

TRANSFORMATION: THE SHARING MODEL

STUDY 14: ELIMINATING POVERTY

Charity in the Church

From Acts to Revelation the key New Testament texts which speak of sharing are:

Acts 2:42-47	1 Cor. 16:1-4	1 Tim. 6:6-10
Acts 4:32-37	2 Cor. 8:1	Philemon 1:15-18
Acts 6:1-7	2 Cor. 9:5	Heb. 10:34
Acts 11:29-30	2 Cor. 9:6-15	James 2:14-17
Rom. 12:10	Gal. 6:9-9	James 5:1-6
Rom. 13:30	Eph. 6:5-9	1 Pet. 2:18-20
Rom. 15:26-27	Phil. 4:10-20	1 Pet. 5:2-4
1 Cor. 4:8-13	1 Thes. 2:9	1 John 3:16-18
1 Cor. 9:4-14	1 Tim. 5:1-10	1 John 4:19-21
1 Cor. 10:24-26	1 Tim. 5:16	3 Jon 1:5-8

This seems a surprisingly long list. The concern of John, Peter, Paul and the early Christians to demonstrate their faith in acts of mercy is a central concern, not a peripheral interest of the New Testament. Read the above passages and put them in the column below which best represents their primary message.

Don't accumulate wealth	Support yourself	Care for widows and the hungry	Take up offerings for poor Christians	Humanize roles in society	Sell and distribute your possessions
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Write out two key verses in each category.

Reflections on Sharing

Many scholars have made perceptive comments about sharing in the scriptures. Orlando Costas summarizes the New Testament position.

The stress on poverty in the life and ministry of Jesus coincides with the social teaching of the Old Testament, where the poor occupy a privileged place, and with the poverty programme of the early church (e.g. the community of good depicted in the early chapters of Acts; with the special attention given to widows; with the concern for the poor of Jerusalem reflected in Paul's collection; the insistence on social equality – on a relation of mutual love and acceptance – in the gathered community of faith and in the personal relationship between believers; and with James' stern denunciation for the oppression of the poor by the rich in the church). Little wonder that the Gospel writers take such care to bring out special anecdotes and parables underlying the special relationship between the good news of the Kingdom and the poor of the earth. Luke in fact goes as far as stating that they are the heirs of the Kingdom: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God' (Lk. 6:21)

(1979, p. 77)

Maria Neal presents the claims of the needy:

In Deuteronomy 24:10, in a discussion of loans, there is a clear explanation that whatever a person pledges for a loan is to be returned before sundown if the person needs it for the night. The example used is that of a poor person's cloak. What is made clear is that no right to ownership supersedes human need. Because the hungry soldiers were allowed to eat the loaves reserved for temple worship, and the apostles the corn in a private cornfield on the Sabbath, we know clearly that no matter who possess it, it belongs to hungry people. Relinquishing one's claim to what others need is clearly a Gospel mandate. The claim is not supposed to be relinquished foolishly, as some have argued, in such a way that Christianity becomes an impossible ideal. The obligation is one of justice, to be honored when the society fails to provide for its members and for sojourners. The point is that the resources of society belong to the people. (1977, p. 104)

Thomas Hanks describes the perspective of James:

James places himself firmly in the ranks of the prophets who viewed oppression as the basic reason for poverty (James 2:1-7, 5:1-6). Never does he shift the blame to the poor themselves, because of racial inferiority, laziness, vices, or other reasons. The rich bear the basic guilt because they exploit and oppress. 'Look: the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord all-powerful' (5:5)

The church, the brotherhood of the poor, is viewed as God's initial response to the problem of poverty. Is it a scandal if the church does not anticipate the culmination of the Kingdom by caring for the needs of its neediest members: 'If a brother or sister is ill clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to him, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled, " without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?' (2:15-16)

Furthermore it is not merely the genuineness of individual faith, but the church's very authenticity that is at stake in this activity. It befits the church to respond to requests, but more importantly, to take the initiative in searching out needy persons. God judges the church not for its orthodoxy, but for its orthopraxy: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their oppression (thlipsis) and to keep oneself unstained for the world' (1:27)

We should recall that in the Old Testament the orphans and widows (along with foreigners or immigrants) became the prototypes of the oppressed class. Similarly, the church's authenticity depends on its commitment to the oppressed.

God's final response in the face of oppression and its resulting poverty is the

Lord's return. (1983, p 135)

In small groups take turns sharing with others the main points each of these writers is making.

Rich and Poor Today

The physical quality of life differs markedly between the rich and the poor, urban and rural, the developed and underdeveloped. A comparison of countries indicates those disparities (Figure 14:1).

What do you think are the historic and contemporary reasons for South Asia's very low GNP? What other indicators of physical quality of life could be added?

The North-South Divide

The "Global 2000" report describes the difference between the rich and poor in the world today.

We have today about two-thirds of mankind living – if it can be called living – on less than 30 cents a day. We have today a situation where there are about one billion illiterate people around the world, although the world has both the means and technology to spread education. We have nearly 70 percent of the children in the Third World suffering from malnutrition, although the world has the resources to feed them. We have mal-distribution of the world's resources on a scale where the industrialized countries are consuming about twenty times more of the resources per capita than the poor countries. We have a situation where in the Third World millions of people toil under a brilliant sun from morning till dusk for miserable rewards and premature death without ever discovering the reasons why. For the past four centuries countries of the South (Third World) have experienced economic underdevelopment and political subservience while the North (First World) has been able to expropriate any economic surplus and maintain its relative economic and political ascendancy. Today two international systems exist and the disparities between them are growing. One is the world of the rich, the other the world of the poor.

One world is literate, the other largely illiterate; one industrial and urban the other predominantly agrarian and rural; one consumption oriented the other striving for survival. In the rich world, there is concern about the