

An Invitation and a challenge, or  
“The third time’s the charm”  
A Critical Concerns Essay regarding one Christian’s response to the poor  
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Discussions about the plight of the poor tend to divide into two camps. In one camp, there are those who stress the meager options of poor people. Barriers to a better life include job and residential discrimination, unemployment, inadequate health care, and poor education. In the other camp, there are those who stress behavioral deficits of the poor. They assert - What the poor most need most is to help themselves with hard work, deferred gratification, frugality and responsibility. (West, 1994)

These two camps significantly shape the way poverty is discussed in America. When Christians enter the debate, as we are doing this afternoon, several other factors come into play. Christians agree that God is at work in the world. They believe that they are entrusted and empowered to do God’s work. Part of that work, certainly, involves the poor. However, Christians disagree over such questions as

- Does God give special regard to the poor compared to other social classes?
- When Christians serve the poor is it to express God’s love or to convey God’s message?
- Does evil reside primarily in the hearts of men, or is it also embedded in the DNA of economic and political structures of a fallen world system?
- Does the creed “Jesus is Lord” affect the way Christians do politics or economics?
- Should the way Jesus acted with politicians and poor shape our interactions with those groups today?

Answers to these questions divide Christians as deeply as does the liberal – conservative debate regarding the poor.

For this event, I wrote and discarded two papers.

In my first essay, I focused on Jim Wallis and Marvin Olasky. Both men passionately persuade Christians to engage the world for Christ. Recently, both have written about a controversial Bush era program known as faith based initiatives. This program allows Christians and other religious groups to compete for government money earmarked to provide social services for the poor. (Dionne & Chen, 2001)

Both Olasky (2003) and Wallis (2005) support faith based initiatives. What they say about them, however, differs dramatically. Mr. Olasky insists that faith based initiatives serve the public well, and are consistent with American traditions of religious pluralism and free speech. He accuses critics of the program of “Christophobia” which Olasky defines as fear to admit the legitimate place that Christianity occupies in American society

Jim Wallis supports President Bush’s plan because many Bible verses indicate that God approves of assisting to the poor. Two things, however, concern him about Christian involvement in faith based initiatives. First, Christians must never be satisfied with merely servicing the poor. They also must

address causes and seek solutions. And second, church – state partnerships must not diminish the practice of “prophetic politics.” Mr. Wallis defines prophetic politics as non-partisan Christian advocacy guided by biblical imperatives for justice, peace and mercy.

My essay neared completion, and I began anticipating the “so what” question that concludes presentations like this. Faith based agencies serving the poor are important to me, but what about you? I’m associated with two such agencies. I’m on the board of directors of the Marriage Resource Center of Miami Valley (You can pick up brochures after the meeting – they do GOOD work - strengthening marriages through relationship education). Also, my wife has recently started a non-profit agency called Citilookout. Citilookout is a community counseling practice that actively serves poor people. Most of you, however, don’t have those connections, and probably never will. So, I discarded my first essay, in hopes of finding something to say that would be more interesting and useful to others.

My second essay began well. It was my Biblical manifesto for Christian engagement with the poor. My essay opened - “Jesus association with the poor was a prominent part of his mission, life and death.” In this paper I present a cultural analysis of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish mores regarding sick and disabled people. Did you know many first century Jew believed that sickness and disability indicated God’s judgment of sinners? (Recall the disciples question in John 9: “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?”). Furthermore, in Jewish society sin was not a private, individual matter, as it is in ours. Sinners were a threat to the whole nation (Recall God’s judgment upon the entire nation at Ai, when Aiken sinned. Joshua 7) Consequently, sick and disabled, along with tax collectors and publicans, were excluded from the community as sinners. Now, it was possible for a sinner to be readmitted to full membership in the community. To do so, however, a priest must inspect the formerly sick man to make sure that there was no threat of contagion. A priest must make sacrifices for the sinner to prevent God’s judgment falling on the nation.

Now, enter Jesus. He forgives sin and heals the sick and disabled and restores them to full status in Jewish society. Beyond that, he attends dinner parties with them and tax collectors, publicans and sinners - privileging them as the first recipients of a new social order (Recall the opening beatitude, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”). This causes quite a stir among the people. And enthusiasm - the kind of notoriety that made Jesus an unacceptable threat to the guardians of the Jewish Nation. In fact, Jesus had acted in ways that made the temple and priesthood irrelevant. From the point of view of the Sanhedrin and priests, Jesus was dispensing what he did not have authority to give (forgiveness and restoration), to people who did not deserve it (sick, sinners, publicans and tax collectors). And so, rather than lose their privileged place, the politicians arranged to have him eliminated. (Wright, 1966)

When I finished reading the second essay to my wife, Shelley, she asked, “What do you mean? How does this perspective help others help the poor?” I said, tentatively, “Maybe it means helping the poor is risky. Look at Jesus - he was misunderstood and mistreated because of his involvement with the poor. So, maybe, today, people interested in helping the poor should assume it will cost them something.” Warming to this idea, I concluded somewhat more confidently. “Maybe that’s what Jesus had in mind

when he said, 'Take up your cross, daily, and follow me.'" I look over to observe what I now believed would be an appropriately admiring response.

Without looking up from what she was doing, she said "Great! So you're telling the faculty, staff and students at Cedarville, 'go out and suffer, and that will help the poor!'" A good wife, is worth far more than rubies. . . She keeps me grounded.

So, after two attempts, and two failures, what can I say about how Christians engage the poor that would interest you, and be an option for some? What practical, concrete advice can I give? I can offer an invitation and a pose a challenge.

Invitation: Many of us of have fond memories of a kind and melodious voice saying - "Won't you be my neighbor?" Here is a picture of neighbors on South Fountain Avenue in Springfield.



The neighborhood in which we live contains one of the best collections of Victorian homes in Ohio. Some homes are in good state of repair. Others are dilapidated and dangerous. In those houses live the poor, because they have no other option. So, here is the invitation. "Won't you be our neighbor?" Specifically, here is the picture of a South Fountain house that will be for sale in the spring.





If you bought this house, be prepared for your life to veer off in unexpected ways. You will see prostitutes, drug dealers, trash pickers, recently released felons and many others whose lives are dramatically different from your own. At first you will be frightened or fascinated. If you are fortunate, with time, you will learn names, and life stories, and soon start to see them as neighbors.



As Emerson and Smith (2000) describe in their book Divided by Faith, your close contact with the poor will affect the “cultural tools” you use for assigning the causes and suggesting solutions for poverty.

Challenge: It goes without saying that with the purchase of a home, comes next door neighbors. This is the house adjacent to one for sale. This once grand mansion is now cut up into 6 apartments.



People who live in those apartments, your neighbors, are well known to the police. A report from the local police department indicates an average of three visits a month - calls for assault, domestic violence, property theft, pandering, drug possession and trafficking. Another thing I should tell you, if you move to this house you will acquire me as the neighbor to the other side of this property. Now, here's the challenge - just imagine, with the Lopez's on the North, and you on the South, who knows what might happen for God's kingdom.

Twelve years ago we joined an already vibrant group of “urban pioneers.” Many of them share our faith in God, and almost all of them are firmly committed to transforming urban wastelands and garbage dumps into beautiful and productive places. Some experiences have been hard, some exhilarating – but all of them have been immensely meaningful and satisfying. Any of you who would like to take the challenge and join the adventure, please contact me after this event.

I would like to conclude with a quote from The Challenge of Jesus by N.T. Wright (1999) – a book I strongly recommend for any of you who might be interested in the symbol making power of Christian community development.

(O)ur task, as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians (intent upon) following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to the world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to the world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to the world that knows only exploitation, fear and suspicion. . . . Following Christ in the power of the Spirit means bringing to our world the shape of the gospel: (which includes) forgiveness, the best news that anyone can ever hear . . . and judgment for all who insist on dehumanizing themselves and others by their continuing pride, injustice and greed. (pp.184, 185).

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