

HOW CAN WE ORDER OUR ECONOMIC PRACTICES IN THE CHURCH IN SUCH A WAY THAT WE GIVE TESTIMONY WITH POWER TO THE HOLINESS MESSAGE?

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Eradication of absolute poverty has become a top priority for the 21st century world. The world seeks to find ways to reduce vulnerability to being poor, ways for generating sustainable development and the total eradication of poverty in the world as a whole, with special focus on the African continent. The majority of people on the African continent live on less than one US dollar per day. Poverty of course, is a much broader concept that transcends material necessity and embraces the broader social well-being and quality of life of the whole person. Possessions do however play a major role in determining a standard or class in which individuals or society live.

The challenge to respond to the ethical issues facing our world is not only for the “secular” organizations, but the world is also looking to the church for answers. We cannot ignore the fact that economics influence the ministry of the church. As the church grows and expands through the continent we are made aware of poverty, which cripples the districts and local churches that we organize.

For several years now I have been concerned about the church in particular in Mozambique where civil war, natural calamities and HIV/AIDS have contributed to poverty in the society. Poverty is also a big problem in the church. Like John Wesley and Phineas Bresee I desire a Holiness Theology that expresses the gospel mandate to respond to the plight of the poor. I believe the church structure is better maintained only by a good economic system. A great number of our constituency is poor, thus the church is equally poor. I am not only concerned with poverty within the church. I am very concerned about the present state of the people we reach out to. Therefore, I want to suggest that the eradication of poverty ought to be one of our top priorities as we continue to expand our ministry.

Wesley and the Poor

“Gain all you can; save all you can; give all you can” this was Wesley’s most famous statement on the problem of handling worldly goods. Wesley was committed to eradication of poverty. He advocated for the poor, in fact he emptied himself for the sake of the poor. He gave much from his own belongings. He organised relief projects, introduced a loan fund (interest free could be secured up to 3 months), and involved himself in searching for jobs for the poor. It is interesting that Wesley would advocate for wealth creation for the sake of the poor and well being of individuals and the society as a whole. Wesley’s writings did not challenge his followers to voluntarily surrender all earthly goods, rather to earn as much money as possible; this was limited however, by emphasizing essential honesty in profit making. He also exhorted the people to save or put away earned money and refrain from unnecessary expenditures. Wesley believed that money as such is neither good nor evil. In the hands of God’s children it becomes ‘nourishment for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for naked’. All that money could achieve, good or evil, depended on how people used it. ¹

The Church of the Nazarene and the Poor

“We want places so plain that every board will say welcome to the poorest.” These were words of Bresee. The early Nazarenes listened with their hearts to “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Identification with the Lord’s own mission had led Wesley to England’s prisons, slums, and mining communities. Now it was the Nazarene founder’s concern. Holiness builds a church with a heart for the poor and broken!” ²

The *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene ³ lists the following as the responsibility of the church to the poor: “The Church of the Nazarene believes that Jesus commanded His disciples to have a special relationship to the poor of this world; that Christ’s Church ought, first, to keep itself simple

and free from an emphasis on wealth and extravagance and, second, to give itself to the care, feeding, clothing, and shelter of the poor. Throughout the Bible and in the life and example of Jesus, *God identifies with and assists the poor, the oppressed, and those in society who cannot speak for themselves*. In the same way, we, too, are called to identify with and to enter into solidarity with the poor and not simply to offer charity from positions of comfort (I think that at this moment compassionate ministry is a venue to offer charity from a position of comfort). *We hold that compassionate ministry to the poor includes acts of charity as well as a struggle to provide opportunity, equality, and justice for the poor*" (I do not believe that the church enters into solidarity with the poor to advocate for economical justice although we are quite good in giving alms).

I do acknowledge that since its beginning the Church of the Nazarene and its leadership have made it a priority to respond to the oppressed, marginalized, and the hurting people of our world. But it seems that the church is only good in relief projects. The relief projects are welcome but they aim mostly to address survival of the victims of war, disaster and prolonged injustice. They are short-term solutions and most of the times treat the symptoms and not the disease. We need to purposefully intensify community development projects which are sustainable. We are called to advocate for equality and justice.

The Economic Imperatives of the Disciples of Jesus

And someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" ...Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." ⁴

"Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." ⁵

"In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" ⁶

The Bible offers a basis for discussion: sharing of possessions according to the New Testament is the economic imperative of the disciples. But there could be sharing of possessions with the aim of empowering the recipients or the sharing of possessions with the aim to gain control over the recipients. Jesus warned his followers that wealth could become an obstacle for people to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 16:13; 18:24). Wealth or possessions can become an obstacle when they pose a temptation to prestige and security apart from God (e.g. Luke 12:13-21, 33-34). Therefore Jesus challenges his disciples to sell everything to help eradicate poverty. Luke carefully observes that discipleship "entails" 'leaving everything'. In the early community of Jerusalem, people were able from time to time to sell property to provide for the needs of the church (Acts 4:34). Perhaps the best commentary Luke provides on "leaving everything" comes in Acts: 'No one claimed private ownership of any possessions. Instead, they had everything in common' (Acts 4: 32).

In the ancient's Mediterranean life, the economic sharing was embedded in social relations. To share with someone without expectation of return was to treat them as though they were family. However there were also Patron-client relations. In this context a potential patron possessed some commodity required by a client. In exchange, the client would provide appropriate expressions of honour and loyalty to the patron. Having received patronage the client now existed in a state of obligation, of debt. The possibility for exploitation and the exercise of controlling power is high. I am afraid in some cases this is true in the church of the Nazarene.

I am equally aware that the rule that disciples of Jesus must give up all their possessions is set alongside other teachings and narratives that pose different models of faithful response to the gospel. Zacchaeus, for example, is commended for his repentant response (Luke 19:9a), even though he gives up considerably less than everything. The church in Jerusalem on the other hand is commended for generous sharing of possessions rather than radical renunciation. Therefore we cannot derive simple or univocal rule for economic practice from the New Testament. ⁷ But it is no doubt that the New Testament calls the church to acts of sacrificial service far beyond what simple justice would require. The Word of God clearly communicates that God requires of us a sharing of possessions far more radical than the church has ordinarily supposed. The concept of "social entrepreneurs" is an emerging paradigm for the 21st Century. Social entrepreneurship could be

the answer to help the church honour her vision to create “self supporting” churches all over the world. Social entrepreneurs are committed to systematic changes and sustainable improvements.

“We understand Christian holiness to be inseparable from ministry to the poor in that it drives the Christian beyond his or her own individual perfection and toward the creation of a more just and equitable society and world. Holiness, far from distancing believers from the desperate economic needs of people in our world, motivates us to place our means in the service of alleviating such need and to adjust our wants in accordance with the needs of others.”⁸

We are called to share whatever we possess in a manner that glorifies God. Sharing in a way that empowers means treating others as members of one’s own extended family. It means trusting them to make decisions on how to use or invest resources that are made available to them for sustainable development. Therefore a careful eradication of poverty within the church will set an agenda that seeks to educate members. Educate with the hope that those trained will be able to assess how the church can make effective use of available resources to solve the problem of rural and urban poverty, improve the understanding of the nature and process of sustainable development and contribute to the reducing of poverty.

The challenge to the church today is to apply Biblical imperatives in the process of uplifting the poor. The challenge to the poor is to accept that God has given them the power to rise above their circumstances and become productive members of the Kingdom of Christ. The challenge to the rich is to work towards empowering the poor to reach their full God given potential without trying to impose their views on them, and to treat them with the dignity that they deserve as true children of the Kingdom.

“Wesley’s most important contribution in improving the poor’s quality of life lay, neither in these individual projects (however exemplary), nor in his extremely beneficial comprehensive education efforts. Instead, it lay in the challenged consciousness that this now notorious preacher began to engender both among the affected poor and the high strata of English society.”⁹

To be faithful to the mission of the church we have a sacred duty to preach the Gospel and spread its values. The values of the Gospel (truth, justice, and love) must compel us to speak out against injustice of whatever kind in whichever sphere of life it is found. We must strive to promote not only the spiritual, but also the social, political and economic development of all people. Matthew 26:11 “You have the poor with you always...” is often quoted when the issue of poverty is discussed. It is easy to take a passage out of its context to reject the truth. But in the modern world, it is said that sufficient wealth and resources exist to wipe out poverty, if only they were properly distributed. The fact that so many people, even in rich countries, still struggle to survive from one day to the next and that untold thousands die from lack of food, basic health care, and shelter is an indication of economic injustice. The economies are organised in such a way that they are unable to meet the basic needs. We dare not be silent on the issue of socio-economic injustice.

Endnotes

1 Marquadt, M. 1992. *John Wesley’s Social Ethics Praxis and Principles*. Pages 29 – 36

2 Wes Tracy & Stan Ingersol. 1998. *What is a Nazarene?* Pgs. 12 and 13

3 *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene 2001 – 2005* Paragraph 904.5

4 Matthew 19:16-21 (NASB)

5 Luke 12:33-34 (NASB)

6 Acts 20:35 (NASB)

7 Richard Hays. 1996: 467 *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*

8 *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene 2001 – 2005* Paragraph 904.5

9 *John Wesley’s Social Ethics Praxis and Principles*.

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