. We will have created out own. 'No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in the country,' President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in 1933, after the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act. 'By living wages I mean more than a subsistence level – I mean the wages of a decent living.'" (p. 217-218). Food for thought for republicans like me!

viewed individualistically (as capitalist do) or collectivistically (as the Communists do) but as related to God. Only Christians, armed with the Word and Spirit, planning and working to spread the kingdom and righteousness of Christ, can transform a nation as well as a neighborhood as well as a broken heart²⁴.”

Lastly, consider the implications of the inverted nature of the Kingdom – it was the sinner who would not lift his eyes toward heaven who was righteous²⁵. The American church does a poor job reflecting the reversed make up of the kingdom. We tend to mirror society in that, for the most part, power and prestige belong to the wealthy and favored. We prefer to emulate, accommodate and attract illusionary “winners” rather than embracing our identities as beloved “losers” and ministering to fellow losers²⁶. By doing so we create a space of false pretenses rather than broken honesty. A soul cannot live long in such a place before it will begin to search elsewhere for relief and comfort. We need to communicate a different message -- one that welcomes joy with weakness. I know of a church that prints this beautiful summons on the cover of every bulletin:

*To all who are spiritually weary and seek rest;
to all who mourn and long for comfort; to all who struggle and desire hope;
to all who sin and need a Savior; to all who are strangers and yearn for fellowship;
to all who hunger and thirst after righteousness; and to whoever will come;
this church opens wide her doors and offers welcome in
the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.*

Although the above summons is indeed lovely, like all things it is meant to be spoken and practiced with wisdom and love, i.e., aid must not be given if it becomes a means of enabling destructive behavior. Making such a distinction is by no means synonymous with dividing the poor and criminals²⁷ into “deserving” and “undeserving” categories. None of us are deserving²⁸. Although the act withholding aid must be practiced, we must resist the urge to approach the poor with skeptical eyes. Denying aid is done for the same reasons as ex-communication – that the guilty may repent. It’s always grounded in love. Miroslav Volf

²⁴ Keller p. 26.

²⁵ Luke 18:11-14.

¹⁶⁹ “The Church is, unfortunately, little different from society in its perspectives. If society is enthralled with evil and power, in a sense, the Church is as well. We don’t like to hear the stories of the wounded. We recoil from dealing with wounded hearts, their struggles and questions. **We want to deal with power** (emphasis mine). And until we, as a church, get back to healing and ministering to the wounded, we are not a church...”

“The story of Cain and Abel invites us to identify with the slain innocent brother. Although it seems obvious that we should so, our deep proclivities are to do otherwise. Victims are always, by definitions almost, weak losers; we prefer powerful winners. Moreover, criminals are shrouded in what has been called ‘the prestige of evil’ (Laurence Selenick), whereas victims are burdened by the ‘dullness’ of innocence. Hence a pervasive cultural obsession with criminals, and a rather quick forgetfulness of victims and their family members.” Miroslav Volf. *Original Crime, Primal Care. God and the Victim: Theological Reflections of Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness*. Edited by Lisa Barnes Lampman. 1999. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. p. 33.

²⁷ “The story of Cain and Abel... underscores the imperative that we not demonize the perpetrator. True, justice must be pursued, and the punishment of the criminals must be appropriate. But even at their worst, criminals remain human beings and, therefore, ‘neighbors’ for whom we must care.” Volf p. 33-34.

²⁸ “We never forget that there is an evil worse than the original crime [Abel’s murder]. It consists of self-centered slothfulness of the mind, heart, and will that will not recognize one’s own selfishness, not pursue justice for the innocent, and not extend grace to the guilty.” Volf p. 35.

reminds us that, “God’s grace has primacy over God’s justice. God’s grace is not an erratic exception to his justice; rather, God’s justice is an inalienable dimension of His grace²⁹.”

Keller rightly asks “Is it possible, then for middle-class Americans to undertake the ministry of mercy without radically altering our lifestyles?³⁰” I believe the answer is no. We cannot both sacrifice for the sake of others and keep spending like we have been without perpetuating our materialism and burying ourselves in insurmountable debt. Most of us cannot help pay rent for a single mother as well as buy a new summer wardrobe. But radically altering our lifestyles does not mean that our goal is to change our class status. It is not necessary for a person to abandon their social class before they can authentically minister to those of a lower social class. Throughout the ages most of the people God has used, including the twelve disciples, to achieve great change have belonged to the middle-class³¹. Our goal should not be class change but rather class reform, namely reforming our conspicuous consumption and more deliberately using our status to benefit others in need³². “It is important for middle class Christians...to realize that they do not need to divest themselves of their middle classness to show solidarity with those in marginal situations. It is better for them to be self-critical with respect to their class but then turn any advantages this gives them to the benefit of those they are seeking to assist³³.” Changing the way we dress and buy clothes is just one simple and immediate way of curbing our consumption³⁴. Men, women and teens need to reconsider the way they shop. It’s a constant temptation for me to buy new clothes despite the realization that I repeatedly wear the same small number of clothing items among the many clothes in my closet. My occupation allows me to wear khaki’s and nearly any collared shirt. I realize that many people have occupations that require a more comprehensive wardrobe but no matter what your occupation there are still ways to dress appropriately while still exercising simplicity/modesty. Blomberg notes,

“In 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul wants ‘women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.’ This ‘dress code’ is a sign that the wealthy women at Ephesus were the primary offenders addressed. They alone would have been able to afford the elaborate hair-dos described. In fact, the Greek text reads more literally, ‘not with braided hair *and* gold or pearls...’ There was nothing wrong with braided hair as such, but the ornate coiffure in which jewels were interwoven into braids, as one way of holding a woman’s hair together, involved hours of attention to one’s external appearance and was often accompanied by lavish, costly attire... **So there is a timeless principle, even in these seemingly very occasional remarks, that women (and presumably men too (emphasis mine)) should not preoccupy**

²⁹ Volf p. 33.

³⁰ Keller p. 68.

³¹ See *The Middle Class and Urban Mission: Part 1 of 2* by Robert Banks. www.urbana.org.

³² *The Middle Class and Urban Mission: Part 2 of 2* by Robert Banks. www.urbana.org.

For a more detailed study concerning Christian relations between different classes see *Wealth and Beneficence in the Pastoral Epistles: A “Bourgeois” Form of Early Christianity?* By Reggie M. Kidd. SBLDS 122. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990.

³³ Banks, part 2 of 2.

³⁴ How much do Americans spend annually on clothing? In 1997 the average American household spent \$1,729.06 on apparel. The percentage distribution of which was: 33.2 women’s apparel; 18.7 men’s apparel; 11.0 children’s apparel; 9.1 women’s shoes; 8.2 jewelry; 5.8 men’s shoes.

themselves with overly expensive or fancy dress, jewellery [sic] and the like. One wonders how many Christian worshippers today violate Paul's principle every Sunday (emphasis mine)³⁵."

In his book, *Desiring God*, John Piper uses Ralph Winter's illustration of the British ship The Queen Mary as a means of orientating us towards living simpler for the sake of God and neighbor. During the pre-WWII years The Queen Mary was a luxury liner. It had the space and means to provide 3000 guests with the finest ocean-going living in the world. When the war began the 300 yard long luxury vessel was converted into a troop transport, being completely stripped of its leather couches and dining halls that had showcased 15 piece china dining placements. After it had been remodeled for its wartime purpose The Queen Mary was able to accommodate 15,000 troops. Bunks were stacked eight high and metal trays replaced the fine china. Luxury had to be sacrificed for the purpose of protecting and liberating the powerless. During its war years I am sure the halls of The Queen Mary heard more complaints but those who had benefited from its sacrifice also spoke it of with greater gratitude. As we simplify our lives for the sake of King and Kingdom I believe we will also feel the frustration of lost luxury but the joy of others, and our own joy, will increase³⁶.

So in repentance we ask the same question that the crowd asked John the Baptist in Luke 3: **What should we do then?** We must pray that we come to recognize the seriousness with which God considers this theme. "It is arguable that materialism is the single biggest competitor with authentic Christianity for the hearts and souls of millions in our world today, including many in the visible church³⁷." We must realize that privilege and obligation of MJM begins with the family. This helps to empower the individual as well as keeping us from being overwhelmed. Don't try to save the world. Choose people and people-groups that interest you and stick with them. Taking on too much will discourage you. As the baby-boomer generation continues to age, Christian families have an opportunity to demonstrate the love of God by not neglecting or despising their older members by dumping them into nursing homes³⁸. We should be quick to offer our siblings and relatives help in their time of need. The next circle of obligation is the church. Considering the wealth of the American church there should be no poverty among us or any church member across the globe. Last, we must realize that the ministries of word and deed are inseparably part of the one gospel of Christ. One is not a means to the other. Balance between the ministry of word and deed is easily achieved by pursuing both extremes.

³⁵ Blomberg, p. 207.

³⁶ The path to joy may be longer than we would like. While a co-worker and I recently discussed the theme of MJM we both began to realize that seriously heeding the call for MJM will cause more than just frustration but rather the terrifying possibility of utter lifestyle alteration. In a sense it will ruin our lives; we will no longer be able to pursue the American dream without the sting of conviction. Each person must wrestle with God concerning how they use their divinely bestowed talents while remembering that we will all stand before the judgement throne of Christ. Surely in that moment we will be thankful for any act of mercy, no matter how small, we contributed to.

³⁷ Blomberg p. 132.

³⁸ Only two generations ago most elderly parents who required continual assistance lived in the homes of their children. I believe it would be a great witness if the church would again exhibit this type of mercy. This practice alone could significantly reduce the incredible stress that baby-boomers feel toward their post-retirement financial condition. Through out history, and still in a majority of the world today, the elderly have been protected, honored and sustained by their children. I've learned that in the past the elderly would stay with each of their children for a one month period. This provided them with a change of scenery and gave their children the opportunity to rest between caretaking responsibilities.

In closing, Blomberg notes,

“The key to evaluating any individual church or nation in terms of its use of material possessions (personally, collectively or institutionally) is how well it takes care of the poor and powerless in its midst, that is, its cultural equivalents to the fatherless, widow and alien. This theme pervades the Law, the historical books, wisdom and poetry, and the prophetic literature. **People always take priority over prosperity. Those in positions of power have no increased privilege, only increased responsibility. The New Testament suggests that governments should promote justice, but it primarily emphasizes the responsibility of the individual and the church** (emphasis mine)³⁹.”

The Bible does not contain a detailed list of acceptable items to own, vocations to practice, or what percentage of our income we should give away, although C.S. Lewis can teach us when he advises that the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare; our charities should pinch and hamper us. Our standard of living, our whole lives, must be informed by love. The opposite of love is evil and evil’s preferred task in this age is to destroy the closest representation of God – his image; male and female. **We must each reform our life according to our awareness of how it contributes to the dehumanization of others.**

An Illustration

In the spirit of the parable of the Good Samaritan, I’ve chosen as an exemplar example of MJM a person who many Presbyterians, including myself, trivialize – Dr. Bruce Wilkerson of *The Prayer of Jabez* fame. After resigning in 2001 from the very successful Walk Thru the Bible ministry, which Dr. Wilkerson started 20 years ago, his plans were to bring *The Prayer of Jabez* phenomenon to Hollywood but a visit to Africa changed all that. Instead he and his wife and daughter have decided to join his son and daughter in-law eight months of the year by living near them in Bryanston, South Africa. Bruce plans to use the other four months of the year to return to American to mobilize support for his new African ministry, Global Vision Resources⁴⁰. This is not to say that serving in Africa is the highest good and goal of mercy and justice, but rather Bruce and his family had soft hearts and willing spirits to sacrifice comfort, and most likely huge financial gain, in order to serve others in the name of Jesus the risen Christ. We, too, need to pray for soft hearts. We must start associating ourselves with those in need to the extent that we begin to feel the burden of their condition. We must feel the insanity of the homeless who cannot get a job because they do not have a home but who are unable to buy a home because they do not have job; the inconvenience of not having private transportation; the pain of hunger; the chill of a room without heat; the feeling of intimidation that accompanies the alien nearly every hour of the day; the loneliness of a prisoner or widow; the distress of not being able to afford prescriptions or healthcare; the boredom and frustration that millions of people feel as they perform menial jobs because they cannot afford an education; the helplessness of an abused spouse who feels that she does not have the financial means or family and church support to leave; the futility of a single mother whose paycheck is barely enough to pay for her daycare expenses; the anxiety of a person with depression as they are discharged from the hospital knowing that they are too ill to work

³⁹ Blomberg p. 84.

⁴⁰ World magazine. *Africa the Old-Fashioned Way*. By Mindy Belz. P. 28. Dec. 7, 2002.

and too fearful to approach a church full of “normal” people to ask for help. **We must go to those who we are tempted to abandon to their fate.** The rich are not called to trade places with the poor. They are called to share and remedy their afflictions. *Lord, forgive and help us.*

Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let Justice roll like a river,

righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23-24)

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy. (Matt. 5:7)

Authors Note: I recognize the irony of writing a doctrinal essay about MJM when all the while I've been exhorting us to move away from teaching to action. *Lord, by your grace may we all be doers of your word, not just hearers.* This essay was not meant to be a how-to guide. I have no experience organizing MJM. I recommend [Keller's book](#) for advice concerning that matter.

Appendix A

Creed by Rich Mullins.

Album title: *Songs: Rich Mullins*

See [web search](#) for lyrics—the editors at thirdmill.org didn't want to get ASCAP angry!

Appendix B

PC(USA): **A Brief Statement of Faith** (not including the two questionable clauses) taken from <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnet/brief.html>

In life and death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The love of God,

And the communion of the Holy Spirit,

we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,

whom alone we worship and serve.

We trust in Jesus Christ,

Fully human, fully God.

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:

preaching good news to the poor

And release to the captive,

teaching by word and deed

And blessing the children,
healing the sick
And binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffered the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide in others and Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the plant entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers

in the one body of Christ, the church.
The same Spirit
 who inspired the prophets and apostles
 rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
 engages us through the Word proclaimed,
 claims us in the waters of baptism,
 feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
 and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.
In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
 to pray without ceasing,
 to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
 to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
 to hear the voices of people long silenced,
 and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
 and to live holy and joyful lives,
 each as we watch for God's new heaven and earth,
 praying, Come, Lord Jesus!

With believers in every time and place,
 we rejoice that nothing in life and death
 can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Appendix C

Debt Elimination: Pro and Con. *Biography Magazine*, October 2002, p. 58.

Bono's [of the band U2] favorite cause is debt elimination: the complete "forgiveness" of debt for impoverished nations. Is it a good idea? That depends on whom you ask?

These debts "are literally being paid by the poorest children in the world to the richest institutions in the world," says Tim Atwater, a spokesperson for the Jubilee USA network, which was founded in 1997 (as Jubilee 2000/USA), with a mission to wipe out debt in developing nations. His organization points out that in Africa (where 18 of the world's 22 poorest countries are located) four times as much money is spent on debt repayment as on health care. One example: between \$7.5 and \$15 billion is needed annually there to combat HIV/AIDS. Yet, Africa pays out \$13.5 billion in debt service each year, leaving little to fight the disease, which is devastating that continent.

According to Jubilee USA, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – the two main international financial institutions involved with Third-World countries – should be

held accountable for the debts that they have helped create through what critics all a consistent pattern of poor economic advice and unworkable economic conditions. They estimate that the two agencies have enough money in reserves and profits from loan re-flows to cancel 100% of the debt of the poorest countries in the world without additional taxpayer appropriations.

Not so fast, say officials from the IMF and the World Bank, which places the total debt of low-income countries at close to \$460 billion. According to a 1999 joint report, "Many factors contribute to poverty in developing countries...debt reduction should be set in context. It is an important part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce poverty, but is not a panacea."

These institutions claim to support limited debt reduction, but with strings attached. They want to make sure that countries receiving debt relief use newly available monies to support health, education, and sound economic growth programs – and not, for instance, the buildup of arms.

The also argue that borrowing money is a legitimate way to finance growth, pointing out that a large majority of the 150 countries that have borrowed to finance their development over the years have paid back their loans, and become active participants in the global economy. Among IMF and World Bank concerns: that total debt relief could undermine the confidence of major lenders, which – along with a cutoff of interest payments – would dry up cash flow to countries that need loans in the future.

Perhaps the only thing that's completely clear about this important issue is just how complicated it is. The following Web sites offer more details, plus links to additional pages:

Jubilee 2000/USA: www.j2000usa.org

The World Bank: www.worldbank.org

The International Monetary Fund: www.imf.org

The World Council of Churches: www.wcc-coe.org

The White House: www.whitehouse.gov