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God vs. Inequality

Wealth, Poverty and the Bible



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God vs Wealth

"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you."

James 5:1

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Chapter 1: God vs Wealth



It's Wrong to be Rich

I've heard countless pastors, preachers and priests who say that there is no problem with being rich, as long as you don't worship your money you can be as wealthy as you want. I'm having some serious trouble with this teaching. Why on earth did Jesus say "woe to you who are rich" if there are no problems with being rich? "Woe" is not a positive word, it's a warning.

James, the brother of Jesus, is also warning rich people:

"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you.

Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and selfindulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. (Jam 5:16)

If there's something James is not saying, it's "There's no problem with being rich". He is not talking to the rich in a certain city but to all rich Christians, since his letter lack a certain adress.

And his message is that need to get rid of their wealth to escape coming misery.

The sin that the rich have committed is according to James not that their wealth has hindered their relation with God in some way or has become an idol. These are of course bad things, but even if their faith in God remains strong, the simple fact that they own wealth is what James criticize: “You have hoarded wealth in the last days... You have lived on earth in luxury and selfindulgence... You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter...” Why is this? Well, I believe verse 6 is a key to that: “You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.”

”You have lived on earth in luxury and selfindulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.”

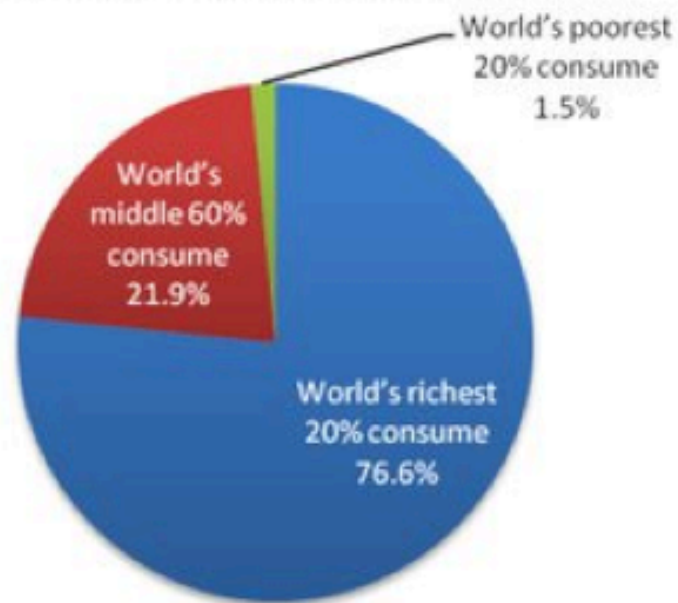
According to the UN Millennium Campaign, 50 000 people die every day because of poverty. That’s 18 million in a year. It’s a triple holocaust. Rich people who got money to help the poor but instead buy unnecessary stuff are accomplices of their suffering and death. i John 3:17 says “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” If we are rich, we have to give our resources away so that we stop being rich. If we keep our money for ourselves, people suffer and die.

Some misinterpret me when I preach this. I’ve met people who say “But if we quit our jobs and stop earning money, we have nothing to give!” I haven’t argued that we should quit our jobs. Ephesians 4:28 says that we “must work, doing something useful with [our] own hands, that [we] may have something to share with those in need.” Earning money is not wrong, keeping more money than you need is. Earning a lot of money is a temptation, but not necessarily sinful, as long as they are earned through a righteous and sustainable business.

Another common misconception is that I preach that we all should be poor. But not being rich doesn’t automatically mean being poor. There’s a prayer in Proverbs 30:8 which says: “give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.”

This midlevel between wealth and poverty is what we should strive for, for all people. God doesn’t want some people to live in luxury while others are going hungry, He wants equality.

Share of world's private consumption, 2005



Source: World Bank Development Indicators 2008

"There were no needy person among them, since there were no rich either.

Equality

It's not controversial to say that we should give money to the poor. The question is how much we should give. Some Christians are arguing that we should give tithe, one tenth of our income. But we can't limit our giving to that, keeping nine tenths of our income no matter if we need it or not. The Old Testament tithe was not a maximum amount but a minimum. Deutoronomy describes how we should act towards the poor even after we've given tithe: if we are able to help them but are not doint it, they may call to the Lord, and we will be guilty of sin.

If the rich only give tithe, they are still rich, and the poor are still poor. We need equality. The richest 20% of the world's population consume 80% of the world's resources. The poorest 20% consume 2% of the resources. The latter group suffer of hunger, lack of clean water and diseases, and they don't live very long. At the same time, the rich spend billions on entertainment, luxury and other unnecessary stuff. This is totally unjust and needs to be changed.

There are two ways to establish global equality in order to solve this problem. The first one is to create economic growth for the poor until they are as rich as the rich are today. This, however, is impossible because of the environment. If everyone lived as an average American, we would need five earth globes. The second solution is that the rich get poorer and distribute a lot of their money to the poor. This is what the Bible talks about.

In Luke 3:11, John the Baptist says that the fruit of repentance is that the one who has two tunics gives one to the poor. In 2 Cor 8:13-15 Paul states that the goal of giving money to the poor is equality. He refers to Exodus 16 where we read that the manna through God's supernatural intervention was equally distributed to the Israelites. And last but not least, the first church, which all other churches come from and whose leadership was the apostles, practiced economic equality (Acts 4:32-35). There were no needy person among them, since there were no rich either.

We live in an age where it is popular to talk about how all people have equal value, which is fortunate since this is a Biblical idea (Gen 1:27, Gal 3:28). For some reason though, it is not implemented in economics. When it comes to politics, we say that every citizen has one vote each in a democracy because all people have an equal value and elections should be fair and just. But when it comes to economics, many argue that we must have inequality because rich people can handle money smarter than poor people, and so everyone benefits from the super rich.

People used to defend dictatorship in the same way. The dictator is a smarter leader than ordinary laymen, and so everyone benefits from not having a democracy. Of course, this is a false statement. Everyone benefits from democracy, and likewise everyone benefits from economic equality. If we really think that all people have an equal value, we cannot tolerate that 20 % of the world's population consume 80 % of its resources. Inequality is unfair, unbiblical and must be fought against.



”Surprisingly many are arguing that while we should live and believe like the apostles and the early church in other areas, the economics of Jerusalem is not normative for us.”

Sharing Everything

I wear a red cross around my neck. I got it when I visited a church called Jesus Army in the UK a couple of years ago. Many people in this church practice community of goods. They eradicate the gap between rich and poor simply through sharing all they have together in community houses called New Creation Christian Community.

This is of course very biblical. We read about the first church in Jerusalem which was led by the apostles themselves: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” (Acts 2:44-45). This should not be surprising, they simply obeyed the commands of Jesus. He clearly told all His disciples in Luke 12:33 to sell what they have and give to the poor.

It is thus misleading to think that this command was just given to one certain rich man in Matthew 19:16-22. I have heard countless rich Christians arguing that Jesus told him to sell what he had just because

his money was a stumbling block to his relation with God, and thus rich Christians with a good relationship with God can ignore this command and continue to be rich. But the gospels doesn't say that he had to sell his stuff because they affected his relationship with the Lord, the only reason Jesus gives is that the poor will get money – something they need no matter how our spiritual situation looks like. And again, He did say the same thing to all His disciples, and they all obeyed it.

But were the believers in Jerusalem really obliged to do this, or could the wealthy skip it and keep their money if they like to? Many assume this is what Peter is saying when he tells Ananias, who pretended to give all the money for his sold house although he had hidden parts of it for himself, “Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?” (Acts 5:4). However, this is just a statement concerning Ananias' responsibility for his action. It doesn't say that if he had continued to be rich while other were starving, God and the church wouldn't care.

No, practicing economic equality through the sharing of goods was seen as a natural part of the Christian life in the church of Jerusalem, that everyone participated in. The question then is if the Jerusalem church should be seen as normative for our churches today. The arguments are many: it was the first and original church, all other churches come from it, it was the only church during this time (which implies that when Luke says that “all believers” had everything in common, he really means all believers) and it was led by the apostles, whose teaching and scriptures are the sources of our faith.

Still, surprisingly many are arguing that while we should live and believe like the apostles and the early church in other areas, the economics of Jerusalem is not normative for us. This idea is especially confusing in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, to which I belong, since the Jerusalem church with its experience on Pentecost is traditionally the primary role model church for us.

The main argument against viewing the economic equality in Jerusalem as normative is that the same practice cannot be found in other New Testament churches. However, this is an argument from silence. There are only two New Testament churches we know of that celebrated communion – Jerusalem and Corinth – does that mean that those were the only ones doing it, and that other churches could skip it even though it was commanded by Jesus?

The thing is that Jerusalem is the only church whose structure and practice is described in the whole New Testament. The rest of Acts doesn't describe how the churches looked like, and the epistles are only touching upon issues that the author finds important in the specific situation – leadership, circumcision, etc. – without doing a systematic description of the recipient church. There are some hints here and there, like in Galatians 6:6, but no clear description of community of goods.

Should we then assume that they didn't practice equality, in spite of Jesus' teaching? Of course not. Rather, we should go to the church fathers and read how they interpreted Scripture and how their churches looked like.



“What deceived many was a blind attachment to their patrimony, and if they were not free and ready to take themselves away, it was because their property held them in chains” – Cyprian, 200-258 AD

Early Christian Teaching on Wealth and Poverty

“Share everything with your brother. Do not say, ‘It is private property.’ If you share what is everlasting, you should be that much more willing to share things which do not last.” –The Didache, c. 90 AD, (Did. 4:8)

“Now then hear me and be at peace among yourselves, have regard one to another, and assist one another, and do not partake of what God has created alone in abundance, but share it with those that are in need. For some men through their much eating bring weakness on the flesh, and injure their flesh: whereas the flesh of those who have nothing to eat are injured by not having sufficient nourishment, and their body is ruined. This absence of community therefore is hurtful to you that have and do not share with them that are in want. Think of the judgment that will come! You then, that have more than enough, seek out them that are hungry!” ... “Take heed therefore; as dwelling in a strange land prepare nothing more for yourself but a competency

which is absolutely sufficient and necessary.” –
The Shepherd of Hermas, c. 110 AD, (Herm.
Vis. 3:9:2-5 and Herm. Sim. 1:6)

“They [Christians] love one another. They do not overlook the widow, and they save the orphan. He who has, ministers ungrudgingly to him who does not have. When they see strangers, they take him under their own roof and rejoice over him as a true brother, for they do not call themselves brothers according to the flesh but according to the soul.” – Aristides, early 2nd century (Apology 15)

“We who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need.” – Justin Martyr, 100-165 AD (1st Apology 14)

“Christians despise all possessions and share them mutually.” – Lucian (pagan author), 2nd century (Peregrinus 13)

“And instead of the tithes which the law commanded, the Lord said to divide everything we have with the poor. And he said to love not only our neighbors but also our enemies, and to be givers and sharers not only with the good but also to be liberal givers toward those who take away our possessions.” –Irenaeus, 130-200 AD (Against Heresies, Book IV, Chapter XIII, paragraph 3)

“Private property is the fruit of iniquity. I know that God has given us the use of goods, but only as far as is necessary; and he has determined that the use shall be common. The use of all things that are found in this world ought to be

common to all men. Only the most manifest iniquity makes one say to another, ‘This belongs to me, that to you.’ Hence the origin of contention among men.” – Clement of Alexandria, 150-215 AD (Paedagogus, 2)

“Let us abandon luxuries, and we shall not regret them. [...] Let us cast away earthly ornaments if we desire heavenly.” (On the Apparel of Women, Book 1, Chapter 13).

“We who share one mind and soul obviously have no misgivings about community of goods.” – Tertullian, 160-225 AD (Apology, 39)

“What deceived many was a blind attachment to their patrimony, and if they were not free and ready to take themselves away, it was because their property held them in chains . . . chains which shackled their courage and choked their faith and hampered their judgment and throttled their souls... And our Lord, the teacher of the good, looking to the future warning us against this, saying: ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ If the rich would do this, riches would not be their ruin; if they stored up their treasure in heaven, they would not have an enemy and a thief within their own household; their heart and thought and care would be in heaven, if their treasure lay in heaven: no man could be overcome by the world if he had nothing in the world to overcome him. He would follow our Lord untrammelled and free as the apostles and many others did at that time, and some have often done since, leaving their parents and possessions behind to bind themselves inseparably to Christ. But how can those who are tethered to their inheritance be fol-

”When they see strangers, they take him under their own roof and rejoice over him as a true brother, for they do not call themselves brothers according to the flesh but according to the soul.”

lowing Christ? And can those who are weighed down by earthly desires be seeking heaven and aspiring to the heights above? They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned: enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not the masters of their money but its slaves. The apostle was pointing to our times and to these very men he said: ‘Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.’ On the other hand, what rewards does not our Lord hold out as He invites us to scorn the property we have! For the small, insignificant losses of this world, what rich compensation He makes!” –Cyprian, 200-258 AD, (The Lapsed 11-12)

“It is absurd and disgraceful for one to live magnificently and luxuriously when so many are hungry...If one who takes the clothing off another is a thief, why give any other name to one who can clothe the naked and refuses to do so?The bread that you store up belongs to the hungry; the cloak that lies in your chest belongs to the naked; the gold that you have hidden in the ground belongs to the poor.” ... “How can I make you realize the misery of the poor? How can I make you understand that your wealth comes from their weeping?” – Basil the Great, 320-379 AD

“All things belong to God, who is our Father and Father of all things. We are all the same family: all of us are brothers and sisters. And among brethren it is best and most equal that all inherit equal portions.” – Gregory of Nyssa, 330-395 AD

“Nature has poured forth all things for the common use of all people. And God has ordained that all things should be produced that there might be food in common for all, and that the earth should be the common possession of all. Nature created common rights, but usurpation has transformed them into private rights...God gave the same earth to be cultivated by all. Since, therefore, His bounty is common, how is it that you have so many fields, and your neighbor not even a clod of earth?” –Ambrose, 340-397 AD

“When you are weary of praying and do not receive, consider how often you have heard a poor man calling, and have not listened to him.” – John Chrysostom, 347-407 AD

“The rich are in possession of the goods of the poor, even if they have acquired them honestly or inherited them legally.”
“Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours but theirs.”

“When you are weary of praying and do not receive, consider how often you have heard a poor man calling, and have not listened to him.”

“The dispersion of property is the cause of greater expenditure and so of poverty. Consider a household with husband and wife and ten children. She does weaving and he goes to the market to make a living; will they need more if they live in a single house or when they live separately? Clearly, when they live separately. If the ten sons each go his own way, they need ten houses, ten tables, ten servants and everything else in proportion... Dispersion regularly leads to waste, bringing together leads to economy.” – John Chrysostom, 347-407 AD

“Seek as much as God has given you, and from that take as much as is necessary; the superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor. Those who possess superfluities, possess the goods of others...Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies. For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms.” – Augustine, 354-430 AD

“Give away these earthly things, and win that which is in heaven. Give that which you must leave, even against your will, that you may not lose things later. Lend your wealth to God, that you may be really rich. Concerning the way in which to lend it, Jesus next teaches us saying: ‘Sell your possessions, and give alms, provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail’ ... Worldly wealth has many foes ... but no one can do damage to the wealth that is laid up above in heaven.” – Cyril of Alexandria, 378-444 AD, (Commentary on Luke, Homily 91)



“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” - Matt 6:21.

Three Heresies

In the first four parts of my God vs Wealth series, I’ve presented why I am convinced that Christians shouldn’t be rich. Now, I will discuss some counter arguments against that thesis.

1. There’s nothing wrong with being rich as long as you value God more than your money

This theory, which I’ve mentioned in some of the previous posts in this blog series, is basically saying that as long as your money doesn’t affect your relationship with God negatively, you can be as rich as you want. The problem is not owning money, the problem is if the money owns you. However, Jesus does not agree with this:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your

treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:19-21).

In other words, it's wrong to argue that you can be rich as long as your money doesn't hinder your relationship with God, because where your treasure is your heart will be also – you cannot have treasures on earth and your heart in Heaven! The word “treasure” is used in James 5 as well where wealth also is criticised. We have to get rid of it to attain full devotion to the Lord.

Furthermore, the poor needs our money independently how we believe that they affect our relationship with God. 200 million people are affected by natural disasters each year, one billion live in extreme poverty. If we have resources to change this, we have to do it.

2. There's nothing wrong with being rich as long as you aren't greedy

This theory is similar to the previous one. It argues that the amount of money is not important, what we should avoid is greed. And poor can be greedy and rich can be generous, according to this theory.

However, I argue that if the rich are truly generous, they won't be rich for so much longer. Generosity shouldn't be measured with what we give but with what we have left. Jesus spoke about this in Mark 12:41-44, when He stated that the poor widow who gave two copper coins gave more than the rich who gave large amounts of money. It's not about how much you give, but how much percentage and how much you have left.


Furthermore, it is problematic to talk about poor greedy people. If you suffer from disease, malnutrition or oppression because of poverty, I wouldn't say that you are greedy if you want to get rid of it. And even if you are greedy and only wants Jacuzzis and PlayStations for yourself, it won't get consequences as long as you are poor. The poor cannot spend thousands on luxuries even if they would want to, but the rich can, and when they do so they neglect the humanitarian needs of the poor.

3. Rich people make investments and manage capital in a way that produces growth and benefits everyone.

This is a common counter argument against equality. The rich are seen as generally wise and smart people who know how to make the best out of the resources they have. This is a popular argument outside the church as well, but among Christians the thesis is surprisingly often backed up by the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. I say surprisingly, because I think it is really strange to believe that this parable has an economic message.

The parable says that a man went away giving portions of his money to his servants. All but one invested the money and gained profit. When their master comes back he rewards those who had gained profit, but he takes the talent from the guy who didn't invest and kick him out “into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30).

Now, if the parable had an economic meaning, that is if the money symbolized money, the message would be that people who don't make pro-



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fit go to hell. Salvation is then not achieved through grace and faith but through business. We could also in the same manner argue that the parable right before this one is telling us that all Christian virgins should have oil when Jesus comes back to enter Heaven.

This is of course ridiculous. Both the parable of the oil and the parable of the talents tells us that we should bear fruit for the Kingdom of God – spreading the Gospel, healing the sick, helping the poor and so on – and not hide our faith. It's not about capitalist investments, it's about spiritual gifts and virtues.

So Matthew 25 cannot be used as an argument for defending inequality. Furthermore, to say that a rich elite should have most of the money because they are smart is very undemocratic. The same argument could be used to defend authoritarian regimes if we apply it to power.

The poor didn't choose inequality. They didn't elect the white men that predominantly own most of the world's wealth. The poor are wise and smart as well. To strive for global equality is the most fair, just and rational thing to do.



The same Bible verse that forbids Old Testament kings to take several wives also tells them not to accumulate wealth.

The Old Testament

“What about king David?” people ask me when we debate whether a Christian should be rich or not. David was a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22) who clearly loved and feared the Lord, and yet he was very rich. Same thing is true for many believers in the Old Testament – kings like Solomon or Hezekiah as well as landlords as Abraham and Job. They believed in God, and still were rich.

However, we must remember that just because you are a believer, all your actions do not necessarily reflect the will of God. The only person in the Bible that we know lived a totally holy life is Jesus Christ. But when it comes to Abraham for example, he had married his sister. Should we use that as an argument for us to do the same?

Likewise, when it comes to David and Solomon, they lived in polygamy. We know however that Scripture condemns polygamy in other places. And interestingly enough, the same Bible verse that forbids Old Testament kings to take several wives also tells them not to accu-

multate wealth. This verse is not so famous, but is a clear debunking of the “what about king David” argument. In Deuteronomy 17, God speaks of the lifestyle of the future king of Israel. Among other things, He says:

He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. (Deut 17:17)

In other words, when David or Solomon were rich, they were acting against the will of God, just as they were when they lived in polygamy.

Many people may get confused about this since Scripture says that it was actually God who gave wealth to Solomon or Hezekiah. But we must remember that just because you receive a gift from God, your use of it doesn't automatically become sinless. We have all received our bodies from God, still we can misuse them.

Solomon and Hezekiah both did good and bad things with their God-given wealth. Some of the money they “had” they used to build villages and cities. Does that sound like private property? Of course not. After all, they were kings with responsibility for all the Israeli people. However, other parts of their wealth they used for gold and luxury for themselves. When they did so, they clearly acted contrary to Deut 17:17.

But what about Job? Even though he experienced devastating poverty, he was rich both before and after this suffering. However, we must look at what he did with his money. As I argued in the first part of this blog series, what's important is not so much how much you earn but rather what

you do with your money. And it seems like Job was passionate giving all his stuff away:

If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless—but from my youth I reared them as a father would, and from my birth I guided the widow—if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or the needy without garments, and their hearts did not bless me for warming them with the fleece from my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things. (Job 31:16-23)

To conclude, I would say that when people use their money to help the poor and needy with their money, they are following the will of God and do not sin. But if they spend their money on themselves they are acting contrary to the will of God and are sinning. As Deut 15:9 puts it: “Be careful not to... show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.”



"The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial." (Mt 26:11-12)

The Woman with the Alabaster Jar

In Matthew 26, Mark 14 and John 12, we read about this woman who poured out really expensive perfume from her alabaster jar on Jesus' body. The disciples get upset and tell her that that perfume could have been sold for a lot of money, which could have been given to the poor.

However, Jesus' defends the woman and calls her act "beautiful". Countless (rich) Christians have told me that this is the proof that there are times when we don't have to give our money to the poor but spend them on luxury instead. If it was okay for Jesus, and He was sinless, why would it be a problem if we from time to time enjoyed some extravagance and glamour?

My answer to that is that this text cannot be applied to any situation today whatsoever. I'll show you what I mean. Firstly, we have to realize that the disciples are doing something very logical if we think about the teaching Jesus already has given them. He commanded them in Lk 12:33 to sell everything they have and give the money to the poor –

of course they get upset when a woman refuses to do the same with an extremely expensive perfume (it says that it was worth 300 denarii – a year's wage for the average worker).

It is thus very surprising that Jesus says that this act is something good. There must be something that makes this situation special, since it obviously is different compared to the disciples' situation when Jesus commanded them to sell everything and give the money to the poor. What could that be? Well, Jesus Himself gives us the answer:

The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. (Mt 26:11-12)

Jesus is thus emphasizing that while the poor always will be with the church, He will not (in His incarnational human body, obviously). His physical presence thus makes this situation special compared to any other situation in the future, where we will have poor people to help but not Jesus' head to pour perfume on. Furthermore, Jesus says that the woman prepared Him for His burial through this act. It is thus a prophetic act, foretelling what will happen in the future, and thus the purpose is not enjoyment or a luxurious experience but to prophesy about the coming death of Jesus.

Since Jesus is not present in His incarnational body anymore, and since He has already died, this text cannot be applied to any situation today, because that are the reasons Jesus gives in the text to explain why the woman's act was "beautiful". I think that we instead of focusing at

a text where Jesus gives no commands whatsoever concerning how we should live, we should look at the earlier chapter, Matthew 25, where He teaches that His disciples should feed the hungry, help the homeless and so on. Too many people suffer and die because of poverty, we should not support inequality through spending money on luxury but instead give as much as we can to aid.



”They took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining.”

Were Jesus and/or Paul Rich?

I always get confused when some Christians argue that Jesus was rich, since it is like claiming that Donald Trump is poor. How can you think that a homeless, jobless foot-walking preacher was wealthy? Have they found a hidden Bible verse that states that Jesus had a mansion somewhere, despite saying that “the Son of Man has no place to put his head” (Mt 8:20)? Have they found an ancient document that shows that He actually owned a jet plane? My Bible says that he was totally aid-dependent, receiving His support from women and sharing everything with His disciples, practicing community of goods (Lk 8:1-3, Jn 13:29).

But the main argument for the rich Jesus is His seamless garment. John 19:23-24 says:

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top

to bottom. “Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.” This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, “They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.”

I’ve seen countless articles and heard many sermons that use this passage to prove that Jesus was rich, since they claim that a seamless garment must have been the clothing of the wealthy. I’m not sure if I would call a homeless, jobless, foot-walking guy who didn’t have anything but a shirt rich though. And more importantly, I can’t find any evidence that only rich people had seamless garments. The Bible sure never says it. And it isn’t hard to create seamless clothing. All you really need to do is to cut a hole in a blanket and ta daa – you got a seamless poncho.

More importantly, the seamless garment Jesus was wearing was His tunic, or “undergarment” as NIV puts it. His underwear. If you wanted to show status and wealth, you didn’t do it through the underwear, but through the mantle. The Bible often talks about purple mantles being symbols for wealth and kingship. So when the soldiers mocked Jesus before His crucifixion through putting a purple mantle on Him and a crown of thorns, He was probably wearing something much more expensive than His seamless underwear. Really, using underwear as an argument for wealth shows how silly it is to try to prove the impossible – that Jesus was rich.

How about Paul, then? He says:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the

circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Phil 4:11-13).

Rich Christians often highlights the parts about living in plenty rather than the hungry, needy stuff, and claims that this shows that it’s perfectly fine for a Christian to be rich. But that is of course not Paul’s point. He is writing this after being in a very critical and dangerous situation caused by poverty that the Philippians rescued him from through giving him money. However, in this thank you letter he says that he has learned to be content with poverty as if he had been wealthy. This is really radical – Paul is saying that he doesn’t need wealth at all, because poverty is content for him!

But doesn’t he say that he “know what it is to have plenty”? Yes, but he used to be a pharisee, and pharisees love money (Lk 16:14). Now, as a Christian, he is saying that we should be content with food and clothing (1 Tim 6:8) and that if we want to be rich we bring ourselves into harmful desires and ruin and destruction. That’s not the words of a man who thinks it’s perfectly fine to be rich. That’s the words of a man who despises wealth and is content with poverty.



“...people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.”

The Prosperity Gospel


The prosperity gospel is a popular teaching in many Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. Even though there are a lot of different views on prosperity, the concept is usually understood as economic blessings that God wants to give all believers. If you have a strong faith in God, you'll get rich. Godliness is a means to financial gain.

But what does the Bible say? Well, in 1 Tim 6:5, Paul speaks about “people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.” So the prosperity gospel is simply corrupt and untrue. He goes on saying:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have

wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (vv. 6-10)

I was once listening to a sermon titled “Prosperity of the Soul” based on 3 John 2, and it all resulted in that the preacher wanted us to raise our hand if we wanted God to bless us with wealth. Most people did so, but few of us didn’t. The preacher said “Come on, I’ll get afraid if you don’t want this!” I was basically just thinking of 1 Tim 6:9. If you want to get rich, you throw yourself into ruin and destruction. The love of money is a root of all evil.



But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

Sometimes I hear people pointing out “it’s not money that is a root to all evil, it’s love for money!” Well, that’s quite obvious, if money were evil it would be evil to give money in aid. If a rich person has no love for money s/he should have no problem in giving it all away. Since most rich people don’t do that, it seems that they cling to this root of all evil too much.

There’s a lot to say about this, I’ve written more [here](#) and [here](#). But to sum up, I believe God wants to prosper the poor, but not to bring them to a state of luxury but to a state of generosity. And when it comes to the rich, they should promote equality through giving as much as they can, not seeking more wealth.



Equality is the goal and community of goods is an effective means to reach the goal.

Now What?

In this final part of God vs Wealth, I want to talk about some practical implications of this teaching and address some questions that I think some of you who have followed the series have.

Question 1: Are you really saying that everyone should have everything in common?

I think economic equality is the goal and community of goods is an effective means to reach the goal. In fact, I don't really know any more effective way to reach equality than Acts chapter 2. The model most churches use today clearly doesn't work, and for many of them equality is not even the goal.

Of course, community of goods requires more than one person, so start with connecting with others who have the same thoughts as you. Get inspired by New Creation Christian Community and The Simple Way, and start building. Remember though that Christians communiti-

es should include the really poor and marginalised. Get to know poor folks in your area or neighbourhoods, invite them for dinner, love them, and if they're up for it, live with them.

Also urge your church to start building international community of goods. Connect with say five churches in other parts of the world, look what common budget you have and split it equally. Then, rich churches will learn simplicity and poor churches will have more resources to meet needs and spread the Gospel. Win-win!

Question 2: If you don't think a Christian should be rich, why are you using a computer?


There was a time when I hardly used electricity at all, where I refused to use a computer. Then, I realized that if I wanted a publisher to publish the book I was writing about what the Bible says about wealth and poverty, they wouldn't accept hand-writing. So I started to use a computer to write this book. And then I realized I could spread this message on the internet as well. The God vs Wealth teaching on my Swedish blog is widely read, with over 5000 views.

I hope and pray that doing this I would help the poor more than if I sold my computer and gave the money to an organization that would use computers to help the poor. But I'm well aware of that this is a slippery slope. Rich Christians hold on to their stuff using this type of argument. The important thing to distinguish though is if the object is blessing people with needs or if it's just for the satisfaction of the rich and privileged. I use to call unnecessary products LEB-products; luxury, entertainment and beauty products. We should get rid of that in order to alleviate suffering and save lives through aid instead.

Question 3: Isn't this just Christian communism?

I once heard a pentecostal pastor speak about how the "communist experiment of the apostles obviously didn't work". Communist experiment? How about apostolic example? You can criticize communism for a lot, but not that it wants equality between the rich and poor, because that is what God wants also. That being said, I think the Kingdom is neither capitalist nor communist but goes beyond human political





**Thinking that you
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ideologies. Thinking that you can ignore what the Bible teaches by labelling it communism is just false logic.

All right, that's the end of my God vs Wealth series. But don't worry, I've already made a sequel! When I was in South Africa I recorded five videos called God vs Poverty, which simply consists of some Bible studies about poverty reduction in its various forms. I'm going to publish them one by one this fall, so keep your eyes open. After you've sold everything you have of course.

2

Simple Christian Living

"If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

1 Tim 6:8

- 1. Should Christians Wear "Formal" in Church?**
- 2. Seven Reasons Why Inequality Sucks**
- 3. Fighting Climate Change through Fighting Wealth**
- 4. It's Time for All Christians to Become Vegetarians**
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Should Christians Wear “Formal” in Church?



Around the world, many people dress “properly” when they go to church, meaning wearing expensive stuff like suits, dresses, and jewelry. Especially pastors and preachers are expected to wear expensive. I don’t like this for the following reasons:

1. The poor are alienated. Some people are basically so poor that they don’t afford a suit, and the preachers silently distances themselves from them. I know a man in Sweden who told a minister “Thank you so much that you wear normal clothes when you preach, I always feel excluded when the pastor wears a suit.” Clothes are symbols, and “formal” clothes are symbols of wealth. It just doesn’t match with James 2:1-7.

2. It’s based on the thought that church is something you “go to” at a specific time at a specific

day, while the Scriptures says that the believers are the church at all times. We are not in God’s house more when we are dressed up in church compared to when we are naked in the shower. Thus, it doesn’t make sense to wear differently than usual when you “go to church” because you ARE the church 24/7.

3. Above all: it’s simply not biblical to dress expensive when you go to church. Some people try to create a theology around it, claiming that it’s honoring God and stuff. But the Bible never says that, and we never read that the disciples dressed in a certain way during their meetings. The only time the New Testament talks about expensive clothes and jewelry is when it forbids us to wear it (1 Timothy 2:9, 1 Peter 3:3)!




The thesis that everyone can benefit from inequality is not true when it comes to social aspects and quality of life.

Seven Reasons Why Inequality Sucks

There is a very common argument against equality, used by Christians and non-Christians alike: inequality is acceptable and right if everyone benefits from it. For example, if inequality produces more economic growth than equality would have done, and rich and poor alike benefit from this growth, then inequality is something good.

There are several problems with this argument:

1. Inequality produces social problems. In 2009, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett authored a book called *The Spirit Level*, which looked upon how inequality impacts social issues in OECD countries. The results were staggering: they found correlation between inequality and infant mortality, crime, poor health, lack of education, etc. Of course the poor suffered most, but even the rich were worse off in unequal societies compared to equal ones. Thus, the thesis that everyone can benefit from inequality is not true when it comes to social aspects and quality of life.




Those who undoubtedly work hardest globally are poor rural farmers, living on one dollar a day.

2. Growth in rich societies cannot solve social problems. What's even more interesting is that Wilkinson and Pickett found that the social problems they analyzed weren't decreasing as a country got richer. Although being poorer than the US, Sweden still had fewer social problems since it is a more equal country. Thus, even if inequality would produce more economic growth than equality (something which can be debated), it still wouldn't make so much difference when it comes to quality of life. Furthermore, growth is rarely good for the environment.

3. Inequality is unfair. On what basis are some people richer than others? It's not very often that this depends on how hard you work – those who undoubtedly work hardest globally are poor rural farmers, living on one dollar a day. Rather, you are born into a country, community and class that define how rich you will be able to become. Problem is that you don't choose where to be born. In equal societies, you get roughly the same opportunities as everyone else no matter what parents you have, but in unequal ones you are often doomed for poverty or wealth from birth. That's extremely unfair.

4. Inequality is undemocratic. Money is power. The rich often use their money to lobby towards politicians and to affect public opinion. But they haven't been elected to have that position, nor have they deserved it through working hard (since poor people work harder). When some people have more money than others it becomes a democratic problem – and thus are equal societies more democratic and fair.

5. Rich people waste their money. Thousands of people die each day because of poverty, humanitarian and development organizations are in desperate need for money, still most rich people spend billions on unnecessary stuff like luxury, entertainment and beauty products. Some may say that there is a trickle down effect: the rich pay the Jacuzzi salesman who pays the hamburger guy who pays the poor janitor. However, it is impossible to guarantee the trickle down effect – besides, many of the poor are outside the established economy, and that's why they're poor in the first place. If we decrease consumption of unnecessary products and increase aid, there will be more equality and less people will suffer and die.



How then can we tolerate that people are born into such huge economic difference, which will affect how they utilise their rights and how much suffering they can avoid throughout their whole life?

6. Weren't all men created equal? We're all created in the image of God, and most people agree with that we have equal rights and equal value and dignity. How then can we tolerate that people are born into such huge economic difference, which will affect how they utilise their rights and how much suffering they can avoid throughout their whole life? As I said before, the rich haven't worked harder than others, they were in most cases born into a privileged position, while others are not. Talking about that people have equal rights and value are just empty words if we do not work for social and economic equality.

7. It is unbiblical. As I have mentioned earlier, the Bible is a strong supporter of equality. 2 Cor 8:13-15 says equality is the purpose of aid giving. Lk 3:11 says that it is the fruit of repentance. Acts 2:44-45 shows it was the order of the early church. If we want to be obedient followers of Jesus, we must work against inequality. Amen.




I'm against that rich countries, corporations and individuals keep getting richer although they know that this will result in coming catastrophies.

Fighting Climate Change through Fighting Wealth

Scripture tells us that the love for money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10), which is evident when it comes to the horrors of climate change. Of course, developing countries have a right to develop and fight poverty, I am definitely not against that. But I'm against that rich countries, corporations and individuals keep getting richer although they know that this will result in coming catastrophies.

The climate problem has been publically known for 20 years, but global greenhouse gas emissions are still increasing. In 2013, the World Bank published a shocking report which said that even if all countries implement what they have promised to do, we still risk a rise of global temperature with four degrees, resulting in humanitarian disasters affecting millions. The aspirations of especially rich countries are simply far too weak. We really need to pray for miracles in Doha.



An infinitely growing economy cannot exist within a finite ecosystem

But we also need to have a simple lifestyle ourselves. While it is important that people living in poverty get richer to achieve a better quality of life, it is equally important that rich people get poorer so that they stop consume unnecessary products. This is what the Bible talks about:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.”
(Prov 30:8)

“Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” (Lk 3:11)

In contrast to this biblical vision of economic equality, some debaters and politicians argue that we can and should combine sustainability and economic growth, so that the richer may get richer with a good conscience. This is of course false; an infinitely growing economy cannot exist within a finite ecosystem, if everyone lived like the average European, we would need three globes (five if everyone were living like Americans).

Let's go back to the biblical vision. Let's fight climate change through fighting wealth.




My experience is that both the church and society as a whole is talking very little about one of the most effective climate actions: becoming vegetarian or vegan.

It's Time for All Christians to Become Vegetarians

It becomes more and more evident that politicians constantly fail to solve the climate crisis – the leaders of the developed countries are out of touch with reality, they are more interested in short-term profit than in saving lives. Since they are the worst polluters and have the most money, this is blocking the whole process.

Christians cannot just sit and wait for the slow climate negotiations to come somewhere, we have to take the initiative. And many churches are indeed talking a lot about climate action and some are even making plans concerning how to reduce their own emissions. This is great, of course. However, my experience is that both the church and society as a whole is talking very little about one of the most effective climate actions: becoming vegetarian or vegan.



**18% of global
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production.**

The current Western meat consumption is wasting resources and destroys the environment. 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from meat and dairy production. There is nothing as effective, simple and cheap to save the climate than becoming vegetarian or vegan. This is why the UN is calling for “a global shift towards a vegan diet”, something that would also increase our health and, of course, create better lives for God’s beautiful animals.

Still, many Christians who know this continue to eat meat every day, often pointing to Rom 14:2: “One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.” Of course, this is a bad excuse: climate change didn’t exist in Paul’s time, and he is discussing vegetarianism on ritual grounds, not environmental. Let’s pretend that all the meat in your country was poisonous. Would you continue to eat it with reference to Rom 14:2? Of course not. In the real world, meat is indeed poisonous – for the planet.

If you don’t want to become vegetarian or vegan immediately, at least start to have a meat-free day every week and scale up after that. Tell your friends and church members about how harmful meat is for the environment, spread the youtube clips above and ask your church to become meat- and dairy-free. And last but not least, pray for a tremendous global outpouring of God’s Spirit that will draw us closer to the heart of the Father and His love for His creation. Time is running out, the planet is getting warmer and warmer. We need a radical vegetarian church revolution, and we need it now.



With his long hair and beard he tried to look like Jesus himself “because there’s no one else I want to look like”

Lonnie Frisbee and his Charismatic Hippie Communal Houses

Lonnie Frisbee was an amazing Jesus freak. Being a key figure and informal leader of the Jesus People Movement in the 60’s and 70’s, his impact on Western Christianity is huge. With his long hair and beard he tried to look like Jesus himself “because there’s no one else I want to look like”, he preached on the beaches to his hippie friends that the Holy Spirit is even better than LSD and brought thousands of them to church.

The Jesus movement spread rapidly across California, US and the world, but most churches closed the door for them – after all, they were hippies. A church that did welcome them though was Calvary Chapel led by Chuck Smith, not because he was a hippie, nor because he wanted to become one, but because he liked them.

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While Chuck emphasized Bible studying and evangelical values (which Lonnie thought was awesome) Lonnie himself was a holy roller. He cast out demons, spoke in tongues, healed the sick and prophesied loudly. He proclaimed himself to be a prophet and a mystic, and the whole Jesus Movement became a radical charismatic movement.

In 1980 he visited John Wimber's Vineyard church and released the youth into full scale charismatic renewal, which had a huge impact on Wimber himself and the whole third wave charismatic renewal. In John Wimber: The Way it Was, John's wife Carol Wimber shares how important Lonnie was for the Vineyard, and she has some awesome testimonies from a trip to South Africa she, John and Lonnie made where they literally saw the blind and lame being totally healed when they imparted the power of the Holy Spirit to them.

And what I find especially cool with Lonnie is that he combined this charismatic fire and zeal for evangelism with Christian communism, in its original, apostolic sense. Together with Chuck Smith and a guy called John Higgins he started a communal house called The House of Miracles (I guess Lonnie picked the name). The House grew to 19 houses in California, and exploded into a ministry called Shiloh Youth Revival Centers, which involved 175 communal houses and – hold on – 100 000 people!

These communal houses had a common fund so that everyone involved gave their income to the community and in return they got free food, clothing, housing and health care. Suddenly there were no rich nor poor, just a bunch of happy holy roller Jesus hippies that were enjoying His presence together in fellowship and love.



“Around 700 of us share our possessions and pool our income and wealth (if we have any!) to live like the early Christians.”

Community of Goods at the Jesus Army

Many Christians in the Western world seem to think that the community of goods is an unrealistic utopia, and thus, they don't even try to live like the apostles. But the Jesus Army in the UK proves that it indeed is possible to live a New Testament life. Many of their church members live in the New Creation Christian Community, where they share everything, just like in the book of Acts. They write:

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Practising a radical 'New Creation' lifestyle in the Jesus Fellowship

You don't have to live in Christian community to belong to the Jesus Fellowship! But many of us do! Around 700 of us share our possessions and pool our income and wealth (if we have any!) to live like the early Christians. They had “all things in common”[Acts 2:44] and “no-one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own”. [Acts 4:32]

That was the result of the power of the Holy Spirit coming on the church at Pentecost. And our community life, too, is the result of the Holy Spirit's presence. We have power to love! Power to serve! Power to share!

We're able to break the mould. To escape from the rut. The question we ask is "How does God want us to live?" Of course it's to love. Of course it's to share. Of course it's to show that through new life in Jesus He brings into being a new way of living!

Jesus had little to call His own.[Matt 8:20] He shared a pooled fund with His disciples.[Mark 10:28] He warned of the love of money.[Mark 10:21,22] Small wonder then that Peter led the new converts at the day of Pentecost into Christian community.

Such sharing was widespread in the early days of the church. The Didache, a respected Christian document from the beginning of the second century, says: "Share all things in common with your brother. Do not claim anything as your own."[*]

And at the end of the second century, the Christian author Tertullian wrote: "Everything among us is in common, except marriage."[*]

The call of Jesus hasn't changed over the years. In the UK today the Holy Spirit is still calling followers of Jesus to embrace a community lifestyle and show a "New Creation" culture as light in the darkness.

We're to challenge the materialism and greed of today's Western society, as well as its social bre-

akdown. We're going to show that in Christ we can love one another and live a better way![John 13:34,35]

—

This Biblical lifestyle of economic equality is combined with a hunger for the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words, they want to resurrect all of Pentecost, both miracles and the community of goods. I visited them in 2010, living for a couple of days in one of their community houses, and I was filled with the power and love of the Holy Spirit as well as inspired by their radical, loving lifestyle. I highly recommend you to look them up: follow their blog, like their facebook page, explore their website and – most importantly – follow their example, as they follow the example of Christ.



If the church sees itself as a global body of brothers and sisters equal in value, economic equality across borders is logical.

How to End Economic Inequality in the Global Church

During fall 2013 I took a course in environmental economics at Uppsala University. Our final assignment for the course was to pretend to write an article for the Solutions journal that explores an economic solution to a sustainability problem. I chose to write about how economic inequality is a root cause to many sustainability challenges and argued that the church should start practicing economic equality again just like in Acts 2:44-45. Below is an excerpt:

Redistribution on the Denominational Level

If the church sees itself as a global body of brothers and sisters equal in value, economic equality across borders is logical. This is not very foreign to Christian practical theology – the only time the New Testament talks about churches giving money to other churches, it is stated that “[t]he goal is equality” (2 Cor 8:13-15).

On the denominational level, the Roman Catholic Church has a unique position. It is one single transnational organization with 1.2 billion members, with most people in the global South and most money in the global North. Because all national jurisdictions are subordinated to the Vatican leadership, redistribution would be easier practically compared to a network of autonomous denominations. Since the current pope, Francis, is Latin American and emphasizes the importance of poverty reduction, social justice and simplicity; internal redistribution of finances may not be a totally foreign idea for the Vatican.

Ideally, ecclesiastical provinces and dioceses should be economically equal, adjusted to population and a certain list of needs like poverty, climate change vulnerability, special interests of the Church, etc. This would result in churches in developing countries generally becoming slightly richer than their Western counterparts.

Most other international church movements consist of nationally autonomous denominations that share theology and partnership through networks like the Anglican Communion or the Lutheran World Federation. Here, redistribution becomes more complex since it rather becomes a form of aid from richer national denominations voluntarily give to poorer ones, without a central authority that can organize it. Again, the ideal should be that all national denominations are economically equal adjusted to population and needs.

Redistribution on the Local Church Level

Then, we have the local church level, which is relevant not only for independent churches and

denominations that do not have clear partner denominations internationally, but for all local churches. Even churches within internationally networked denominations often have an economy of their own with money that never reaches the denomination domestically.

Here, it is crucial that an international church budget standard about what is reasonable for a church to possess financially to perform religious and social activity based on population and need is introduced. It should contain both a maximum and minimum limit, and could be developed within for example the World Council of Churches. Then, churches that possess more than the maximum limit allow can redistribute money to churches below the minimum, using either their own missionary networks or the networks of other churches. The interval between the maximum and minimum limit should not be too wide so that the standard becomes impuissant, but not too narrow so that it makes creativity in church activities impossible. An example of an interval could be € 10-30 per active church member and month.

Risks

This proposal would for many churches in the West increase their international giving massively – for many far above the 10% that American churches gave in 1920. Would this even be practically possible? I am convinced that it would. Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley, California, gives 50% of their budget in international donations; and the Antioch Presbyterian Church in Chonju, South Korea, gives 70%. This will most likely mean major cutbacks in rich churches' activities, which may include selling

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church buildings, not hiring anyone full-time, not being able to fund certain projects, etc. Obviously, there may be huge opposition to this among both leadership and members. Likewise, rich denominations may be reluctant to do major cutbacks in their national programs.

How can this problem be solved? Hopefully, information and communication between the churches and denominations that show what the donated money is doing will create incentives for redistribution; as well as moral teaching about the importance of simplicity, which can be founded both on sustainability literature and the life of Jesus and several monastic Christians throughout church history. It would be naïve to think that all churches would accept this though, and thus denominations will probably need to do a cost-benefit analysis: should they demand that all their member churches accept the “international church budget standard”, and risk that many churches then leave them, or should they make it a voluntarily commitment and risk that the interest will be far too low?

One must also take the risk of corruption into consideration; not even churches are sinless and it is probable that some of them will lie about their membership numbers and their needs in order to get more money, something that could be more prevalent in lower income countries where auditing is uncommon. Denominations should decide whether they want a control mechanism or simply let it pass by.

Suggestions

Something that I have not yet covered in this paper is individuals’ offering to their churches and denominations. This is a topic on its own, but I can shortly state that church leaders should consider the costs and benefits of voluntary giving or a fee, respectively. I think a fee would generally increase church income, but one should be careful not to put it on a level that is unbearable for some. A proportional fee dependent on the members’ income that increases as the income gets bigger, like a progressive tax, is recommended.

What is a realistic time frame for the implementation of this proposal? If the idea catches attention within some of the major denominations and/or the World Council of Churches within the coming five years,

and it finds acceptance, it is not unlikely that the “international church budget standard” as well as redistributing churches and denominations will be realized within ten additional years.

[...]

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have proposed that Christian churches should practice global economic equality as an alternative climate financing and aid giving within civil society. It should not be done instead of lobbying for political climate financing and aid giving, but as a complement and a prophetic message to the politicians, who may get inspired by the initiative. There may be a risk if the model gets very popular that some politicians will use it as an argument for political international donations not being as necessary as before, but personally I find it dubious whether such policy makers would have been giving more even if the church did not.

[...] Is there a chance that this model of redistribution could be applied to states as well? Since many nations are governed by parties that are very skeptical to economic equality, I think a universal policy that tries to bring all nations to roughly the same economic standard lies very far away. However, it is not unthinkable that a rich and a poor country that share a socialist ideology do a bilateral agreement in which they strive for economic equality through redistribution. The same problem of dissatisfaction among the rich country’s population due to cutbacks is probable though, and has to be addressed in a similar way that I described above. But as international communication and awareness of global problems increase, I am optimistic that humanity will be able to leave the unequal status quo and pursue a world where all human beings are truly equal in dignity and rights.

In this article, I have proposed that Christian churches should practice global economic equality as an alternative climate financing and aid giving within civil society.




If everybody lived like Costa Ricans we would need one earth. Which is what we got, so that would be rational.

The Costa Rica Solution

As seen above, I think that churches can work towards economic equality through increased aid giving and an international church budget standard that forbids churches to get too rich. But what can the rest of society do? I think we would need something similar for them – an international budget standard, both for individuals and states. And I got good news for you: there is such a standard, namely Costa Rica.

It's simple: if you take the World Gross Product, that is the GDP of the world (minus the D since it isn't domestic – economists will get what I say), and you divide it with the world population, you get the gross world product per capita which, according to the CIA, is around 13 000 USD (PPP). That's roughly the same GDP per capita as Costa Rica. And thus, if everybody lived like Costa Ricans we would need one earth. Which is what we got, so that would be rational.

Costa Rica is also #1 in the Happy Planet Index, a index that looks at experienced well being, life expectancy and ecological foot print. What



If you live on more than 13 000 USD per year, give away your money to the poor until you live on 13 000 USD per year or less.

makes Costa Rica so interesting is that its citizens have a long life expectancy even though (or rather, because) they live simply and have a quite low GDP per capita, and thus also a low carbon foot print.

Costa Ricans are Christians as well. And they got sunny beaches and a female democratically elected president. I say that all countries should be like Costa Rica and all people should live like Costa Ricans. Sure, they're not sinless and they got problems, but while the rest of us are trashing the planet and promote injustice, they are doing quite well. I'd say we give it a shot. If you live on more than 13 000 USD per year, give away your money to the poor until you live on 13 000 USD per year or less. Then tell your friends, politicians and church members to do the same.

3

God vs Poverty

"Loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free and break every yoke" (Is 58:6).

1. Loving
2. Giving
3. Working
4. Liberating
5. Praying
6. Why I as an Activist Love the Gifts of the Holy Spirit!



Loving

Let us now look at what the Bible says about poverty reduction. When I have studied the Word on this topic I have found that there are at least five Biblical ways to fight poverty:

1. **Loving**
2. **Giving**
3. **Working**
4. **Liberating**
5. **Praying**

In my opinion, love is the first and most vital steps in poverty reduction. One of the main economic problems in the world is that the rich don't know the poor. The roots of inequality is of

course that the rich separates themselves and refuse to get to know the poor. When people from different socio-economic classes become friends, it will be impossible for the wealthy to ignore their needs and problems of the needy. Our generosity should not be excluded to people we know of course, but if we only know people with our own socio-economic status, something is terribly wrong.

So here comes the radical biblical challenge: if you don't live in an area where there's poor people, move. If you do not get to serve the poor in your work, change job. If you have people begging on the streets in your town, sit down and talk with them (if they don't speak your language, use google translate or something). Jesus will not ask us if we asked someone else to feed the hungry and clothe the naked when He comes back (Mt 25). He will ask us.



Giving to the poor still is our duty: to refuse to give to the needy even if you're able to, is sinful (Deut 15:9).

Giving

Rich folks are experts on producing arguments why we shouldn't give to the poor. Have you also heard Christians using this Bible verse as Bible proof for inaction:

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." – 2 Cor 9:7

Was Paul's point really that if you are a grumpy, greedy Scrooge McDuck, God is perfectly fine with that? No, of course Paul wants us to be cheerful givers, and he states in the next verse that we will be poorly rewarded in Heaven if we aren't generous on earth, but his point is that we cannot force people to be generous. Giving to the poor still is our duty though: to refuse to give to the needy even if you're able to, is sinful (Deut 15:9).

Who are we to decide what the poor should spend their money on? They're not controlling our consumption of luxuries, entertainment and beauty products.

Another argument against giving to the poor is an unbiblical one: aid doesn't work. This is both applied to foreign aid and giving to beggars on the streets. In the former case, people blame corruption and other structural problems, or they simply state that aid undermines incentives to work. In the latter case, people blame drugs and other social problems, or state that rewarding begging undermines incentives to work.

There's a lot to say about that, but for a Christian, those arguments are not very strong; simply because our Master has ordered us to always give to everyone. Yes, always. Yes, everyone. Luke 6:30 says "Give to everyone who asks and don't ask people to return what they have taken from you." You see? Always give to those who asks you, regardless how corrupt or drug-hungry they are.

Does it makes you uncomfortable? Well, think of all the time you gladly give your money to banks, multinationals and the state that use it for all sorts of crazy stuff. But I know what you're thinking, two wrongs doesn't make a right. Seriously though, who are we to decide what the poor should spend their money on? They're not controlling our consumption of luxuries, entertainment and beauty products.

If you're still uncomfortable I have a solution for you – give everything you have to Iris Ministries or some other good aid organization. Then, next time you meet a beggar you will be like Peter, who had nothing but the wonderful power of the Spirit, which was sufficient to lift the beggar out of poverty (Acts 3). As we covered in part 1, building relationships and loving the poor really is the most vital step, regardless of how much you can give. Or, just give a sandwich if you're worried about the drug things. But give. Do not let inaction be an option. Stop for the one in front of you and pour out your generosity. Because as good ol' John said:

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be that person? – 1 John 3:17



Guarantees
a better deal
for Third World
Producers


Trade is not the magical solution to poverty reduction, since many companies only have their own profit in mind.

Working

I am critical to the “trade instead of aid” idea expressed by people like Dambisa Moyo (who thinks that all aid to Africa should be stopped in five years) simply since it is irresponsible, harmful and not very smart. Trade is not the magical solution to poverty reduction, since many companies only have their own profit in mind. In contrast, aid agencies have a genuine goal to help the poor.

Still, trade is important. In fact, it’s necessary for poverty reduction. Acts 20:33-35 says:

“I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”



Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, find a good job, serve the poor through it and then give a lot of your wage to aid.

In other words, if we are able to work but aren't doing it, we are using resources that could have been given to the poor. As long as we are healthy and there are job opportunities, we should work. But we must remember that all jobs aren't good jobs!

"[they] must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need." (Eph 4:28)

Do something useful! I once got a question: "Should I work for a company that uses sweatshops, earn a lot of money and be able to give a lot of aid; or should I work for Fairtrade, where I do good stuff for the poor in my work but won't be able to give so much in aid?" I answered "Work for Fairtrade". Why should we earn a lot of money to clean up the mess we've created? Do something useful with your hands, let your job be beneficial for the poor.

This may result in changing your job. Some jobs are directly harmful, such as working for oil companies or weapon producers. Others are simply unnecessary, like beauty products. Others are beneficial for people but only reach the rich. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, find a good job, serve the poor through it and then give a lot of your wage to aid.



The Bible is well aware of structures that oppress the poor.

Liberating

“Give a man a fish and he has food for a day. Teach him to fish and he has food for a lifetime.” We’ve all heard that, haven’t we? It’s a good proverb about the importance of empowerment and long-term solutions in aid giving. But what about the lake? What if the man cannot fish even after we taught him because the lake is polluted by a multinational corporation, or illegal to fish from because of an unrighteous regime? In other words, are there structures that are blocking development and poverty reduction?

The Bible is well aware of structures that oppress the poor. It is very common that the Old Testament not only talks about giving to the poor but treating them fair in court (see for example Prov. 22:22-23), so that they will not be discriminated. When Isaiah prophesies about true fasting, he doesn’t just talk about giving food and clothing to the ones in need but he also says that it includes “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and bre-

Did you know that more money leaves developing countries through capital flight, debts and unfair trade compared to what they receive in aid?

ak every yoke” (Is 58:6). In order to fight poverty effectively, we have to identify oppressing structures and crushing them.

What could those structures be? Dictatorship is one. When people refuse to listen to what their people want, there is nothing stopping them from oppressing and neglecting the will of the poor. Discrimination is another huge one. The poor are often discriminated just for being poor, as Prov. 22:22 addresses, but ethnic groups, religious groups, LGBT folks and other minorities are also very often kept in poverty and oppression through discrimination – plus women, who aren’t a minority.

Then we have different global economic and political structures that are very unjust. Did you know that more money leaves developing countries through capital flight, debts and unfair trade compared to what they receive in aid? In other words, the poor give more money to the rich than vice versa! This obviously has to stop. Likewise, the unfair power balance within international institutions where Western countries has far too much to say must change in order for a better world to come true.

These topics are a bit controversial. Oscar Romero famously said: “When I helped the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why people are poor, they called me a communist.” But these issues have to be addressed by a radical, prophetic church. It’s time to loose the chains of injustice and break every yoke!



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Praying

Once we start praying and working for a better world, there is a risk of struggling in our own strength and power. And since everyone are sinners (Romans 3:10-18), the human way lined with failures, accidents, discouragement and fatigue. The Bible says that through the power of God, we are able to more than in our own force (Philippians 4:13). And that can sometimes be a little bit more dramatic than getting some extra energy as by an invisible vitamin kick. Sometimes, it means walking on water or raising the dead.

The ministry of Jesus and the apostles not only included human deeds but also acts of God, things that only God can do. While they gave money to the poor (John 13:29) and they also used the miraculous gifts of the Spirit to help them. As they combined action with prayer, there was suddenly no limit to what their aid work was able to do.

For example: Jesus raised a widow's son from the dead, which besides being extremely joyful in itself saved her from economic misery (Lu-

When Stephen was elected to serve the widows, it was because he was filled with the Spirit (Acts 6:3-5), and as he helped the poor he was doing signs and wonders (v. 8).

ke 7:11-17). Jesus also did food miracles out of His compassion for the hungry (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:29-39). His healing miracles had an activist dimension as well; in Mark 10:46-52 He heals a blind beggar, who thus is rescued not only from a life in darkness but also from a life in poverty.

Likewise, a lame beggar is healed from his lameness when encountered by Peter and John by the Temple gate (Acts 3:1-10). Peter says “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (v. 6, NIV), and from that moment on, the beggar didn’t have to beg again. Finally, in Acts 11:28-30, the prophet Agabus foresees a coming famine, just as Joseph did in Genesis 41, so that the church can prepare humanitarian relief.

Thus, as we fight poverty we should pray for miracles. This is why I love Iris Global. When I was in South Africa last summer I interviewed Surprise Sithole about food miracles and other forms of charismatic activism that he has witnessed. Heidi Baker says in the film *Compelled by Love* that she worships several hours every day to get the strength and power necessary for her ministry to the poor. The gifts of the Spirit aren’t just cool special effects, they are meant to be used for service (1 Peter 4:10). When Stephen was elected to serve the widows, it was because he was filled with the Spirit (Acts 6:3-5), and as he helped the poor he was doing signs and wonders (v. 8).

This is the central theme of this blog and, indeed, of my life. In 2012 at a charismatic conference where Heidi Baker was speaking, I loudly said “I dedicate my life to combine signs and wonders with peace and justice, and to resurrect all of Pentecost.” Heidi joyfully said “Yeah, that’s it!”, layed her hands on me, and immediately I fell down and just praise the Lord.

If there’s one thing I want you to remember from this teaching about poverty reduction, it is that the power of the Spirit is extremely vital and necessary since it will enable you to do so much more.



I am totally convinced that every Christian activist should embrace the gifts of the Spirit and pursue signs and wonders.

Why I as an Activist Love the Gifts of the Holy Spirit!

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements have a bad reputation among Christian anarchists and activists. There are too many examples of healing evangelists who control the masses through manipulation and hysteria, with promises of supernatural encounters only to gain money and status for themselves. Furthermore, many Pentecostals and charismatics support nationalism, war, discrimination and inequalities. They bless the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, they preach a prosperity gospel where strong faith leads to great wealth, they deny climate change and don't care about the environment.

Yet, I am totally convinced that every Christian activist should embrace the gifts of the Spirit and pursue signs and wonders. Why? Because the mess I just described is of course not genuine a fruit of the Spirit, it is a result of what I call the Corinth Syndrome, when charismatic Christians portray their own crazy ideas and practices as divinely inspired.

The church at Corinth was experiencing charismatic chaos; they loved spiritual manifestations and everyone spoke in tongues simultaneously, but they showed no care for the poor and some were living in sexual immorality.[1] Paul's solution to the Corinthian problem is not commanding them to be less charismatic; on the contrary, he urges them to seek the gifts even more![2] However, he emphasizes that this must be done in order and in love.

Inviting the Holy Spirit will not put us in a risk zone of becoming war-waging wealth-hungry republicans, because love and servanthood are at the essence of the spiritual gifts. 1 Peter 4:10 says: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." Healing, prophecies, tongues, discernment and the other gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 are thus not intended to elevate a human being or create a spectacular show, but to serve and help people.

This is why they are fantastic activist tools! There are numerous examples in the Scriptures of signs and wonders promoting peace and justice. The exodus from Egypt, which has inspired thousands of liberation theologians in their struggle against oppression and dominion, is filled with miracles.[3] There are four food miracles in the Bible when God gives food to the hungry,[4] plus a vegetarian miracle in Daniel 1:12-16. Both in the Old and the New Testament, famine is foreseen by prophets.[5] Many of the blind and lame people that were healed by Jesus and the apostles were beggars.[6] And in Acts 9, Jesus is non-violently stopping Paul from persecuting

the church through a dramatic vision and a healing.

If we acknowledge that these events have a social and political message but ignore or even deny their miraculous essence, we are not only cherry-picking but we are also missing a beautiful chance to get more effective results in our activism. The Holy Spirit didn't disappear after the time of the Bible but continues to promote peace and justice through signs and wonders in the church today. I know of so many examples of this, let me share three of them here.

In 2010, a 20-year-old woman named Teresa Jebiwot participated in a revival meeting in Kisumu, southern Kenya. She was born without a cornea, which made her totally blind, not knowing if it was day or night unless someone told her. But at the revival meeting, she got completely healed when the prophet David Owour prayed for her, and she started to see perfectly.



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This was verified by an eye specialist, Dr. Agnes Maiyo, at the Iten District Hospital. After her healing, she could leave the blind school she had attended and her living condition got highly improved.[7]

Swedish musician and evangelist Simon Adahl, who is a friend of mine, was at the World Prayer Assembly last year in Jakarta, Indonesia, to sing the theme song of the event together with his brother. While he was backstage, a man walked by him, and suddenly Simon started to prophesy to him: "You are not going home! Those people who tried to silent you are not my servants says the Lord, you are my servant – don't go home!"

The man started to cry, he explained that he was from the Netherlands and that he wanted to hold a seminar at the Assembly about the horrible gold trade between the Netherlands and Indonesia, that destroys the environment and exploit poor workers. However, some Indonesian pastors, that he knew benefited from the gold trade, took him aside in a room and forbade him to speak about this. When he went out of the room he felt so discouraged and thought to himself that he probably should go home then. But right then a Swedish guy jumped in front of him and started to prophesy...

The Irresistible Revolution

Finally, Christian activist Shane Claiborne shares in his book *The Irresistible Revolution* how a good friend of his was working at a health clinic in Latin America.[8] Their medical supplies were scarce, and one day they had nothing left except a bottle of the stomach medicine Pep-to-Bismol. So when people came with various types of diseases that was all they were offered. However, according to Shane's friend, everyone got well. Even more astounding, the small bottle didn't become empty although they kept handing out the medicine to all the sick who came.

All these events are wonderful; still, we all know that many times the sick aren't healed, the hungry aren't fed, the dead aren't raised. And I don't have the answer to that. I just know that we are still commanded to strive for an abundance of spiritual gifts.[9] If we allow the Holy Spirit to do the impossible through us, our struggle for a better world will

obviously be more effective than if we are limited to what is possible. Let us become charismatic activists, promoting peace and justice through signs and wonders!

[1] 1 Corinthians 5:1, 10:21.

[2] 1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1.

[3] Exodus 7-14.

[4] Exodus 16, 1 Kings 17, Matthew 14:13ff. and 15:32ff.

[5] Genesis 41, Acts 11:27-30.

[6] Mark 10:46ff., Acts 3.

[7] This story was printed in the Repentance and Holiness Magazine, volume 8, "The Coming Messiah", pp. 19-21. It can be found here:<http://share.snacktools.com/FAEE9D58B7A/fdac7ca95a2856c450976f1977q327103>

[8] I only got the Swedish edition of the book so I can't give you the exact page number, but it is in the end of chapter 3.

[9] 1 Corinthians 14:12

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