

Ronald J. Sider (Kent, Great Britain; Hodder & Stoughton, 1980)

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Perhaps all books must be lived before they are written. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 7) That is certainly true of books like this one. I must immediately confess that I make no claim to be living out the full implications of this book. But I have begun the pilgrimage. The most important reason I am even a little way down the path is my wife, Arbutus Lichti Sider. Always enthusiastic about a simpler living standard, spontaneously generous and eager to experiment, she has slowly tugged me along.

who will have to live in the global village we are now creating.

Foreword

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IT IS VIRTUALLY impossible to overstress the practical significance of this book. It calls for a new reformation of the church that is as relevant and urgent for today as were Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in 1517.

Certainly there are numerous issues that call for our attention at this present time: confusions over basic doctrines, questions of ordination, patterns of ministry, the role of women, the unity of the church, the place of spiritual gifts, methods of evangelism, the vital need for renewal-these, and many other matters, hammer insistently on the doors of the church.

Nevertheless, while we continue to have an internal, theological dialogue within our own ranks, the harsh, inescapable fact is that this very day about 500 million men, women and children throughout the world are literally starving, and double that number are undernourished.

The equally disturbing, uncomfortable truth is that Christians in the developed countries are living in comparative gross affluence. We have accepted a lifestyle which is so similar to that of the covetous world around us as to be indistinguishable from it. We may try, sometimes with high sounding spiritual reasons, to justify the money we spend on ourselves, our homes, our food, our clothes, our possessions, our entertainment, our holidays, our children's education, and even our church buildings. We may talk about "trying to win our friends for Christ", about "nothing less than the best being good enough for God", or about "church buildings that must reflect the beauty and glory of our Creator"; yet, however we may describe it, we cannot escape from the fact that (in Jesus' parable of Dives and Lazarus) we are the rich man, (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 9) clothed and fed in comfort, and also guilty of appalling negligence concerning the starving and sick man at our gate. Since all that we are and all that we possess belong to God, we must on day give account of our stewardship to him.

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Further, we have largely ignored the insistent theme throughout the Scriptures-a theme that Ronald Sider expounds so powerfully in this book-that God has always been on the side of the poor. It is not that God is partial towards the poor; he loves equally every person he has created. However, God is essentially a God of justice; and it is because the rich so often oppress or neglect the poor (as is manifestly true in the world of today) that God is especially concerned with the needs of the afflicted. The whole self-revelation of God in the Scriptures-at the time of the Exodus, through the warnings of the prophets, in the compassion of Jesus Christ, with the loving action of the early church-makes this truth abundantly clear.

Moreover, God normally works through his people. If, therefore, we claim to be the people of God, one sure sign of this should be our practical and sacrificial concern for the poor. "If any one has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (1John 3:17f). What the apostle John is saying, in his usual forthright terms, is that those who neglect the poor and needy prove that they cannot really be God's children at all, however orthodox and pious their words and beliefs might be.

It is disturbing, therefore, to find that most western Christians are closely identified with the "establishment", with the rich and powerful. We have greater affinity with the affluent and the influential than with the downtrodden and the oppressed. We have accepted a largely middle-class culture, with its worldly values and selfish ambitions, and have conveniently ignored the utterly radical teaching of Jesus concerning money, possessions and social standing within the kingdom of God.

Most serious of all, perhaps, our lifestyle, both individual and corporate, is astonishingly different from the lifestyle of our Master whom we profess to follow and serve. We know (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 10) (and preach) all about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor, really and extremely poor; but we do not demonstrate the same grace in our own lives. We have not become poor so that others might become rich. We have not even chosen to live simply so that others might simply live. We glory in gospel texts, such as John 3:16, which describes God's amazing generosity towards us in giving us his own Son; but we easily forget certain other texts, such as 1 John 3:16, which challenge our generosity towards others: "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren".

Ronald Sider rightly believes that a new reformation is urgently called for at three levels at the same time.

First, "simple personal lifestyles are crucial to symbolize, validate and facilitate our concern for the hungry". If we carefully and honestly re-examine our own values, and ask ourselves how far they are controlled by western culture and social convention, most of us could and should live far, far more simply than we do. The biblical principle is that of equality amongst God's people (2Cor. 8:14); and the biblical standard for each Christian is enough (2Cor.9:8). Everything above "enough" is to "provide . . . for every good work". The example of John Wesley (p.150) is one probable reason why God was able to use him so powerfully to revive a decadent church and nation.

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Second, "the church must change so that its common life presents a new model for a divided world". As I know a little from my own experience, a deliberate attempt to make a radical change in one's own personal and family lifestyle can be so painful and threatening that the need to "immerse ourselves deeply in Christian fellowship", and to "find our primary identity with other brothers and sisters who are also unconditionally committed to biblical values" (p.164) becomes of considerable importance. Such Christian fellowship, as found in the New Testament means "unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other sisters and brothers-emotionally, financially and spiritually". This is a point that Ronald Sider makes repeatedly. Moreover, the (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 11) existence of such a loving community is indispensable before the church can bring a prophetic word to the society it serves. "The church should consist of communities of loving defiance."

Third, "the structures of secular society require revision". Repentance for personal sin is not enough. As the prophets made clear, we need to repent also for the structural evil in society; and any genuine repentance will lead to a serious attempt to change those structures which encourage the evil. If we neglect to do this, any personal and corporate attempts towards simple living will degenerate into "little more than a gloriously irrelevant ego-trip or proud pursuit of personal purity" (p.178).

I profoundly believe that this book contains the most vital challenge which faces the church of today. It is one of the most searching and disquieting books I have ever read. It requires not only careful study, and, perhaps, some adaption to the society in which we may live; it calls, above all, for immediate and sacrificial action, if we know anything of God's love in our hearts. It is useless calling Jesus "Lord, Lord", if we do not do what he tells us. It will not be easy. It will often be painful. But I am convinced that this practical expression of God's love for people, especially for the afflicted and oppressed, will bring about the greatest impact for Christ that the church could ever make in this present world.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

(Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 12)

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Introduction

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HUNGER AND STARVATION stalk the land. Famine is alive and well on planet earth. Millions of people die of starvation each year. Even the most conservative statistics reflect a horrifying situation. One billion people are starving or malnourished. Can overfed, comfortably clothed and luxuriously housed persons understand poverty? Can we truly feel what it is like to be a nine-year-old boy playing outside a village school which he cannot attend because his father is unable to afford the necessary books? (The books would cost less than my wife and I spent on some entertainment one evening during the writing of this book.) Can we really feel what it means for poverty stricken parents to watch with helpless grief

as their baby daughter dies of a common childhood disease because, like half of our global neighbours even today, they lack access to modern medicine? Probably not.

We can however, make an attempt to understand. We can search for honest answers to questions such as these: How many people are actually hungry today? What are the effects of poverty? Tear-jerking rhetoric aside, how great is the gap between the rich and poor passengers on spaceship earth? And how does our affluence look in comparison with their poverty?

This book develops a biblical response. Part One sketches the setting with a brief overview of world poverty and the affluence of the Northern Hemisphere. The heart of our study is Part Two, "A Biblical Perspective on the Poor and Possessions." Part Three develops concrete suggestion for the individual, the church and society. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 13)

PART 1 POOR LAZARUS AND RICH CHRISTIANS

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1 A BILLION HUNGRY NEIGHBOURS

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SOMETIMES I THINK, "IF I DIE, I WON'T HAVE TO SEE MY CHILDREN SUFFERING AS THEY ARE." SOMETIMES I EVEN THINK OF KILLING MYSELF. SO OFTEN I SEE THEM CRYING, HUNGRY; AND THERE I AM, WITHOUT A CENT TO BUY THEM SOME BREAD. I THINK, "MY GOD, I CAN'T FACE IT! I'LL END MY LIFE. I DON'T WANT TO LOOK ANY MORE!" (IRACEMA DA SILVA, RESIDENT OF A SLUM IN BRAZIL)

What does poverty really mean in daily life?

One way to try and answer this question is to list what a typical Western family would need to give up if they were to adopt the lifestyle of a typical family living among our billion hungry neighbours. Economist Robert Heilbroner has itemized the abandoned "luxuries".

We begin by invading the house of our imaginary Western family to strip it of its furniture. Everything goes: beds, chairs, tables, television set, lamps. We will leave the family with a few old blankets, a kitchen table, a wooden chair. Along with the bureaus go the clothes. Each member of the family may keep in his "wardrobe" his oldest suit or dress, a skirt or blouse. We will permit a pair of shoes for the head of the family, but none for the wife or children.

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We move to the kitchen. The appliances have already been taken out, so we turn to the cupboards . . . The box of matches may stay, (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 17) a small bag of flour, some sugar and salt. A few mouldy potatoes, already in the rubbish bin, must be hastily rescued, for they will provide much of tonight's meal. We will leave a handful of onions, and a dish of dried beans. All the rest we take away: the meat, the fresh vegetables, the canned goods . . .

Now we have stripped the house: the bathroom has been dismantled, the running water shut off, the electric wires taken out, Next we take away the house. The family can move to the toolshed . . .

Communications must go next. No more newspapers, magazines, books - not that they are missed, since we must take away our famil'ys literacy as well. Instead, in our shantytown we will allow one radio . . .

Now government services must go. No more postman, no more firemen. There is a school, but it is three miles away and consists of two classrooms . . . There are, of course, no hospitals or doctors nearby. The nearest clinic is ten miles away and is tended by a midwife. It can be reached by bicycle, provided that the family has a bicycle, which is unlikely. . .

Finally, money. We will allow our family a cash hoard of \$2.00. This will prevent our breadwinner from experiencing the tragedy of an Iranian peasant who went blind because he could not raise the \$1.50 which he mistakenly thought he needed to receive admission to a hospital where he could have been cured.

How many of our brothers and sisters confront that kind of grinding poverty today? Probably at least one billion people are as poor as this. They know hunger in a way that those of us in the West have never known, including those who can remember living through war-time and post-war rationing in Western Europe. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 18)

It is vital to remember that the effects of malnutrition do not disappear when a good crop comes along. The consequences of those years of extreme hunger will always be with tens of millions of children who survived, but who have already experienced severe irreversible damage to both brain and body during their childhood, and have weakened bodies highly vulnerable to disease because of their inadequate intake of calories and proteins. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 19)

The tears and agony of all these people are captured in the words of Mrs. Alarin from the Philippines. The Alarin family of seven live in an eight-by-ten-foot room. Cooking utensils are their only furniture. Mr. Alarin makes forty pence on good days as an ice vendor. Several times a month, Mrs. Alarin stays up all night to make a coconut sweet which she

sells on the street. Total income for her midnight toil: twenty-five pence. The family had not tasted meat for a month when Stan Mooneyham of World Vision visited Mrs. Alarin recently:

Tears washed her dark, sunken eye-sockets as she spoke: "I feel so sad when my children cry at night because they have no food. I know my life will never change. What can I do to solve my problems? I am so worried about the future of my children. I want them to go to school but how can we afford it? I am sick most of the time, but I can't go to the doctor because each visit costs two pesos [fifteen pence] and the medicine is extra. What can I do?" She broke down into quiet sobbing. I admit without shame that I wept with her.

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World poverty is a hundred million mothers weeping, like Mrs. Alarin, because they cannot feed their children. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 21)

While Sebastian and Maria's twins lay dying, there was still an abundance of food in the world. But it was not divided fairly. The well-to-do in Brazil had plenty to eat. Two hundred and ten million U.S. citizens were consuming enough food (partly because of high consumption of grain-fed livestock) to feed over one billion people in the poor countries!

This is how famine has been redefined, or rather, redistributed! It no longer inconveniences the rich and powerful. It strikes only the poor and powerless. Since the poor usually die quietly in relative obscurity, the rich of all nations comfortably ignore this kind of famine. But famine - redefined and redistributed - is alive and well. Even in good times, millions and millions of persons go to bed hungry. Their children's brains vegetate and their bodies succumb prematurely to disease.

Poverty means illiteracy, inadequate medical care, disease, brain damage. People in the West have enjoyed the security offered by modern medicine for so long that they assume it must now be available to all. But that is a tragic illusion. Population expert Lester Brown reminds us that "as of the mid - 1970s, . . . an estimated one-third to one-half of mankind still lives without access to health services of any kind."

INFANTS, BRAIN DAMAGE AND PROTEIN

Permanent brain damage caused by protein deficiency is one of the most devastating aspects of world poverty. 80 per cent of total brain development takes place between the moment of conception and the age of two. Adequate protein intake - precisely what at least 210 million malnourished children do not have - is necessary for proper brain development. A recent study in Mexico found that a group of severely malnourished children under five had an IQ thirteen points lower than a scientifically selected, adequately fed control group. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 25)

When a poor family runs out of food, the children suffer most. For the present, an inactive child is not as serious a problem as an inactive wage earner. But malnutrition produces millions of retarded children. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 26)

Hunger, illiteracy, disease, brain damage, death. That's what world poverty means. At least one billion persons experience its daily anguish. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 27)

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POPULATION

Along with the food crisis and the population explosion, a third set of complex, interrelated issues makes our dilemma even more desperate. How long can the earth sustain the present rate of industrialization? What will be the effect of the resulting pollution? When will we run out of natural resources (especially fossil fuels such as coal and oil)? In 1972 the Club of Rome (a group of elite, international corporation executives, technocrats and scholars) shocked the world with an answer based on a sophisticated, computerized analysis. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 28)

Although industrial production growth rates have come down since the oil crisis, the growth in Western industrial production and some in industrial production in developing countries will still place intolerable strains on the world's resources in the future. The debate taking place at the moment is about when this will happen, and which resources will be used up first, rather than if it will happen.

THE FUTURE AND OUR RESPONSE The population explosion and the probable necessity of slowing industrialization (at least in the affluent nations) compound the difficulties involved in trying to divide the world's resources more justly. Not surprisingly, predictions of doomsday are legion. What are our future prospects?

No one can predict with any certainty what will happen in the next decade. Vast mushrooming famines in the poorer nations may tempt their leaders to unleash wars of unprecedented size and ferocity in a desperate attempt to demand a fairer share of the earth's resources. Such a prospect is not at all fantasy. In a recent book Professor Heilbroner predicts nuclear terrorism and "wars of redistribution". Heilbroner suggests that the world is like "an immense train, in which a few passengers, mainly in the advanced capitalist world, ride in first-class coaches, in conditions of comfort unimaginable to the enormously greater numbers crammed in cattle cars that make up the bulk of the train's carriages". As millions die and imminent starvation stares tens of millions of persons in the face, a country like India will have to seek some way out. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 30)

What will Christians do in such a time? Will we dare to insist that the God revealed in Scripture is always at work seeking to "set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk.4:18)? Will Christians have the courage to seek justice for the poor even if that means prison? Where will you and I stand? With the starving or the overfed? With poor Lazarus or the rich man? Most of the rich countries are white and at least nominally Christian. What an ironic tragedy if the white, affluent, (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 31) "Christian" minority in the world continue to amass wealth while hundreds of millions of people hover on the edge of starvation!

In an Age of Hunger most Christians (regardless of theological labels) will be severely tempted to succumb to the liberal heresy of following current cultural and societal values rather than biblical truth. Society will offer demonically convincing justification for enjoying our affluence and forgetting about a billion hungry neighbours.

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But if the Christ of Scripture is our Lord, then we will refuse to be squeezed into the mould of our affluent, sinful culture. In an Age of Hunger Christians of necessity must be radical nonconformists. But nonconformity is painful. Only if we are thoroughly grounded in the scriptural view of possessions, wealth and poverty will we be capable of living an obedient lifestyle. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 32)

2 THE AFFLUENT MINORITY

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There are many ways of showing our incredible affluence in the West relative to that of developing countries but undoubtedly the most striking measure of the gap between rich and poor is our consumption of the most basic commodity of all - food. Table 5 shows that Europeans consume two and a half times as much cereal per person as do the people in the developing countries, although cereals such as rice are the staple diet of almost all the developing countries. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 35)

Christians earning \$4,000 a year or more have been heard to complain that they are poor! In summer 1977, a leader of one of Britain's professions said that his members were "worrying themselves sick" on how they could manage on \$8,500 a year. To the vast majority of the world's people such statements would be unintelligible - or very dishonest. To be sure, we do need \$4,000 a year (which is above average earnings for the U.K. in 1977) or even more if we are going to run a car, have a comfortable suburban home full of "labour - saving devices", and demand some new clothes every year. Most Christians in the West have come to expect precisely that, but it is hardly life at the edge of poverty. In fact it is undreamed - of luxury to hundreds of millions of our brothers and sisters in the developing world.

Constant, seductive advertising helps to create this destructive delusion. Advertisers regularly con us into believing that we genuinely need one luxury after another. We are convinced that we must keep up with or even go one better than our neighbours. So we buy another dress, suit or pair of shoes and thereby force up the standard of living. The ever more affluent standard of living is the god of twentieth-century Western people and the ad-man is its prophet.

The purpose of advertising no longer is primarily to inform. It is to create desire. "CREATE MORE DESIRE" shrieked one inch-high headline for an unusually honest ad in the New York Times. It continued: "Now, as always, profit and growth stem directly from the ability of salesmanship to create more desire." Luxurious houses in Country Life, Ideal Home or Homes and Gardens make one's perfectly adequate house shrink by comparison into a dilapidated, tiny cottage in need of immediate renovation. The advertisements for the new season's fashions make our almost new dresses and suits from previous years look shabby and positively old fashioned.

We are bombarded by costly, manipulative advertising at every turn. The average Briton watches television containing 5-10,000 commercials every year.

In 1977, \$1,500 million was spent in the U.K. on advertising “to convince us that Jesus was wrong about the abundance of possessions”.

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Luxuries are renamed necessities by advertising. Our postman recently delivered an elegant brochure complete with glossy photographs of exceedingly expensive homes. The brochure announced the seductive lie that Architectural Digest would help one quench “man’s passionate need for beauty and luxury” (my emphasis). Supposedly, we “need” luxuries!

Sometimes advertising overkill is hilarious. An evangelical book discount house recently created this pious, promotional gem “Your mouth is going to water, and your soul is going to glow, when you feast your eyes on the bargains we have been providentially provided for your benefit this month.” (I promptly ordered books worth twenty-four dollars! My library is one of my near idols.)

(Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 40)

PROMISES, PROMISES Perhaps the most devastating and most demonic part of advertising is that it attempts to persuade us that material possessions will bring joy and fulfilment. “That happiness is to be attained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to man, but is preached incessantly by every commercial on television.” Advertisers promise that their products will satisfy our deepest needs and inner longings for love, acceptance, security and sexual fulfilment. The right deodorant, they promise, will bring acceptance and friendship. The newest toothpaste or shampoo will make one irresistible. A house or bank account will guarantee security and love.

Examples are everywhere. A bank in Washington, D.C., recently advertised for new savings accounts with the question: “Who’s gonna love you when you’re old and grey?” Our savings bank sponsors a particularly enticing ad: “Put a little love away. Everybody needs a penny for a rainy day. Put a little love away.” Those words are unbiblical, heretical, demonic. They teach the Big Lie of our secular, materialistic society. But the words and music are so seductive that they dance through my head hundreds of times.

If no one paid any attention to these lies, they would be harmless. But that is impossible. Advertising has a powerful effect on all of us. It shapes the values of our children. Many people in our society truly believe that more possessions will bring acceptance and happiness.

In a sense we pay too little attention to advertisements. Most of us think that we ignore them. But in fact they seep into our unconscious minds. We experience them instead of analysing them. We should examine their blatant lies and then laugh hilariously at their preposterous promises. John V. Taylor has suggested that Christian families ought to adopt the slogan “Who Are You Kidding?” and shout in unison every time a commercial appears on the screen. An alternative is simply to turn down the sound whenever a commercial break comes on. Fortunately in Britain the commercial breaks are much less frequent than in America, though each commercial break is longer, and they occur on only one of the three channels. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 41)

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Advertising itself contains a fundamental inner contradiction. Christians know that affluence does not guarantee love, acceptance and joy. But advertising promises them to strive feverishly for more gadgets and bigger bank accounts. Given our inherent bent for idolatry, advertising is so demonically powerful and convincing that most people persist in their fruitless effort to quench their thirst for meaning and fulfilment with an ever-rising river of possessions.

The result is inner, agonizing distress and undefined dissatisfaction and external, structural injustice. Our affluence fails to satisfy our restless hearts. And it also helps to deprive one billion hungry neighbours of badly needed food and resources. Will we affluent Christians have the courage and faithfulness to learn how to be uncomformed to this world’s seductive, satanic advertising?

(Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 42)

It is simply false to suggest that there is not enough food to feed everyone. There is enough - if it is more evenly distributed. In 1970 the United Nations estimated that it would take only 12 million additional tons of grain per year to provide 260 extra calories per day to the 460 million people suffering from malnutrition. That is only 30 per cent of what the U.S. feeds its livestock. In a world where the rich minority feed more grain to their livestock than all the people in India

and China eat, it is absurd and immoral to talk of the necessity of letting selected hungry nations starve. The boat in which the rich sail is not an austere equipped lifeboat. It is a lavishly stocked luxury liner.

A second rationalization has a pious ring to it. Some evangelical Christians argue that they must adopt an affluent lifestyle in order to evangelise wealthy persons. But that is highly questionable.

Where does valid justification end and rationalization begin? We must avoid simplistic legalism. Christians certainly ought to live in the suburbs as well as the inner city. But those who defend an affluent lifestyle on the basis of a call to witness to the rich must ask themselves hard questions: How much of my affluent lifestyle is directly related to my witnessing to rich neighbours? (For people who go out to work much of their witness is to those they work with. A humbler lifestyle may convince others that our Christian faith really does mean something especially when it affects even our pocket!) (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 49)

How much of it could I abandon for the sake of Christ's poor and still be able to witness effectively? Indeed how much of it must I abandon in order to faithfully proclaim the biblical Christ who clearly taught that failure to feed the poor entails eternal damnation (Mt.25:45-46)?

In the coming decades rationalizations for our affluence will be legion. They will be popular and persuasive. "Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.19:23). But all things are possible with God - if we will hear and obey his Word. If there is any ray of hope for the future, it is in the possibility that growing numbers of affluent Christians will dare to allow the Bible to shape their relationship to a billion sons and daughters of poor Lazarus. The next four chapters will develop a biblical perspective on poverty and possessions. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 50)

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PART II A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE POOR & POSSESSIONS

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Martin Luther once said that "if you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you are not preaching the Gospel at all".

Luther's comment relates directly to the findings of a recent scholarly study. Social scientists examined the factors that shape attitudes on matters related to the development of the poor nations. They discovered that religion plays no significant role at all! Those with deep religious beliefs are no more concerned about assistance and development for the poor than are persons with little or no religious commitment.

Western Christians have failed to declare God's perspective on the plight of our billion hungry neighbours - surely one of the most pressing issues of our time.

But I refuse to believe that this failure must inevitably continue. I believe there are millions of Christians in affluent lands who care more about Jesus than anything else in the world. There are millions of Christians who will take any risk, make any sacrifice, forsake any treasure, if they see clearly that God's Word demands it. That is why part two, "A Biblical Perspective on the Poor and Possessions," is the most important section of our study. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 52)

3 GOD & THE POOR

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HE WHO IS KIND TO THE POOR LENDS TO THE LORD. [PROV.19:17] I KNOW THAT THE LORD MAINTAINS THE CAUSE OF THE AFFLICTED, AND EXECUTES JUSTICE FOR THE NEEDY. [PS.140:12]

What is the biblical approach to possessions and poverty?

Is God biased in favour of the poor? Some theologians have recently said yes. The question, however, is ambiguous. Does it mean that God desires the salvation of the poor people more than the salvation of the rich? Does it mean that God and his people treat the poor so conspicuously differently from the way the rich and powerful normally treat them that we can say that God seems to have a special concern for the poor and oppressed? Is God on the side of the poor in a way that he is not on the side of the rich?

We can answer these questions about God's "bias" toward the poor only after we have searched for biblical answers to five related questions: (1) What concern for the poor did God disclose at those pivotal points (especially the Exodus, the destruction of Israel and Judah, and the Incarnation) where he acted in history to reveal himself? (2) In what sense does God identify with the poor? (3) How significant is the fact that God very frequently chooses to work through the poor and oppressed? (4) What does the Bible mean by the constantly recurring teaching that God destroys the rich and exalts the poor? (5) Does God command his people to have special concern for the poor? (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 53)

But the right of private property is not absolute. From the perspective of biblical revelation, property owners are not free to seek their own profit without regard for the needs of the neighbour. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 102)

The psalmist summarized the biblical view of Yahweh's absolute ownership: "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps.24:1). "Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine," God informed Job (Job 41:11; see also Ps.50:12; Deut.26:10; Ex.19:5). In the last chapter we examined the year of Jubilee. It is precisely because absolute ownership of the land rested with Yahweh rather than the Israelite farmers that he could command the redistribution of land every fiftieth year: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev.25:23, my emphasis; see also Deut.10:14). Because he is creator and sustainer of all things, God alone has absolute property rights.

As absolute owner, God places limitations on the acquisition and use of property. According to the Old Testament, "the right to property was in principle subordinated to the obligation to care for the weaker members of society." That is the clear implication of the legislation, discussed in the last chapter, on the Jubilee, the sabbatical year, gleaning and interest. Property owners did not have the right to harvest everything in their fields. They were to leave some for the poor. When an Israelite farmer purchased land, he really only bought the use of the land until the year of Jubilee (Lev.25:15-17). Indeed even the right to use the land for the intervening years was not absolute. If a relative of the seller appeared, the purchaser had (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 103) to sell the land back promptly. Or if the seller recovered financial solvency, he had the right to buy back his land immediately (Lev.25:25-28). The purchaser's right of ownership was subordinate to the original owner's right to earn a living.

The case of slave illustrates this point. In all other ancient civilizations slaves were viewed as mere property.. The owner was completely free to treat the slave according to his whim. But in Israel the slave was a person, not a piece of property. Specific laws guaranteed him certain rights (Ex.21:20,26,27; Deut.23:15-16). "The fact that, in accordance with God's order, the life of every individual, even of the poorest, is of greater value than all material things - this fact represents an insurmountable stumbling - block to all economic developments which make profits for the few out of human misery." (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 104)

RICH CHRISTIANS IN AN AGE OF HUNGER

13

Ronald J. Sider (Kent, Great Britain; Hodder & Stoughton, 1980)

A CAREFREE ATTITUDE TOWARD POSSESSIONS

Jesus calls his followers to a joyful life of carefree unconcern for possessions:

I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food to keep you alive and clothes to cover your body.

What is the secret of such carefree living? First, many people cling to their possessions instead of sharing them because they are worried about the future. Jesus taught us that God is our loving Father. His word Abba (Mk.14:36) is a tender, intimate word like Papa. If we really believe (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 105) that the almighty creator and sustainer of the cosmos is our loving Papa, then we can begin to cast aside anxiety about earthly possessions.

If there are poor people who need assistance, Jesus' carefree disciple will help - even if that means selling possessions. People are vastly more important than property. "Laying up treasure in heaven" means exactly the same thing. (Rich Christians in an age of Hunger, Ronald J. Sider : 106)

The rich fool is the epitome of the covetous person. He has a greedy compulsion to acquire more and more possessions even though he does not need them. And his phenomenal success at piling up more and more property and wealth leads to the blasphemous conclusion that material possessions can satisfy all his needs. From the divine perspective, however, this attitude is sheer madness. He is a raving fool.

