

Following Jesus in a World of Poverty



Bible Studies & Reflections
for Lent 20000

Introduction

These Bible Studies are intended for use over this time of Lent. Lent is a time traditionally associated with self-examination and sombre introspection. My hope is that Lent might also become a time where our reflections on our own struggles might lead us to a deeper awareness of the struggles of others - particularly those who are most destitute in this world.

It is worth noting that this is the process that Job seemed to go through. In the early parts of the book that bears his name, Job is entirely obsessed with his own terrible pain. But as his thoughts develop, Job is able to see his own dilemma as part of a much broader tragedy that envelopes a whole class of people.

*There are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast,
and take as a pledge the infant of the poor.
They go about naked, without clothing;
though hungry, they carry the sheaves;
between their terraces they press out oil;
they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst.
From the city the dying groan,
and the throat of the wounded cries for help;
yet God pays no attention to their prayer.*

(Job 24:9-12)

There is nothing new about poverty and injustice. The stark reality of world poverty can make us question our faith, as it did for Job (and indeed for Bob Hawke). It can certainly also frustrate us, and even tempt us to give way to cynicism. My hope is rather that these reflections will help drive us to a more informed faith and a more sacrificial commitment to the Lord and to the world's poor.



Dulwich Hill 10/3/00

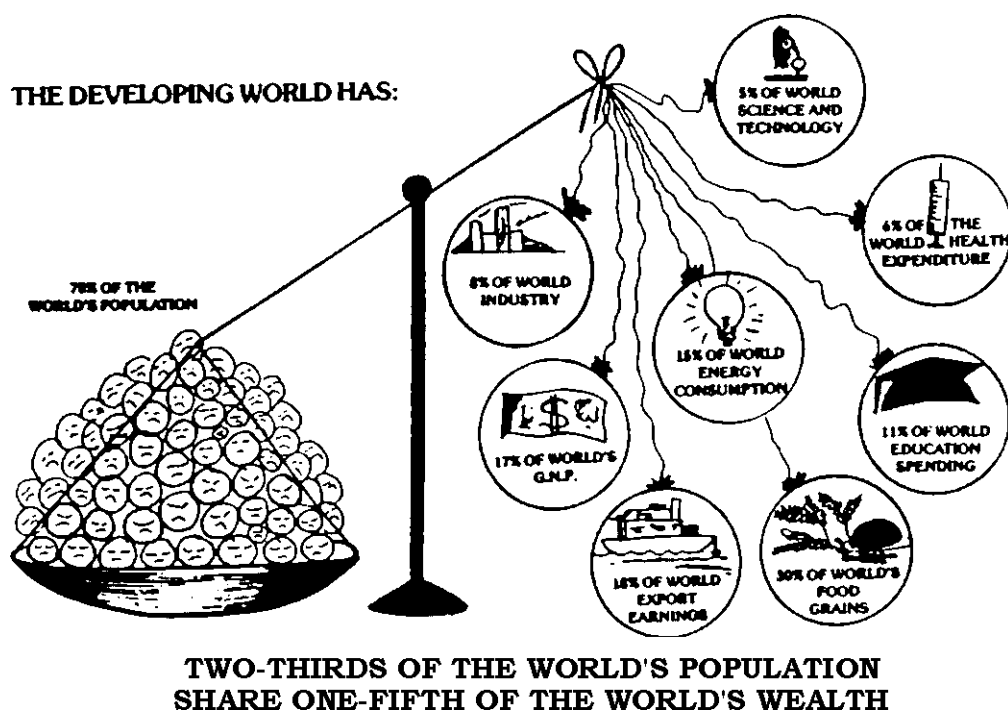
Study 1: God of the Poor

1. Some facts about Poverty

Brief Statistics (courtesy of 'Save the Children Fund' 1999)

- 35,000 children die each day from malnutrition and preventable diseases.
- Each year 600,000 women die from complications relating to pregnancy or childbirth, leaving one million children orphaned.
- Over 630,000 Australian children (one in seven) are living below the poverty line.
- 75 per cent of the world's poorest people living in the Asia-Pacific region.
- In rural Papua New Guinea, only 17 per cent of families have access to safe water, and only 11 per cent have access to adequate sanitation.
- In Bangladesh, two in every three children are malnourished. One in three is forced to work for his or her survival.

Children bear the heaviest burden of poverty. Throughout the world, whether in the richer or in the poorer countries, children are much more at risk of living in poverty than anyone else. They die because of poverty. They don't go to school because their parents cannot afford the school fees. They become malnourished because their parents cannot earn enough to buy food, or because not enough food is produced to eat. They die from preventable diseases, like measles and whooping cough.



Study 1: God of the Poor

Malnutrition kills, maims and disables

(from World Health Organisation Fact Sheet no.119, Revised Nov.1996)

Malnutrition in its many forms persists in virtually all countries of the world in spite of a general improvement in food supplies and health conditions, and the increased availability of educational and social services.

An estimated 174 million under-five children in the developing world are malnourished as indicated by low weight for age, and 230 million are stunted. Malnutrition results in poor physical and cognitive development as well as lower resistance to illness. It is now recognized that 6.6 million out of 12.2 million deaths among children under-five - or 54% of young child mortality in developing countries - is associated with malnutrition. In addition to the human suffering, the loss in human potential translates into social and economic costs that no country can afford.

Over 800 million people still cannot meet basic needs for energy and protein, more than two thousand million people lack essential micronutrients, and hundreds of millions suffer from diseases caused by unsafe food or by unbalanced food intake.

In 1990, only 53 developing countries had reliable national data on the prevalence of underweight in young children; by 1995, 97 countries had such data, and 95 countries also had data on stunting and wasting.

It is estimated that more than half of the young children in south Asia suffer from protein-energy malnutrition, which is about five times the prevalence in the Western hemisphere, at least three times the prevalence in the Middle East and more than twice that of east Asia. Estimates for sub-Saharan Africa indicate that the prevalence is approximately 30%.

In some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia, stagnation of nutritional improvement combined with a rapid rise in population has resulted in an actual increase in the total number of malnourished children. Currently, over two-thirds of the world's malnourished children live in Asia (especially south Asia), followed by Africa and Latin America.

At the end of January 1996, 98 countries had national plans of action for nutrition and 41 countries had one under preparation, in keeping with their commitment made at the International Conference on Nutrition in Rome in December 1992.

Study 1: God of the Poor

2. Bible Study - God of the Poor

1. Pslam 140:12

Psalm 72:12-14

Exodus 3:7-10

Psalm 103:6-7

- a) What do these passages reveal about the character of God?
- b) Where has God acted in history to free suffering people from oppression?

2. Job 24:1-12

- a) ‘Why are times not kept by the Almighty?’ How would you respond to Job’s passionate complaint?
- b) Does God really just fail to hear the prayers of the suffering? (v.12b)

3. Luke 4:16-21

- a) In what sense was Jesus’ message ‘Good news to the poor’?
- b) How does Jesus’ definition of His mission correspond with the purposes of God discovered in the Exodus, and elsewhere in Biblical history?

For General Discussion

- a) How would Jesus read today’s newspapers?
- b) Is God still acting in our world to bring food to the hungry?

Some further passages about God’s concern for the poor:

Exodus 6:2-9, Leviticus 19:32-34, Deuteronomy 26:1-11, 1 Samuel 2:2-8, Job 5:11-16, 22:5-9, 29:11-17, Psalm 10:2-18, 12:5, 35:10, 68:5-6, 69:30-33, 109:30-31, 113:5-9, 123:3-4, 146: 1-10, Proverbs 17:5, 19:17, 28:8, Isaiah 11:1-4, 26:5-6, 29:17-21, 61:1, Matthew 12:15-21, Luke 1:46-55, 7:18-23, James 2:5

Study 1: God of the Poor

3. Models for Action

Colleen Evans & Virginia MacLaury
of National Presbyterian Church, Washington D.C.
(as reprinted in Ron Sider [ed.] 'Living More Simply')

Our most specific attempt to encourage our congregation to focus on lifestyles began in 1975 when a dedicated band of concerned people felt led to do something, however small, about alleviating world hunger. But what to do? A special collection? A fair? A rummage sale? All of those time-honoured but tired methods seemed to miss the point. It was easy for our relatively well-to-do congregation simply to write another cheque. That would not make us examine our own lives and think of the true meaning of sacrificial giving.

After a period of studying world hunger and learning what others were doing, it was decided to develop a 'Hunger Covenant'. People were urged to covenant with the Lord to sacrifice something that would simplify their lifestyle or eliminate a wasteful practice in order to accumulate funds for a Hunger Task Force. A dinner was given to dramatize the need, with members randomly receiving either an ample and delicious chicken dinner, a low-cost starchy meal or a single boiled potato. People analysed their emotional reactions of resentment, self-pity, embarrassment and guilt as some ate luxuriously while others looked on hungrily.

The dinner was a huge success, but even so, only a small percentage of the congregation actually made the covenant. The monetary results were good enough, however, to encourage the dedicated few. During the first year about \$6,000 was collected, with a surprise anonymous gift of another \$5,000. Since then, the giving continues, with roughly \$9,000 received for hunger as a result of life simplification this last year. The proceeds are divided about evenly between hunger missions abroad (a village in India) and those in the Washington area....

Our next efforts were directed toward developing an Urban Ministry Team. Although half of our 'hunger money' went to the poor of Washington, most of the people in our congregation had never set foot inside a real slum. It was suggested that people donate time and talent directly to serve the needy and in the process develop greater understanding. In cooperation with minority leaders engaged in such ministry, National Presbyterian people began to go into poor neighbourhoods to clean, paint and repair run-down buildings....

And so we began our next consciousness-raising project: a seminar series devoted to grappling with those questions and many more entitled 'The Wrestlers: Where the Rubber Meets the Road'. National Presbyterians meet every Sunday between services to discuss the real meaning of Christian commitment. Among others, we have had guests from the Sojourners and from the Church of the Saviour come to share their way of living out commitment, of simplifying lifestyles, of dealing with social problems within a Biblical, Christian context. Out of that we hope will come greater lifestyle changes, greater commitment to action, a deep honest look at 'Christianity and money'.

Study 2: Siding with the Oppressed

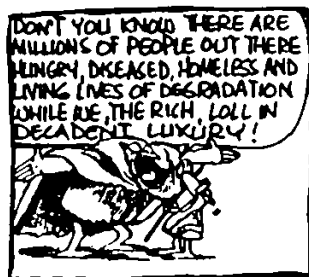
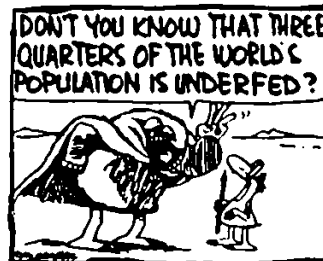
1. Some facts about Inequalities

How Generous are We?

Giving and Spending of the 'Average Australain' back in 1984

On Overseas Aid.....	\$3.00
On Easter Eggs.....	\$4.60
On Alcohol.....	\$360.00
On Gambling.....	\$500.00+

(figures from World Vision, ABC, The Investigators & Sun-Heral, respectively)



Study 2: Siding with the Oppressed

WHO Bulletin Spotlights Inequalities in Health

(from WHO Press Release, Jan 2000)

In spite of tremendous progress in improving human health over the past half century, the health gaps between different sections of society, particularly the rich and the poor, remain wide.

“There is much evidence that public subsidies – be they for health, education, water, power, food or whatever – intended to promote equity and benefit the poor are largely captured by the non-poor, especially by the middle class,” writes Richard Feachem, the *Bulletin*’s editor-in-chief, in his editorial.

He is echoed by Donald Acheson, former Chief Medical Officer of England, who says that “experience shows that a well-intended policy which improves average health in a population may have no effect on inequalities. Indeed, it often widens them by having a greater impact on the better-off. This has happened in some initiatives concerned with immunization and cervical screening, as well as in some campaigns to discourage smoking or promote breastfeeding”.

... Global opinion has begun to shift towards an increased concern for the health of the poor and for a reduction in health inequalities. As a first step, according to Gwatkin, health objectives should take into account conditions prevailing among the poor rather than in society as a whole. “Averages typically disguise as much as they reveal”. Health goals, now expressed primarily in terms of population averages, should aim directly at improving conditions among the poorer groups and at reducing the differences between those groups and others in society. For example, instead of adopting a goal to reduce child mortality by two-thirds in the entire population—as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has called for—countries would be better advised, says Gwatkin, to aim to reduce infant mortality by two-thirds in the poorest segment of society....

Other examples of health inequality are seen among different ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Martin Brockerhoff and Paul Hewett of the Population Council, citing data collected in the 1990s in 11 countries (Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia), show that the risk of dying during infancy or before the age of five years varies significantly from one ethnic group to another. Up to 1992, for example, in Kenya, Kalenjin children were half as likely to die before the age of five as other non-Kikuyu children. The authors point out that ethnic differences in child mortality are closely linked to economic conditions, educational status of women, use of health care and geographical setting.

Health appears poised for a significant move towards the centre of thinking about poverty. As WHO Director-General Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland told the WHO’s Executive Board earlier this week, “ill-health is both a cause and a consequence of poverty [and] better health can offer a route out of poverty.” We must, she said, “move from a vicious to a virtuous cycle...focusing resources on improving and protecting the health of the poor.”

Study 2: Siding with the Oppressed

2. Bible Study - Siding with the Oppressed

1. Isaiah 58:1-10

- a) What can we say about the religious habits of these people?
- b) Is it possible to be sincere in your prayer and fasting and still be involved in such hypocrisy?

2. Matthew 25:31-46

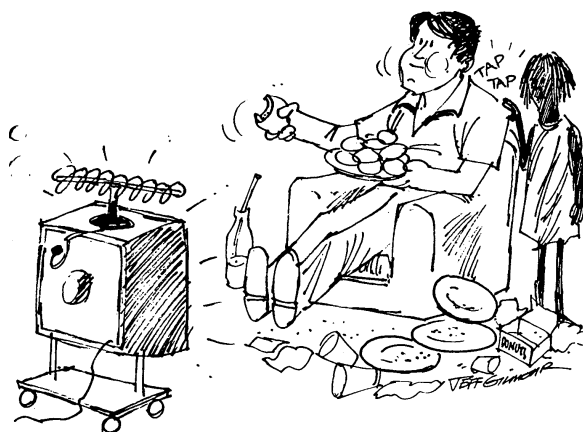
- a) Who are the people being judged in verse 32? Who are the poor on view?
- b) Does this passage teach that all persons who refuse to help the poor are going to hell?

For General Discussion

- a) According to these passages, is much church worship today really hypocrisy?
- b) Would most Christian people change their behaviour if they could really see Jesus in the poor?

Some further passages about siding with the oppressed.

Exodus 22:21-24, Deuteronomy 27:19, Proverbs 14:21, 14:31, 19:17, 21:13, 22:9, 22:16, 22:22-33, 23:10-11, 19:7, 31:8-9, Psalm 72:1-4, Isaiah 1:10-17, 3:13-25, 32:6-8, 33:14-16, Jeremiah 5:26-29, 21:11-12, 22:1-5, 22:13-17, Ezekiel 16:48-50, 22:23-31, Hosea 12:7-9, Amos 4:1-3, 8:4-8 Micah 2:1-10, Zephaniah 3:1, Zechariah 7:8-14, Mark 14:7, Luke 3:7-11, 11:37-41, 12:32-34, 14:12-14, 16:14-31, 19:1-10, 20:45-47, Acts 4:36-41, Ephesians 4:28, James 1:27, 2:14-17, 5:1-6, 1 John 3:16-18



Study 2: Siding with the Oppressed

3. Models for Action

Arbutus Sider
of Jubilee Fellowship, Germantown USA
(as reprinted in Ron Sider [ed.] 'Living More Simply')

Jubilee Fellowship is a house church whose members live and meet in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. We have twenty members, nineteen children and thirteen other adults who are either exploring membership or are friends who attend regularly...

The fellowship is divided into four sharing and discipling groups which meet weekly. In those groups we aim to help and support one another in living the Christian life. Biweekly workdays in the spring, summer and fall provide opportunities to help each other with minor hour repairs.

We live in separate households and do not share a common purse, but we share with one another as there is need. Members are asked to give seven and a half percent of their incomes to the fellowship for common projects and expenses, and are encouraged to give the rest of their tithes and offerings to projects they choose themselves. We stress simple lifestyle, including careful consideration of what we spend our money on, in view of the poverty and injustice in the world....

In the context of our small groups we feel free to share our family budgets and ask for help in making financial decisions. There we also gain helpful input on our relationships with our children. We come to our small group for counsel and admonition if we face a decision requiring additional time commitments... We also encourage each other to use public transportation when possible. Two families in the fellowship have no cars, so there is freedom to use each other's vehicles. There is a great deal of sharing of other things, from lawn mowers to hedge clippers to flour. We pass on clothes as our children outgrow them, help each other find the best thrift shops, fabric stores, garage sales, recycling centres and so on. We share information about free or inexpensive recreation. We support local food co-ops, and buy food in bulk. 'More with Less' is a favourite cookbook. We try to limit eating out and frequently get together for shared meals in our homes....

Our structure includes the following teams: (1) Teams that relate to the internal life of the fellowship: worship, adult teaching, children's concerns, counselling, hospitality, finance and coordinating. Basic policy-making is by consensus. (2) Teams that relate to the external life of the fellowship: Liberty to the Captives (concerned with human rights issues) and Discipleship Workshops (concerned with world hunger and justice issues). Both of those teams include people not a part of Jubilee Fellowship.

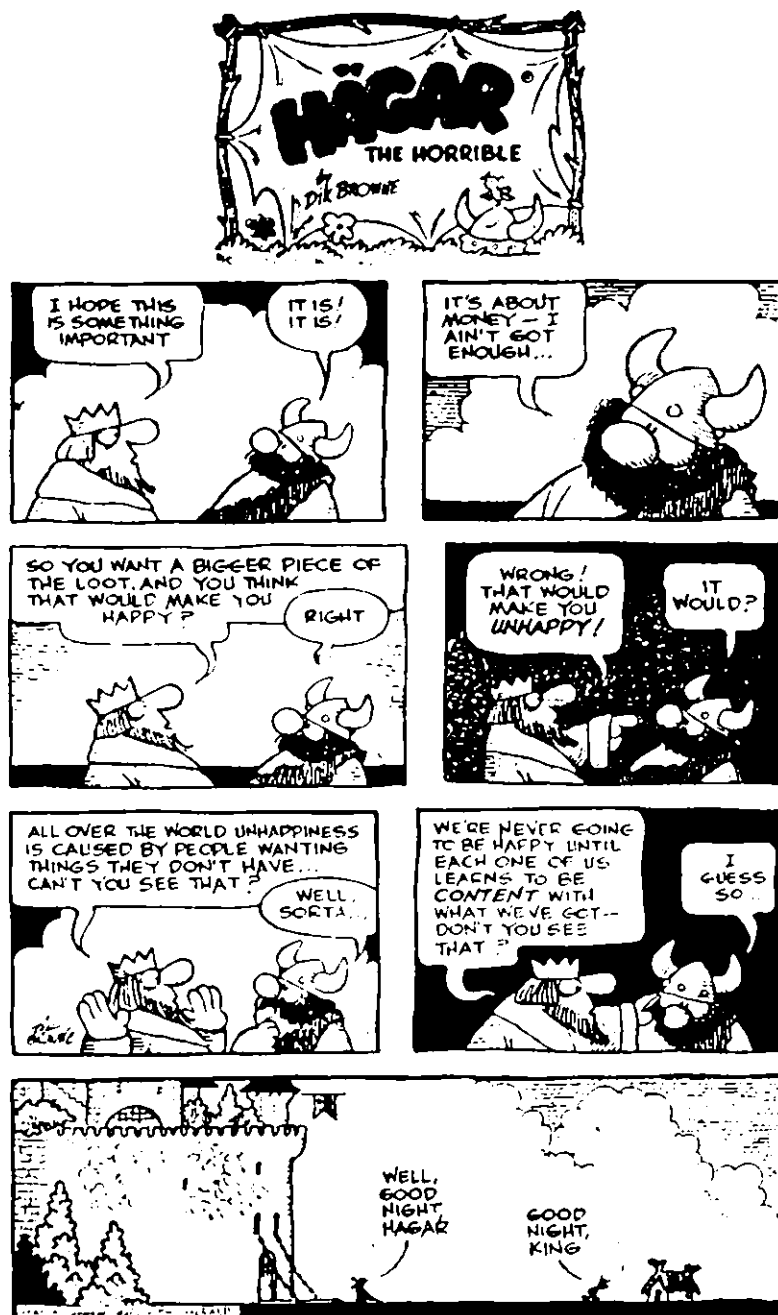
Community projects include preparing and serving hot lunches to elderly people on Fridays at a nearby Episcopal Church, a food cupboard for needy neighbourhood people (the food is gathered by us and dispersed by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd) and a joint project of members of the fellowship and the Sisters to improve living conditions for the elderly, retarded and mentally ill people living in a neighbourhood hotel.

Study 3: Simplifying my Lifestyle

1. Some facts about Lifestyle

“The uncomfortable truth, which we must be mature enough to bear, is that the world is hungry because we demand a standard of living which is only made possible by using the resources of other parts of the world - and their poverty.”

Erik Dammann (Norway)



Study 3: Simplifying my Lifestyle

What would it be like to live in poverty?

(Robert Heilbroner, as quoted in Sider's 'Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger')

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 shirt or blouse. We will permit a pair of shoes for the head of the family, but none for the wife or children.

We move to the kitchen. The appliances have already been taken out, so we turn to the cupboards... The box of matches may stay, 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 hose. 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 family's 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.



Study 3: Simplifying my Lifestyle

2. Bible Study - Money & Possessions

1. Ecclesiastes 9:7

- a) How does this text reflect the Biblical attitude towards Creation?
(cf. 1 Timothy 4:4-5, Genesis 1:11-12, 20-22)
- b) How Biblical is asceticism?

2. Matthew 6:24-33

- a) What is the secret of this care-free attitude towards material possessions?
- b) What is the connection between this attitude towards possessions and commitment to the poor (cf. Luke 12:32-34)?

3. Matthew 19:16-26

- a) Why do you think Jesus asked the man to sell all his possession and give the money to the poor?
- b) Why are there so few rich people in heaven? (cf. Luke 6:20-25, James 2:5-7)

For General Discussion

- a) What are the Biblical reasons for a simple lifestyle?
- b) What other things, apart from simplicity and sharing, might be important components in a lifestyle that reflects Christian commitment to the poor?

Some further passages about the dangers of wealth and greed.

Deuteronomy 32:15, Psalm 37:16, 119:36-37, Proverbs 11:7, 11:28, 13:8, 18:10-11, 19:1, 19:22, 23:4-8, 28:11, 30:7-9, Ecclesiastes 4:4-8, 5:10-12, Ezekiel 7:20, Hosea 10:1-2, Matthew 5:42, 6:19-21, 13:22, Luke 12:13-21, 16:14-15, 16:19-25, John 2:13-16, Acts 5:1-11, 8:18-24, 20:32-35, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 6:9-10, 2 Corinthians 6:5, 6:8-10, Ephesians 5:3-5, Philipians 4:11-13, Colossians 3:5-6, 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 3:8, 6:6-10, Titus 1:10-11, Hebrews 10:32-24, 13:5, James 1:9-11, 4:1-2, Jude 1:11-12, Revelation 3:14-18.

Study 3: Simplifying my Lifestyle

3. Models for Action

Joe Roos

of 'Sojourners Fellowship', Washington, D.C.

(as reprinted in Ron Sider [ed.] 'Living More Simply')

Sojourners Fellowship is a young and growing church located in inner-city Washington, D.C...

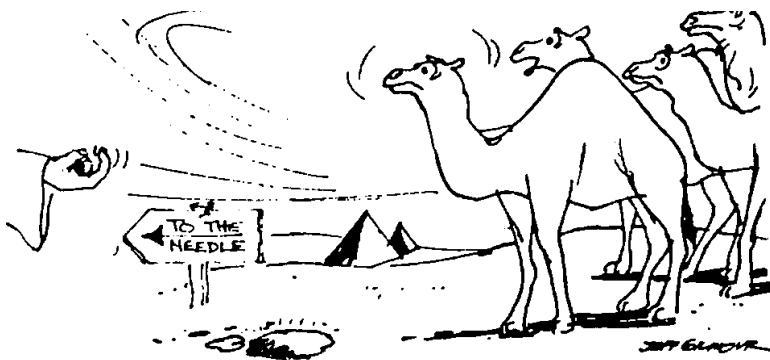
Spiritually, we understand from the teachings of Jesus that we are to live simply, unpreoccupied by physical needs, living as though God was as concerned (or even more concerned) about our physical sustenance as he is about that of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. We are to seek first the kingdom of God, assured that our physical needs will not be neglected...

Simple living is therefore one of the pillars undergirding the economic structure of our community's life. But an equally important pillar is our understanding of what it means to be a church. We believe that to live in Christian community means to share our lives fully with one another, as though we were all brothers and sisters and part of the same family...

We also share our economic lives. We do not make economic decisions in isolation; they are made in a relationship of trust and accountability. Where we work; how much income is earned; how much is spent on rent, food, clothing, long-distance calls; where and how one goes on vacation; how much spending money one has and so on are all 'submitted decisions', not strictly up to the individual....

Some of the practical results are these: total monthly living expenses for a member average about \$200; food runs \$1.25 per person per day; each adult receives \$15 spending money per month; clothing expenses are under \$45 per person per month, except for children and those whose jobs necessitate somewhat higher amounts; used cars are purchased and assigned to small groups (not individuals) as needed.

Hospitalisation insurance is carried only by those few who have coverage through their jobs. For the rest of the community, a cash reserve is used in the event of hospital stay. If the hospital expenses should exceed the cash reserve, we would pay the remainder in monthly instalments and/or rely upon financial assistance from other churches with whom we are in relationship. We would assist them in similar emergencies....



All things (eg. a camel's journey through a needle's eye) are possible if it's true.

But picture how the camel feels squeezed out in one long bloody thread from tail to snout."

C.S. Lewis

Study 4: The Church in Action

1. Some facts about Welfare and Politics

“When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist.”

Dom Helder Camara (former Archbishop of Recife in Brazil)



Study 4: The Church in Action

Ambulance drivers & tunnel builders

For reasons largely historical in nature, many Christians, and evangelicals in particular, have come to take a dim view of Christian involvement in politics.

Welfare work, they say, is the proper outworking of Christian compassion. Political action, on the other hand, is a worldly affair.

Ron Sider wrote this parable to suggest that such distinctions are too simplistic.

A group of devout Christians once lived in a small village at the foot of a mountain. A winding, slippery road with hairpin curves and steep precipices without guard rails wound its way up one side of the mountain and down the other. There were frequent fatal accidents. Deeply saddened by the injured people who were pulled from the wrecked cars, the Christians in the village's three churches decided to act. They pooled their resources and purchased an ambulance so that they could rush the injured to the hospital in the next town. Week after week church volunteers gave faithfully, even sacrificially, of their time to operate the ambulance twenty-four hours a day. They saved many lives although some victims remained crippled for life.

Then one day a visitor came to town. Puzzled, he asked why they did not close the road over the mountain and build a tunnel instead. Startled at first, the ambulance volunteers quickly pointed out that this approach (although technically quite possible) was not realistic or advisable. After all, the narrow mountain road had been there for a long time. Besides, the mayor would bitterly oppose the idea. He owned a large restaurant and service station halfway up the mountain.

The visitor was shocked that the mayor's economic interests mattered more to these Christians than the many human casualties. Somewhat hesitantly, he suggested that perhaps the churches ought to speak to the mayor. After all, he was an elder in the oldest church in town. Perhaps they should even elect a different mayor if he proved stubborn and unconcerned. Now the Christians were shocked. With rising indignation and righteous conviction they informed the young radical that the church dare not become involved in politics. The church is called to preach the gospel and give a cup of cold water. Its mission is not to dabble in worldly things like changing social and political structures.

Perplexed and bitter, the visitor left. As he wandered out of the village, one question churned round and round in his muddled mind. Is it really more spiritual, he wondered, to operate the ambulances which pick up the bloody victims of destructive social structures than to try to change the structures themselves?

Study 4: The Church in Action

2. Bible Study - The Church in Action

1. Leviticus 25:8-28

- a) In the 50th year (the 'Jubilee Year') all the land is returned to its original owners without compensation. Is this fair?
- b) What is the theological basis for the restoration of the land? (vs. 23)

2. Acts 2:44-47

Acts 6:1-6

- a) How important was economic sharing amongst the early Christians in Jerusalem?
- b) What principles do you think these people were working from in their distribution of goods and services?

3. 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

- a) List the methods Paul uses to urge the Corinthian Christians to dig deep. Could Paul be accused of 'guilt manipulation'?
- b) How does the example of Jesus' sacrifice (vs.9) and the quote from Exodus 16:18 (vs.15) help us to grasp Paul's principles of giving and sharing?

For General Discussion

- a) Many scholars think that the collection was only necessary because the Jerusalem Christians had impoverished themselves through the sort of sharing outlined in Acts 2. Would this suggest that the Jerusalem model was a 'failed experiment'?
- b) In Luke 4:9 Jesus proclaims a year of Jubilee. We normally take this to mean a sort of 'spiritual Jubilee'. Might the practice of the early Christians indicate though that they took the economic implications of the Jubilee quite seriously? Are there other indications in New Testament of the Jubilee principle at work?
- c) Considering both the principles of Jubilee, the Jerusalem church's economic expression of Christian love, and Paul's 'principle of equality' between churches, how should the church today structure itself with regards to those in need?

Some further passages about economic relationships between the people of God..

Genesis 28:22, Exodus 22:25-27, 23:10, 23:19-20, Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22, 25:1-7, 25:35-55, Numbers 26:52-56, Deuteronomy 14:22-29, 15:1-15, 24:19-22, 26:12-13, Ruth 2:1-9, 2 Chronicles 36:17-21, Psalm 15:1-5, Jeremiah 34:8-17, Nehemiah 10:28-31, 5:1-12, Matthew 6:1-4, Mark 10:28-31, Luke 11:42, John 12:6, 13:29, Acts 4:32-37, 11:27-30, Romans 12:9-13, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 9:1-15, Galatians 2:7-10, 1 Timothy 5:9-10, James 2:1-9, 5:1-6

Study 4: The Church in Action

3. Models for Action

Tony Campolo

‘A Dream for the Church’

(reprinted from his book ‘Ideas for Social Action’)

I long for a Church organised in small cellular units of four or five members. I see each of these groups committed to some special mission in the world. For example, one group would work for better schools, another to end the abuses of the multinational corporations in Third World nations, another to better the condition of the elderly, another to save the environment, another to support missions, and all of them would be committed to winning new converts to Christ. The list could go on, describing thousands of small groups, each striving to change the world into the Kingdom of God. There would be a pastor, but his job would be far different from that of the typical clergy. The pastor would be a resource person for these groups. He would help them understand what the Bible has to say about what they are trying to accomplish and the ways in which they should proceed. This pastor would facilitate the formation of new groups, and teach the members how to grow in love towards each other.

The laity would realise their true potential through the action of these groups. Laypeople would no longer be second-class Christians whose only purpose is to support the clergy in their ministry. Instead, the laity would be viewed as the real ministers of the Gospel, and the clergy would be viewed as persons called to equip these saints to fulfil their calling. Thus, Biblically prescribed roles would be realised:

‘And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry.’ (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Because these small groups would be committed to changing the world, they would have to engage in intensive Bible study. Their members would come to realise that the Scriptures are not meant to be simply devotional material to inspire them through a day’s work. Instead, they would look to the Bible as the ultimate source for developing the strategy of their revolution. The Bible would provide the methodology they would employ in bringing about social change; it would establish the ethical conditions for social action, and it would enable the participants in God’s revolution to know what to expect. Armed with Scripture, they would not be discouraged when their efforts seemed fruitless or when they were ridiculed or persecuted. They would know that they labour in the hope and faith that all things will work together for good and that God who has begun a good work in them will complete it on the day of the Second Coming.

Prayer meetings would be times of deep encounter with the Holy Spirit. In these small groups, members would help each other to discover their spiritual gifts. Christians, often unaware of the talents and gifts which the Spirit has given them, would discover through the perceptions of their brothers and sisters in Christ those things which God has equipped them to do

Appendix: The Chicago Declaration

(made by a gathering of evangelical Christians in November, 1973)

As evangelical Christians committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and the full authority of the Word of God, we affirm that God lays total claim upon the lives of his people. We cannot, therefore, separate our lives in Christ from the situation in which God has placed us in the United States and the world.

We confess that we have not acknowledged the complete claims of God on our lives.

We acknowledge that God requires love. But we have not demonstrated the love of God to those suffering social abuses.

We acknowledge that God requires justice. But we have not proclaimed or demonstrated his justice to an unjust American society. Although the Lord calls us to defend the social and economic rights of the poor and the oppressed, we have mostly remained silent. We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along colour lines. Further, we have failed to condemn the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system.

We affirm that God abounds in mercy and that he forgives all who repent and turn from their sins. So we call our fellow evangelical Christians to demonstrate repentance in a Christian discipleship that confronts the social and political injustice of our nation.

We must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistributions of the nation's wealth and services. We recognise that as a nation we play a crucial role in the imbalance and injustice of international trade and development. Before God and a billion hungry neighbours, we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of living and promote more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources.

We acknowledge our Christian responsibilities of citizenship. Therefore, we must challenge the misplaced trust of the nation in economic and military might - a proud trust that promotes a national pathology of war and violence which victimises our neighbours at home and abroad. We must resist the temptation to make the nation and its institutions objects of near-religious loyalty.

We acknowledge that we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity. So we call both men and women to mutual submission and active discipleship.

We proclaim no new gospel, but the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, frees people from sin so that they might praise God through works of righteousness.

By this declaration, we endorse no political ideology or party, but call our nation's leaders and people to that righteousness which exalts a nation.

We make this declaration in the Biblical hope that Christ is coming to consummate the Kingdom and we accept his claim on our total discipleship till he comes.

Michel Quoist

Hunger

I have eaten,
I have eaten too much,
I have eaten only because others have done so,
Because I was invited,
Because I was in the world and the world would
not have understood;

And each dish
And each mouthful
And each morsel was hard to get down.
I have eaten too much, Lord,

While at that moment, in my town, more than
1,500 persons queued up at the bread line,
While in her attic a woman ate what she had
salvaged that morning from the garbage bins,
while urchins in their orphanage divided some
scraps from the old folks' home.
While ten, a hundred, a thousand unfortunates
throughout the world, at that very moment
twisted in pain and died of hunger before
their despairing families.

Lord, it's terrible, for I know,
men know, now.

They know that not only a few destitute are hungry,
but hundreds at their own doors.
They know that not only several hundreds but
thousands are hungry on the borders of their
country,
They know that no only thousands, but millions,
are hungry throughout the world.

Men have made a map of the prevalence of hunger,
Areas of starvation and death, appalling.
The figures stand out in stark and implacable truth.
The minimum wage for a month here is, for mil-
lions and millions of human beings, their
maximum wage for a year.
One third of humanity is underfed.
Several million die of hunger in India in the course
of one famine alone.
On an average, the Indians live for barely 26 years.

Lord, you see this map, you read these figures,
Not like a calm statistician in his office,
But like the father of a large family bending over
the head of each of his sons.

Lord, you have seen this map, you have read these
figures since the beginning of time,
and you told the story, for me, of the rich man at
table and the poor starved Lazarus;
And you spoke, for me, of the Last Judgement.
“... I was hungry ...”

It's you who queue up at the bread line,
It's you who eat the scraps of garbage,
It's you who are tortured by hunger and starve to
death,

It's you who die alone in a corner at 26,
While in another corner of the great hall of the
world - with some members of our family - I
eat without being hungry, what is needed to
save you.

“... I was hungry ...”

Remind me of that, Lord, if I cease of a moment to
give myself.

I'll never be through giving bread to my brothers,
for there are too many of them.

There'll always be some who won't have had their
share.

I'll never be through fighting to get bread for all
my brothers.

Lord, it isn't easy to feed the world.
I would rather say my prayers regularly, properly;
I would rather fast on Fridays,
I would rather visit my poor man,
I would rather give to fetes and orphanages;
But apparently that isn't enough.
It's nothing, if one day you can say to me: “I was
hungry!”

Lord, I'm no longer hungry,
Lord, I don't want to be hungry again.
Lord, I want to eat only what I need to live, to serve
you and to fight for my brothers.
For you are hungry, Lord.
You die of hunger, while I am satisfied.