

THE RESPONSE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH TO MATERIAL NEEDS AND MATERIALISM

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Abstract

The New Testament church responded to materialism both in philosophical and ethical ways, stressing the spiritual side of poverty or wealth. The answer she was giving to this problem was based on the Old Testament approach to the poor who were not only poor in property but were also poor before the Lord (i.e. humble, godly and obedient). In modern times it is important to reiterate this message because the modern church tends to be preoccupied with the material side of the problem while the core of the problem is spiritual.

“Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom?” (James 1:25)

INTRODUCTION

First of all we need to say what we mean by “the period of the New Testament church,” Is it the church at the time of Jesus' disciples in the period before the beginning of Paul's mission to the gentiles? Or does the period of the Apostolic Fathers also belong to this period? Different answers have been given by Harnack or by a Catholic theologian. One of the possible solutions is given in Bultmann's book *Primitive Christianity*.¹ Bultmann says Christianity is a syncretistic religion, but all his quotations that characterize early Christianity are from the New Testament. In spite of my reservations with Bultmann's theology, I am using his definition of the period and I am limiting myself to quotations from the New Testament.

We can say, simply, that the response of the New Testament church to the material needs was the diaconate, and that the response to materialism was the

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956).

warnings against the dangers of wealth. The first consisted in action and the second in words. These two things – words and deeds – are inseparably united in the response of the New Testament church, although we must agree with Thieliicke who says that “...the specifically “Christian” element in ethics does not emerge at the level of acts and in ethical programs ... the specifically “Christian” element in ethics is found only at the level of motives”.² (This means, simply, that you cannot prove that the words or deeds are Christian just by listening to them or observing them.) So we must understand that the response of the New Testament church to the issue of material needs on the one hand and materialism on the other was the formation of the motives, building-up faith and Christian love. That is why, in addition to our interest in the history of Christian actions, we need to concern ourselves also with the interpretation of those actions in words.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AND POVERTY

The way in which the New Testament understands poverty is based on the theology of the Old Testament. Here the words describing ‘the poor’ are mostly – especially in the Psalms – connected with oppression, humility and piety. The poor are ‘God’s poor’, they are oppressed and get help from God. It has nothing to do with the ‘risen proletariat’ demanding its historical rights. The Lord himself identifies with poor like these.³

According to this Old Testament understanding, the New Testament church saw the difference between purely physical poverty and poverty that was connected mainly with piety and humility. We can see this in Jesus' expression the “poor in spirit” (Matt 5:3). This expression is an equivalent of the Hebrew “poor and humble” (e.g. Ps 9:12; 25:9; Prov 16:19). The reminder found in the letter to Timothy shows that not everyone who is physically poor should be the object of the church’s care. This can be understood from the characteristic of a widow. (1Tim. 5:5 “...puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.” NIV)

² Helmut Thieliicke, *Theological Ethics I*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 19-20.

³ e.g. Prov 19:17.

Schaff said, "...the churches... were largely charitable institutions for the support of widows and orphans, strangers and travelers, aged and infirm people in an age of extreme riches and extreme poverty."⁴

Clement of Rome wrote, with reference to the Epistle to the Corinthians: "Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect unto the strong. Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because He hath given him one by whom his need may be supplied."⁵ Polycarp wrote concerning the Philippian epistle: "And let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgment; keeping far off from all covetousness."⁶ And Aristides, the apologist, wrote this testimony to the Roman Caesar around the year CE 140:

"Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their numbers is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food."⁷

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997 reprint), 499-500.

⁵ Clement of Rome, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Chap XXXVIII.

⁶ Polycarp, The Epistle to the Philippians, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Chap VI.

⁷ Aristides, *The Apology*. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/aristides_02_trans.htm (20 January 2003).

Although the Old Testament pays really close attention to the poor, physical poverty does not mean that the poor are somehow privileged.⁸ The same can be said about the New Testament. In Luke 14:13 we read the appeal of Jesus to pay special attention to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (NIV). And Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians goes so far as to change his topic when he tells of the reminder he got in Jerusalem not to forget the poor (Gal 2:10). In Jesus’ words, the poor are blessed,⁹ because they are more ready to get something much better, something that the rich will get only with serious difficulty. And James states, without reservations, that God had chosen the poor “to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom” (Jas 2:5 NIV).

Despite the great emphasis in the Bible on the care for the poor, we have to realize that the social aid that is due to them is in many ways of a secondary order. For example, it was secondary to Jesus' mission to preach: “...so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” (Mark 1:34-38 NIV). It was secondary to devotion to Jesus himself (when Judas criticized the “waste” of precious ointment Matt 26:11). It is also subordinated to the preaching of the Gospel to the poor, since the poor are primarily the object of the preaching of Gospel.¹⁰ A similar principle is used by the apostles in the sixth chapter of Acts, when they refuse to abandon preaching and prayers, but they separate deacons for the social service (Acts 6:1-4).

The same assessment must be applied to what is sometimes called “the Jerusalem communism” (Acts 2:44, 4:32-37). The meaning of this fellowship was the spiritual unity of the church, not total social equalization,¹¹ as we can see in the case of Ananias and Sapphirra (Acts 5:4). Besides, the spontaneity of the Jerusalem communism, it later gave way to an organized diaconate. (The beginnings of this are recorded in Acts 6:1-5.) The “charity initiatives” can be seen in the activities of Tabitha in Acts 9:36, and in the voluntary offering, given as a ministry to the poor in Judea (2 Cor 9).

On the other hand, those who are the object of Church care must not misuse it. The well-known expression of this principle is: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat”

⁸ A good example of this is the warning given in Exod 23:3 – “Do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit” (NIV).

⁹ “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20 NIV).

¹⁰ Jesus quotes in Luke 4:10 the passage from Isa 61:1 – “The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” (NIV)

¹¹ Although the 2 Cor 8:13 speaks about *equality*, it is not an enforced response of the church as a whole, but the voluntary decision of an individual, who has wealth.

(2Thess 3:10 NIV). When the Church applies this strict principle for directing her social aid, it will not become a questionable support of laziness and abuse. Her help is aimed at the weak (Acts 20:35) who, despite their efforts to find a job and work, still cannot support themselves.

The real biblical meaning of material aid given to the poor is admirably expressed in the word “alms”. This Greek term captures the meaning of charity in the New Testament. In the LXX, it translates the Hebrew words for “mercy” (“loving kindness” in the KJV), “justice” and, in one place, “truth” (Gen 47:29). These are words that represent the ultimate meaning of Christian social action. It is an expression of God's mercy, and it also speaks of justice in accordance with the law of God, in which love is central. The poor receiving alms may still remain poor, but they know of God's care in the present, and they look to the Kingdom of God that is coming. The purpose of giving material aid is kerygmatic, to convey a message.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AND MATERIALISM

First let us explain clearly what kind of materialism we are talking about here. The word materialism is a term with a very wide semantic field, it has several meanings, but basically it is used either in its philosophical sense or in its ethical sense. Briefly, we can sum up philosophical materialism in the statement that “everything has its origin in matter and everything can be explained by the processes that occur in matter”. Materialism in its ethical sense can be captured in the statement that “material goods are the most important things for man” (for his existence and his happiness). 1Tim 6:17 expresses this state as putting “hope in wealth, which is so uncertain” (NIV). Another definition is “... the idolatrous elevation of money and the material possessions it will buy as the goal of life”.¹²

These two aspects of materialism are often (but not always) connected. Consequently, we meet people who are convinced materialists in their worldview, but at the same time they are “idealists” and unselfish people, who find fulfillment in cultivating the human spirit, or even in philanthropy. On the other hand, there are philosophical idealists, or those who have a religious worldview and believe in God, but their everyday life and their ethics are determined by material goods.

¹² Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for destruction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 88.

If we wish to use the response of the New Testament church as a model for the Church in our days, it is necessary to be aware of the differences between materialism in the times of the New Testament and materialism today. Materialism in antiquity was philosophically based on atheism and stressed the *primaevae* matter, and the ethical form of materialism concentrated on pleasures (Cyreniacism, Epicureism). In contrast modern philosophical materialism stresses the laws of nature discovered in modern times, and the future of human society that will be brought about by progress. This is what gives the modern form of materialism the element of stability and regularity (instead of God's promises), and with the elements of theology (instead of religious hope).

Ethical materialism in Biblical times is expressed in 1Cor 15:32 in the words of Isa 22:13 – “Let us eat and drink ...for tomorrow we die!” (NIV).

The response of the New Testament church to material needs was clear, not only in what she taught but also in what she did. With reference to the materialism of the rich and wealthy, at first the Church limited herself to warnings addressed to them and appeals to use their property in accordance with Christian love. Only later, under the influence of Greek (Platonic) dualism, communities which considered asceticism and poverty the means to reach Christian perfection began to be created. As we do not find these opinions supported in the New Testament, we will not deal with these here, and we will deal only with the words.

The New Testament church based her view of wealth and riches on the theology of the Old Testament, as she did in the case of the poor. The rich owners of the soil in the agrarian society of the Old Testament times were only tenants of God (Lev 25:23). That meant that the real owner was God. As this society was agrarian, the soil was the main source of the wealth. And since it belonged to God, the source of the wealth was God Himself. This principle had its specific expression in the jubilee year, when the soil was to be restored to the family that had originally sold it.

Although in relation to God no man was the owner of the soil, nevertheless the Old Testament protected private property not only against theft (the Eighth Commandment), but also against coveting (the Tenth Commandment). Wealth was a sign of God's blessing (Deut 8:18). For example, Israel “...will lend to many nations but will borrow from none” (Deut 15:6 NIV).

Against the background of this positive evaluation of wealth as the blessing of God, there are numerous warnings about the vanity and deceitfulness of riches. “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked” (Ps 37:16 NIV). To trust in wealth leads to a fall: “Whoever trusts in his riches will fall” (Prov 11:28 NIV) and unsatiable covetousness: “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income” (Eccl 5:10 NIV).

In the New Testament, probably the sharpest warning of the danger of wealth is that it claims a man’s love: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matt 6:24 NIV). A rich man finds consolation in his wealth, and so he does not look for the joy that comes from God (Luke 6:24). The parable that Jesus told about the difficulty for the rich of entering the Kingdom is also famous – it is compared to the probability of a camel getting through the eye of a needle! The same meaning is conveyed by the story of a rich farmer who planned to rebuild his granaries, or by the story of Dives and Lazarus. Chesterson wrote: “...a man who is dependent upon the luxuries of this life is a corrupt man, spiritually corrupt, politically corrupt, financially corrupt. There is one thing that Christ and all the Christian saints have said with a sort of savage monotony. They have said simply that to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck.”¹³

From what was said above it should be clear that, despite great danger, wealth does not necessarily mean that the rich person has a materialistic outlook on life. The New Testament sees the root of the problem in covetousness (Rom 7:7-8 NIV), in the love of money (1Tim 6:10), in pride and the trust in wealth, in the ruthless amassing of property, and in the oppression of the poor. This is the heart of the materialistic outlook and lifestyle. In the end this leads to apostasy (1Tim 6:10), the greatest tragedy in human life.

Although the New Testament knows of voluntary poverty as an expression of following after Christ, this is not its main response to the problem of materialism. Since materialism is not in the first place the problem of the quantity of the things owned, but mostly of the attitude to wealth, the solution to this problem must be first of all by an

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, ed. Harry Plantinga (Burton: Calvin College, 1999), Chap 7.

inward change. The command of Jesus, "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear" but have confidence that the Heavenly Father takes care of His children (Luke 12:22-30), presupposes inward liberty. The Apostle Paul challenges Christians to live as follows: "...those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (1Cor 7:30-31 NIV). Bultmann comments on this passage correctly with the words "dialectics of participation and inner separation".¹⁴ This kind of attitude is totally dependent on the reality of the eschatological expectation of the Kingdom of God, as it is expressed vividly in Heb 10:34 "... You joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."

Inward liberation is the precondition for the righteous use of wealth. Jesus describes this liberation from wealth with a very strong verb: to despise. But this contempt does not mean that mammon (wealth) cannot be used for the purposes of the Kingdom of God (contrary to Platonic dualism), and Jesus also says: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:9 NIV).

The precondition for the correct use of wealth is the inner involvement of Christian love ("But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you." Luke 11:41 NIV). An example of this Christian love is the widow of Mark 12:43, and the apostle talks about it explicitly in 1Cor 13:3 "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love I gain nothing."

Ignatius, in the letter to the deacon in Antioch, added to this also the demand of orthodox doctrine:

"Every one that teaches anything beyond what is commanded, though he be [deemed] worthy of credit, though he be in the habit of fasting, though he live in continence, though he work miracles, though he have the gift of prophecy, let him be in thy sight as a wolf in sheep's clothing, laboring for the destruction of the sheep. If any one denies the cross, and is ashamed of the passion, let him be to thee as the adversary himself... Though he gives all his goods to feed the poor, though he removes

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, 207.

mountains, though he gives his body to be burned, let him be regarded by thee as abominable.”¹⁵

COMPARISON WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION

The question of how we can use the principles of the New Testament church in our times, times of material demands and materialism, is still unanswered. The state is responsible for social care, and the materialism of the present has dimensions that were absolutely unknown to the people in biblical times.

In post-biblical times the church came under the influence of Platonic dualism, and the material assistance to the poor took on the character of a meritorious ascetic act, which meant the promotion in the career in church of someone doing such an act. At the Seventh Ecumenical Council there was a note which said: “those who, on account of their large expenditure on churches and the poor, have been raised, without simony, to the clerical estate as a reward and recognition of their beneficence; and being proud of this, now depreciate other clergymen who were unable or unwilling to make such foundations and the like.”¹⁶

Much later, Marxism did not preach ascetic abnegation, but a certain kind of “eschatological expropriation” of the rich. This is the reason why the church today is not under pressure to answer the problem of the Platonic elevation of giving (ascetic abnegation), but she has to answer the Marxist view of the recipients. The way these recipients of the Marxist expropriation see themselves is very different from the self-image of the humble and pious poor of the Old Testament. Sure, this does not mean that social aid should not exist, but it does mean that it is necessary to speak while giving social aid. Acts of love must be accompanied by the words of the Christian message.

The historical experience of the Christian church shows that the response of the Church to material needs must not be based on the principle of abnegation (Platonism), nor on the principle of expropriation (Marxism). The aim is that both should give thanks to God, who is the giver of everything. We can achieve this only when we interpret social aid through the Word of God. Today, the demands for social aid are incomparably

¹⁵ Ignatius, The Epistle of Ignatius to Hero, a Deacon of Antioch, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, ed. Harry Plantinga (Burton: Calvin College, 1999).

¹⁶ The Canons of the Holy and Ecumenical Seventh Council, Canon V, Hefele’s note, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, ed. Harry Plantinga (Burton: Calvin College, 1999).

bigger, and gratitude is incomparably smaller, than in biblical times. The Christian response to the material needs of the present has to speak both through actions and through words.

The division of the world today – into the rich North and the poor South – means that we, the Christians living in the North, have to see our neighbors not only in the people of our own nation, but also in those beyond our state’s borders. The task of the national and international church organizations is to remind Christians in the rich North what real poverty is, and to change what Sider describes in his book: “Present economic relationships in the worldwide body of Christ are unbiblical, sinful, a hindrance to evangelism and a desecration of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

It seems to me that our more immediate problem is materialism as a myth about happiness, a glittering mirage that man is pursuing, but is not able to reach. One analyst wrote:

“The real conflict in our age is between opposing types of imagination – or, to speak more accurately, among a variety of types of imagination ... So the great contest in these declining years of the twentieth century is not for human economic interests, or for human political preferences, or even for human minds – not at bottom. The true battle is being fought in the Debatable Land of the human imagination. Imagination does rule the world.”¹⁸

The imagination of contemporary man is, in its essence, hedonism transformed into the transcendency of an unassailable faith. Materialism of this kind unashamedly makes parallels between the experience of buying some goods, or an experience of sexual intimacy, and the experience of religious faith. Schulze describes this process as follows:

“In the hedonistic-aesthetic conception of the world, the world offers itself as a cosmetic object. Inability to change one’s thinking (or the excessive effort that this would require) on the one hand corresponds with the possibility to step up and to refine the commercialisation of needs and to create new needs. So the life here is pretty good, despite the fact that the unsolved problems remain unsolved. The surface symbols of the problem are:

- detergents – and their demonstrable efficiency
- home appliances: dishwashers, washing machines, TV sets

¹⁷ Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 99.

¹⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky*, Chuck Colson *Against the Night* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publ., 1989), 171.

- nicer living: furniture, family house, second flat
- holiday, caravan, aeroplane trips
- fashion
- the entertainment industry: shows, illustrated magazines, public gossip
- flirting, sex without any risk, etc.

... For a long time already, it is not about the reification (Versachlichung) of the world nor its demythologisation. Much more it is about new ideology, about new pseudoreality, about new unreality of the world of illusions, about 'technology and science as an ideology'.¹⁹

The experience of ownership is short term and it can in no way substitute for the depth of religious or interpersonal relationships. Materialism ends in insatiability. Huxley called the commercial catalogues of modern society "The Newest Testament" to emphasize their place in people's minds. A rich materialist of biblical times could have been surrounded by expensive things and maybe by slaves. But his modern parallel can, thanks to mass production, be constantly running after newer and better things and, with the help of technology, he/she can create a virtual reality that blunts his ability to perceive the "real reality".

Modern materialism defends its position by appealing to economic principles that have the status of physical laws, although they are an expression of human selfishness and greed.

"If language is not competent for this purpose – of the criticism of materialism - then what else could allow us to accomplish this task without which human beings do not have much significance? Today, of course, this task seems negligible, compared to the importance of making refrigerators or refining oil. Anyone who tries to interfere with such efforts by means of words is considered to be nothing but a conjurer."²⁰

The Word is still the powerful tool of the Church. The message of the New Testament church is that the church of today must rely on the Word of God.

¹⁹ Hans Schulze, *Theologische Sozialethik* (Gutersloher: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, 1979), 283.

²⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 34.