

## WEIGHTIER MATTERS A PRESBYTERIAN'S REFORMATION<sup>1</sup> by Ben Aalbers

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**Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let Justice roll like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!**

### **Amos 5:23-24**

Although I affirm that the true church of Christ has always included members of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions, I'm especially glad that I belong to the reformed branch of the Protestant tradition because, historically, two of our guiding doctrines have been *sola Scriptura* (scripture alone) and *semper reformada* (always reforming). This means we recognize that our theology and practice will never be perfectly biblical so we must continually return to scripture as our sole standard (*sola Scriptura*) in our never-ending need to reform (*semper reformada*) our theology and practice to make them more Godly. These two doctrines are very important because they serve to both protect and correct the church. They protect us from something the church is prone to in every generation - the habit of defining righteousness according to strict, extra biblical standards. This essay, however, is going to focus on the correcting rather than the protecting aspect of these two principles.

If you've ever attended various churches for any length of time, you know that each church, or denomination, seems to concentrate on different aspects of faith or even different portions of scripture. This begs the question 'Where do I and other Presbyterian's focus?' We focus where 95% of all Evangelical, American Protestant's focus - at the pulpit. We center on the preaching of the word. Studying scripture has also dominated our time of small group and individual spiritual cultivation. Yet despite all of our time and effort spent concentrating on scripture the lifestyles of American Christians are essentially indistinguishable from those of non-Christians. This is most evident when comparing attitudes and practices between believers and nonbelievers concerning money and material possessions<sup>2</sup>. New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg notes, "In most affluent or suburban Western communities, it is impossible to detect any outward differences between the expenditures of professing Christians and the religiously unaffiliated who surround them in their neighborhoods<sup>3</sup>." I propose that one of the reasons, if not the most significant reason, why we bear little fruit is because **God will not bless the American church when it is unwilling to sacrifice for the purpose of providing ministries of justice and mercy (MJM) for the defenseless and needy**. This is where the principle of correction comes in.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This is the condensed version of Mr. Aalber's larger work also found at [Thirdmill.org](http://Thirdmill.org).

<sup>2</sup>The average American gives between 1.6 and 2.16% of their income to charity. American Christians give an average of 2.4%. For a more in-depth analysis see *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possession* by Craig Blomberg, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Blomberg p. 20.

First, let's consider three causes for our current condition of neglect. The primary cause is the callousness of our hearts. I have no doubt that millions of church-goers in America give to charity and take no pleasure in the suffering of others but we must be willing to engage at a deeper level. We must begin to personally associate with the neglected as well as give more from our abundance. Friendship/association with the destitute is the essence of almsgiving. We desperately need God's grace to open our eyes so that we can see our own immense wealth, the needs of others and give with a cheerful heart. A second reason for our neglect is that we evangelicals have nearly reduced the totality of our faith and practice down to the contents of the "sinner's prayer." In doing so we have emphasized the fact that a) all people have sinned b) even the slightest of our sins separates us from God c) we can do nothing to earn our salvation and d) we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Though this teaching is delightful, important and true, it distorts the reality that a) God doesn't feel the same way about all sin and b) all of scripture demonstrates that true faith always produces fruit of compassion. For example, in Matthew 22 the "expert in the law" asks Jesus about the greatest commandment. His question suggests that some commandments are of greater importance<sup>4</sup>. Again in Matthew, Jesus rebukes the teachers of the law because although they give a tenth of their spices they "neglected the more important matters of the law," which happen to include justice and mercy<sup>5</sup>. Who can deny that we have become focused, if not obsessed, with "spices" such as group Bible study? A third reason for our neglect is our belief, as evidenced by the outworking of our daily lives, that knowing that we should practice mercy (studying scripture) is as pleasing to God as actually practicing mercy. We must begin to shift more of our energies away from scripture and towards MJM. Before I continue let me affirm my commitment to scripture. I maintain that it is a gift from God to his people and that in its entirety it proclaims the gospel which is the power God for salvation of all who believe. Also, God has been and will always be pleased to use it in conjunction with the Holy Spirit to form and mature his people in Christ. With this said, I also believe the things of God can cut us off from God. Are our Bibles and study groups a stumbling block? Both Testaments clearly warn that even God given means of grace can provide a false sense of righteousness as well as being a stench in God's nose when his people are not reflecting his heart by providing justice and mercy<sup>6</sup>. We must assume that this is also possible for us who live during the new covenant. **Our religious practices will nauseate God as long as we neglect the weightier matters of the law.**

Why does the idea of spending less time and money studying scripture scare us and sound heretical? I propose that one of the reasons why we are scared is that we do not want to compromise the importance of Christ's atonement. We are reacting against theologically liberal churches and denominations that offer only humanistic solutions towards suffering while neglecting Christ's call for repentance and faith. Our reaction is to affirm Christ through preaching, worship and bible study. We, of course, are right to affirm Christ but we forgotten that he is just as interested in justice as he is in justification. Acts 6:1-4 teaches us that the ministries of word and deed are equal in status as evidenced by the fact that the Greek word

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<sup>4</sup> It's important to note that scripture never suggests an either/or mentality concerning obedience towards the lighter and weightier matters of the law, rather we should "practice that latter without neglecting the former" (Matt. 23:23).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 23:23.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 7:4; Isaiah 1:13.

*diakonia* is used to describe both. A second reason for our fear may stem from the fact that our theological focus, both historically and currently, is on teaching and preaching doctrine. I believe that doctrine is precious and should be taught and defended with all diligence but those who need our charity the most, along with God himself, will not care about the correctness of our doctrine if it's not accompanied by our obedience to the weightier matters. As the African proverb states, "An empty belly has no ears." We must admit and talk about our obsession with teaching and learning doctrine at the expense of MJM. What if Bible study groups became MJM groups that provided for the poor in their community? **Perhaps the spiritual blessings and growth we are hoping for through our emphasis on studying scripture will be given by God as we become agents of mercy and justice?**

Although all of scripture is a witness to God's desire for us to care for the disenfranchised, the books of Amos and Luke may be particularly helpful for us considering the social and religious circumstances of their original audiences. Amos prophesied when both Israel and Judah were enjoying prosperity and security due to the decline of traditional foreign enemies and peace between the two nations of the divided kingdom. Unfortunately this prosperity led to an increase in corruption that in-turn created the need for Amos' ministry. The prophet's audience was living the high life. They were enjoying the best wine, oil and housing – though often at the expense of the poor (2:8). Their purposeful misunderstanding of God's election and promises of prosperity and protection "gave the people the false impression that they were doing all the right things and believing all the right doctrines. Religion had truly become the opiate of the people in Israel<sup>7</sup>." Amos 5:14 teaches that the people were sure that God's presence was with them -- but it wasn't! They were living in denial. Amos' warnings of death and exile sounded absurd, if not heretical, to them. It wasn't that Amos' audience didn't "go to church enough" but rather their "church" attendance, worship songs and sacrifices meant nothing to God because they did not hate evil and love good. God didn't want more "church services" if they would not be accompanied by justice and mercy! God would come to them only when and if they sought good and not evil. "For Amos, proper worship at the temple is intrinsically identical with seeking Yahweh (5:4-6), and this unified with loving good (5:14-15) and establishing justice. Loving good and hating evil are part and parcel of loving God with all your heart (Deut. 6:5)<sup>8</sup>."

Most scholars agree that Luke, being a doctor, was a middle-class citizen writing to other educated middle-class citizens. The similarity between Luke's audience and a majority of the American church is obvious. So when considering the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16 we must be careful not to equate wealth with evil. The rich man isn't condemned for his wealth, in fact "he is not said to have committed any grave sin, but he lived only for himself. *In that lay his condemnation* (emphasis mine)<sup>9</sup>." The rich man appears to be oblivious to Lazarus' need even though they exist within close proximity. Alrand Hultgren comments,

"[Lazarus] is the type of person about whom it would have been socially acceptable for the rich man to be indifferent. The gate and wall around the rich

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Gary. *Amos: A Mentor Commentary*. Geanies House, 1998, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Smith p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, Leon.

man's mansion are outward barriers representing psychic and social barriers as well. The parable warns the well-to-do about any arrogance they may have that looks upon the unfortunates of the world as less than human<sup>10</sup>...the parable is primarily a warning to persons who, like the five brothers of the rich man, still have time to repent and do the will of God<sup>11</sup>."

As previously mentioned, unfortunately the financial and charitable practices of the church and those outside the church are nearly indistinguishable. In her book *The Overspent American* Juliet Shor notes that the spending practices of the typical American no longer reflects a keeping-up-with-Jones' attitude. Rather, the typical American now strives to emulate the richest 20% of Americans in an attempt to associate themselves, through their clothes and other goods, with a chosen reference-group -- no matter how wide the income gap is between them and their chosen group. This has drastically effected our attitude about what we consider to be necessities for living. For example, 27% of all households that make over \$100,000 feel that they can't buy everything that they need. Thirty-nine percent of households who make between \$50,000 and \$100,000 feel the same way. Also, consider the fact that households who make between \$50,000 and \$100,000 have the largest percentage of credit card debt. "Overall, half of the population of the richest country in the world say they cannot afford everything they really need<sup>12</sup>."

According to *The World Christian Encyclopedia* (2000 Edition)<sup>13</sup>: 2 billion people live in poverty (a daily wage of under 2 dollars) of which 1.1 billion live in extreme poverty (a daily wage of under 1 dollar); 2.2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water; 700 million children are sick; 30 million people, of which 18 million are children under the age of five, die from hunger each year; 700 million people are shanty-town or slum dwellers; and there are 120 million street children. These numbers are horrific and most often leave us feeling powerless and guilty. We must fight against our habit of using our feelings of powerlessness as an excuse not to act. Greed, along with the complexities of foreign trade relations, diplomacy, and cultural differences sadly often prevent immediate national relief but these barriers do not mean that relief is not possible. There are reputable organizations that seek to meet the needs of the world's poor by providing basic necessities such as clean drinking water. **We must stop living as though these people do not exist.** Locally, according to 1999 U.S. Census Bureau statistics<sup>14</sup>, 12 percent of Americans, 33,899,812 people, live in poverty<sup>15</sup>. Of that 12 percent: 34 percent are 17 years old or younger; 32 percent are members of a married-family; 41 percent, 14,167,861 people, are members of all other types of families. Of those 14.16 million people 7 percent live in homes with a male householder and no wife present while 34 percent live in homes with a female householder with no husband present! In his book *Ministries of Mercy*, Tim Keller, sighting a 1995 *Parade Magazine* article, reports that 42 percent of American children grow up in low-income homes and 23 percent of American children grow up in poverty.

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<sup>10</sup> Hultgren, Arland. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 115-116.

<sup>11</sup> Hultgren p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> Shor, Juliet. *The Overspent American*. Harper Collins, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> As sighted by [www.urbana.org/\\_articles.cfm?RecordId=436](http://www.urbana.org/_articles.cfm?RecordId=436)

<sup>14</sup> <http://factfinder.census.gov>

<sup>15</sup> In 1999 a family of four making \$17,029 or less was considered to be living in poverty.

Keller rightly asks “Is it possible, than for middle-class Americans to undertake the ministry of mercy without radically altering our lifestyles?<sup>16</sup>” I believe the answer is no. We cannot both sacrifice for the sake of others and keep spending like we have been without perpetuating our materialism and burying ourselves in insurmountable debt. But radically altering our lifestyles does not mean that our goal is to change our class status. It is not necessary for a person to abandon their social class before they can authentically minister to those of a lower social class. Throughout the ages God has used “middle class” men and women to achieve great change<sup>17</sup>. Our goal should not be class change but rather class reform, namely reforming our conspicuous consumption and more deliberately using our status to benefit others in need<sup>18</sup>.

In repentance we ask the same question that the crowd asked John the Baptist in Luke 3: **“What should we do then?”** We must pray that we come to recognize the seriousness with which God considers this theme. “It is arguable that materialism is the single biggest competitor with authentic Christianity for the hearts and souls of millions in our world today, including many in the visible church<sup>19</sup>.” We must realize that privilege and obligation of MJM begins with the family. This helps to empower the individual as well as keeping us from being overwhelmed. Don’t try to save the world. Choose people and people-groups that interest you and stick with them. Taking on too much will discourage you. As the baby-boomer generation continues to age, Christian families have an opportunity to demonstrate the love of God by not neglecting or despising their older members by dumping them into nursery homes. We should be quick to offer our siblings and relatives help in their time of need. The next circle of obligation is the church. Considering the wealth of the American church there should be no poverty among us or any church member across the globe. Last, we must realize that the ministries of word and deed are inseparably part of the one gospel of Christ. One is not a means to the other. Balance between the ministry of word and deed is easily achieved by pursuing both extremes.

In closing, Blomberg notes,

“The key to evaluating any individual church or nation in terms of its use of material possessions (personally, collectively or institutionally) is how well it takes care of the poor and powerless in its midst, that is, its cultural equivalents to the fatherless, widow and alien...**People always take priority over prosperity. Those in positions of power have no increased privilege, only increased responsibility. The New Testament suggests that governments should promote justice, but it primarily emphasizes the responsibility of the individual and the church** (emphasis mine)<sup>20</sup>.”

The Bible does not contain a detailed list of acceptable items to own, vocations to practice, or what percentage of our income we should give away, although C.S. Lewis can teach us when he advises that the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare; our charities should pinch and hamper us. Our standard of living, our whole lives, must be informed by love. The

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<sup>16</sup> Keller, Tim. *Ministries of Justice and Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*. P&R: Phillipsburg, 1997, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Middle Class and Urban Mission: Part 1 of 2* by Robert Banks. [www.urbana.org](http://www.urbana.org).

<sup>18</sup> *The Middle Class and Urban Mission: Part 2 of 2* by Robert Banks. [www.urbana.org](http://www.urbana.org).

<sup>19</sup> Blomberg p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Blomberg p. 84.

opposite of love is evil and evil's preferred task in this age is to destroy the closest representation of God – his image; male and female. **We must each reform our life according to our awareness of how it contributes to the dehumanization of others.**