

# The Poor Church as the Truly Evangelic Church

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## **I Introduction.**

**Fundamentally Speaking.** How do we define Christian faith and life? What is fundamental for a basic understanding of the Church? The recent history of Christianity in America has tended to use the term "the Fundamentals" and hence the rise early in this century of "fundamentalism", which later developed a more restrictive meaning. The longer view has tended to employ the term "orthodoxy" and appeal to the creeds of the fourth to sixth centuries. An even larger perspective will speak of "apostolic Christianity"

and presume to take us back to the church of the first century. Of course the Roman Church and the eastern churches have their own perspectives and their own frameworks for providing their definitions of what is truly Christian and what true Christianity is, and therefore what the Church is.

For the most part such efforts focus on belief systems, the confessional and cognitive dimensions of definitions. Without in any way desiring to diminish the significance of confessions, creeds, theologies and belief systems, and while acknowledging their place in any definition of the Church, it is important that we recognize that there is a fundamental existential dimension that has to be set in place if we are going to have anything that approaches an adequate perception of what Christianity is, of what it is that we proclaim, of what it is we call people to embrace - in short, the content of the εὐαγγέλιον or the κηρύγμα which does justice to the New Testament and the Word of Christ.

I will attempt, therefore, to point to a "neglected fundamental" or what we might call "the other handle of orthodoxy", a feature of the Good News that is as essential to the Gospel as is the resurrection. The New Testament, following the lead of the Old Testament, makes it quite clear that in some way, in a way that does not exclude others, in a way that does not require uniformity, and in a way that does not submit to spiritualizing, God calls for His people to be poor. I am speaking not only of Good News for the Poor - an indicative - but also of the imperative to become poor so that we might live as God's poor people in the world and thereby witness to a new definition of, and a new vision for, humanity. I suggest that it is only the poor Church that is able to bear witness to the nature of the revelation of Christ, to the nature of the Gospel and to the nature of discipleship.

**My thesis is that only the poor church is truly evangelic, by which I mean, faithful to the Gospel and faithful to its proclamation.** To put it in the terms of Sam Kameleson, the poverty of the church is an absolute absolute for both the Church itself and for the Church in the world. It is a *sine qua non* for its existence. I am wanting to define, not describe, the Church.

**Definitions.** "The Poor Church." Before I can proceed farther I must define two terms in the title of this paper. I have already referred to "the poor Church." I hope this is not interpreted to mean a church without assets or resources. The term "poor" does not denote "destitution". It is not an economic term. By "poor Church" I mean the Body of Christ which is not only oriented toward the poor and in behalf of the poor, not only an advocate or champion in public forums for the poor, but a Church which appropriates and embraces what is most inherent in poverty, namely an absence of status, importance and control over one's life. I shall come back to these.

"Evangelic." I want also to justify the word "evangelic" which I consciously choose and prefer over the more common word "evangelical." The latter word connotes a tradition, a movement, a set of institutions and a posture which tends to focus on the *form* of belief. To be evangelical in Germany is to be protestant; in America it is a theological tradition that focuses on biblical authority, conversion and evangelism. I choose the word "evangelic" because, like the word evangelical, it derives from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον and will, I hope, cause us to go back behind the history of the Church to the word as it was in Christ "who though rich became poor". The poor Church, then, incorporates the poverty of Christ and sees its poverty as a constituent part of its message and as its best instrument for the evangelization of the world and the establishment of a human community. Poverty is not only an attribute but more importantly an instrument in the communication and empowerment of the Word of God. It is poverty for the sake of the Word of God. It is poverty for the sake of the world.<sup>1</sup>

It is important not to maudlinize poverty as a sweet sentiment which makes contact primarily with the emotions. Nor must we allow it to be modernized. In another context Henry J. Cadbury warned us of "the peril of modernizing Jesus."<sup>2</sup> When we speak of the poverty of the Church we are not referring primarily to a social agenda. We are not speaking of a strategy to bring about social change. Rather, we are speaking of faithfulness to the Word of God as an end in itself and as a witness to the nature of God. The Church is not called to a posture of poverty in response to poverty in the world, but because of the Word of God and because of the Church's awareness of the nature of God. As others have said, God is not for the poor because they are poor, but because He is God. The poor Church, then, embraces poverty to reflect the character and being of God. It is a theo-centric rather than anthropo-centric stance. This helps us keep our priorities straight. The world does not set the agenda. This is a matter of following Jesus in the world. The poor Church, then, reflects or radiates (Hebrews 1.3, ἀπαύγασμα) the image of the Savior and through that image reveals the Creator.

## II The Humanity of God and the Worldliness of Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jürgen Moltmann: "His proclamation of the imminent kingdom of God is part of his all-embracing mission. It brings out the meaning of his acts, just as conversely, his acts accompany his proclamation. The two have to be seen together, but his mission must not be reduced to his charge to proclaim." The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions. New York, Harper-Collins, 1990. p. 94f.

<sup>2</sup> Macmillan, 1937.

This heading borrows from two world-famous Christians, Karl Barth in his essay on "The Humanity of God", and Archbishop William Temple and his oft-quoted statement that Christianity is the most worldly of all the world's great religions. Both theologians underscore the point that Christianity focuses as much on this world and our struggle for meaningful and purposeful existence as it does on the life that is to come. Certain types of eschatology have done great damage to the expression of Christianity in society.<sup>3</sup>

**Community.** Christianity, if it is anything, is a social religion. It focuses on a new community, the Church, the Body of Christ, or more recently, the new Humanity. It is the great new Reality in the New Testament. When people embrace Christ, they embrace a community in that they belong to each other.<sup>4</sup> A special inter-participation in lives is to be manifest in the bearing of one another's burdens, in loving one another as Christ has loved us, in the sharing of resources and in the mutual upbuilding of one another in love.<sup>5</sup> This eschatological community is called to manifest the life of the future in its present existence. It manifests God's commitment to our lives as we live in society and culture.

To view our present existence as basically probationary and anticipatory of a glorious future is to reduce the significance of our living to the glory of God. The New Testament does not denigrate human existence. When the Word became flesh, it sanctified human life as the locus of grace and of revelation. The New Community is a revelation of the Word of God in its life together. That common life nurtures the strength and grace necessary to live and witness in an evil world for the sake of the Word of God. This common life *is* a revelation of the grace of God that reaches down.

It should go without saying, then, that in this community common human distinctions of gender, race, wealth and social standing are eliminated; cultural patterns are insignificant and the Torah of God finds expression. The Church in the world is the grand expression of the ministry and achievement of the Incarnation. We learned the expression "the infinite qualitative distinction" during the era of neo-orthodoxy. We ought to re-baptize the expression to describe what ought to be the character of the believing community in contrast to the world. The Church is a new cultural reality.

**Faith as Obedience.** Christian theology has tended to relate faith and obedience as a tractor-trailer rig - the second in tandem to the first, obedience (works) following upon faith. Obedience, it is commonly said, is a consequence of faith. But we find much in the New Testament to indicate that obedience is the common expression of faith, that is, that obedience is the substance of faith. Confession and profession of faith only have reality in

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<sup>3</sup> C. F. H. Henry, The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 12.5

<sup>5</sup> Gal. 6.2; John 13.34; 1 John 3.17; Eph. 4.15f.

obedience. Thus, in the sheep-and-the-goats pericope<sup>6</sup> the nurturing of the marginalized is the act of faith, not a proof or evidence of faith, that provides for eternal bliss. We note also Rom. 10.16 where Paul refers to "obeying the gospel" and the following verse which identifies obedience with "believing" or "trusting".

We have been bedeviled too long by the faith-works dichotomy in the history of theological conflict and have generally chosen to come out in favor of faith. But the real conflict, as Wesley pointed out so well, is between faith and law rather than faith and works. Faith is our active response to the Word of God which comes not only in the form of promise but also command. We cannot split the Word of God; rather, we are to embrace both if we are to be a believing people. The imperatives of Scripture are as much Word of God as the promises; the imperatives are as much Good News as is the story of Jesus, because the latter contains the former. Whereas we find πίστις in the Pauline epistles and πιστεύω in John, we find ἀκολουθέω in the synoptic accounts. Together these encompass the human response to the Word of God. We need to get the "works righteousness monkey" off our backs. The Church is the Body of Christ living out the word of Christ in obedience. Obedience is not to be seen as the penultimate to faith. To trust alone is not to respond, is not to hear. Hearing the Word of God brings about the doing of that Word, which is itself the trusting of that Word. Though this comes close to works righteousness, it is not as close as our history has suggested.

**Love: the summation or content of Torah.** That love of one another (John 13), love of neighbor (Luke 10), love of the marginalized (Matt. 25), and love of enemy (Matt. 5.48), is seen as the fullness of Torah<sup>7</sup> and the sum of perfection underscores our responsibility as human beings to God and to humanity. The call to love is rooted in the fact that - as an expression of the divine image - we were created to love.<sup>8</sup> Not to love is, therefore, murder; it is destructive and self-destructive. (1 Jn. 3.14f) Not to be human in all relationships is to deny our own nature. We respond to the love of God only by loving. It is the call of God, not merely the call of the poor. It is not primarily for the poor, but for God and even for ourselves..

It is necessary at the same time to see that love is not an emotion or a feeling toward other persons. It is neither a sympathy nor a positive attitude toward others. Nor is it even primarily a kinship with others. It is an expression of being "for others" in the sense that Jesus was a "man for others" (to echo Bonhoeffer). That is to say, to love is actively to engage others in their existence, to embrace their humanity, as well as to see them as possibly

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. 25.31ff

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 13.10; Matt. 22.40

<sup>8</sup> I owe this insight to a former student, Philip Jamieson.

members of the Kingdom. It is to serve them at the points of their brokenness and suffering, to participate in their suffering and to work for their deliverance.

In sum, the social character of Christianity is its glory for it reveals the glory of the presence of God. It is the expression of the Gospel which makes the Gospel three dimensional. Apart from the revelation in community and society, the Gospel is flat, unappealing and contradictory of the original Word made flesh. We must not relegate community, obedience and love to being supplements or consequences to the Gospel. They belong to the content of the Gospel.

### III Christian Eschatology

**A. Newness.** Earlier I mentioned in passing the damage done by faulty and wrong-headed eschatology. To understand "the poor Church" we must appreciate the fulness of times and the reality that the future has become present. The gospels portray Jesus as the pivotal point in history in that he brings to an end the domination of Satan and in himself offers an alternative for humankind. The power and newness of the future become available and are to be manifest in "the society of Jesus." The programmatic statement is, "Time has arrived. The Kingdom of God has become present."<sup>9</sup> The language of "newness" is significant in the New Testament in that it underscores an historical transition that has taken place. Whether this be by the Adam/Christ metaphor of Romans 5, the new creation of 2 Corinthians 5, the stripping off of the old and the putting on of the new in both Colossians and Ephesians or the present reality of eternal life in the fourth Gospel, we see that the future is now present in the Church. The assignment of the Church is to bear witness to newness in the presence of the old. Not only do we anticipate the future, but more importantly we bear witness to it. The importance of this will be discussed later.

**B. The Holy Spirit.** We understand the significance of the gift of the Holy Spirit only in this context of the new. The bestowal of the Spirit at Pentecost is described in terms of the fulfillment of the promise of God for the end time. It is important that individuals thus experience the baptism of the Spirit, but even more so that the Church itself experiences that baptism. Thus the receiving of the Spirit is the identifying sign of incorporation into the Church. By the first Christian century the gift of the Spirit was understood to be the sign of the Messianic age and with it the promise of fulfillment. The gift of the Spirit not only assures our future but introduces us to our future and to God's future. "We have been transported from the tyranny of darkness into the Kingdom of the son who embodies his love."<sup>10</sup> We know we have passed from death in that we love the

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 1.14, par

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1.31

members of the body.<sup>11</sup> We have over-personalized the gift of the Spirit and often failed to appreciate its significance as a sign that fulfillment is the only adequate metaphor to describe the new situation brought into being through the work of Christ. Through the gift of the Spirit the Church can be seen as God's gift to the world to create hope, healing and the possibility of transformation.

**C. The Poor.** Another feature of Christian Eschatology is the portrait of the poor coming into their inheritance. The Old Testament gives us plenty of material to indicate that the poor have only a future, that they live by hope. Oppression is the name of the game. They are and will continue to be victims. But they, especially they, have a future. Here we introduce the theme of reversal which we find expressed in the Magnificat: "He has shown the might of his arm, he has routed the proud and all their schemes; he has brought down monarchs from their thrones, and raised on high the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1.51-53, REB). We see it in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It is so common a theme that we do not need to rehearse all the texts which underscore the fact that the Messianic age is the age of the poor.

#### IV SOCIAL CHRISTOLOGY

**A. Continuity.** I have chosen this term "social Christology" so as to try to make a distinction from the common Christology which focuses on the nature (the attributes) of Jesus and his redemptive work on the cross. I choose the term in order to underscore the fact that the ministry of Jesus so focussed on the poor and the marginalized that this focus actually defines the role of Christ in his humanity or - to put it another way - the humanity of Christ which is God's great gift in the incarnation. It is important to affirm the divinity and humanity - the dual nature - of Christ - but we must go a step farther and recognize that Jesus' open identification with and for the poor is at the core of the story. Take that away and we no longer have the same story

The Kingdom is for the poor. The fate of the rich is grim. Outcasts enjoy the banquet. The religious are seen to be empty people. This is social Christology and as such is as fundamental to the nature of faith and life as is the incarnation, atonement and resurrection. Indeed the incarnation is the story of the ultimately poor one who empties himself in order to be for the poor. Orthodox Christians who defend the historic creeds as they relate to the person and work of Christ will be consistent when they persistently advocate and give expression to the same kind of total identification with the marginalized which they find in the story of Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3.14

Fundamental to the life of the church is its assignment to continue this story of Jesus, to portray social Christology and thus establish symmetry between the story of Jesus and the story of the Church. The dissonance between the story of Jesus and Christian history makes the hearing of the Gospel problematic. The fourth Gospel reminds us that there is a connection between the conduct or communal activity of the Church and the capacity of the world to hear and believe. "If there is this [foot washing] love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples." <sup>12</sup>

**B. The Center.** Christ is portrayed in the New Testament as agent in creation. But more than merely being involved in creation he is involved in the sustaining of the created order. All things stand created through him and toward him. The significance of the perfect tense at the end of that sentence<sup>13</sup> needs to be underscored. He sustains all things by his powerful word.<sup>14</sup> He is the Center of the New Humanity. And the Gospels portray him not in the common center of life - the civic, social and religious institutions - but among the marginalized. Kosuke Koyama has underscored this point well.

"Where the crucified Lord is, there is the Center! In the passion of Christ the periphery became the center, and the center became the periphery. The relationship between center and periphery, which must now be viewed in the light of redemptive suffering, is no longer clearly evident. This new insight is disturbing to our ordinary concepts of prestige and ignominiousness."<sup>15</sup>

The Center of human life, the power of life, the locus of hope, the future is now on the margins of human society as presently arranged. Ken Medema's song, "The Kingdom of the Streets" <sup>16</sup> describes this new arrangement. If the Church is to be biblical, it must move its energies and its vision to where Christ is among society's marginal people.

The question is whether the Church, in view of its institutional character, is free to do this, for it will threaten the viability of our churches and denominations. The reason for this is because this vision of the poor conflicts with the principles of efficiency and growth which, in turn, are the basic reasons why we locate our churches where we do. One of my former students in a project for a sociology class in his undergraduate program studied the location of churches in Fresno, California, and offered his conclusions to the local ministerial association. He showed that there is a direct correlation between the number and location of churches and the socio-economic character of their communities. The lower class communities were neglected while the better parts of the city were over-populated with

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<sup>12</sup> John 13.35.

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 1.16, ἐκτίσται.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 1.3; cf. John 1.3; 1 Cor. 8.6

<sup>15</sup> "The Hand Painfully Opened," *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, XX.2 (April, 1987), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Copyright by Word



churches. The poor were barely being served. This, it seems to me, violates the vision of Christ. The churches are not where the Center is. Dieter Lührmann has said, "Every community acknowledging Jesus is faced with the dilemma that it is able to live out a fundamental openness to others, whether they are tax-collectors, prostitutes or anyone, only at the price of their own organization."<sup>17</sup> Critics of the "church growth" movement have pointed the finger at the "homogeneous principle" as perpetuating separation. But even more critical is the principle that limited resources are to be used in the most efficient way possible in order to - if we may use a marketing metaphor - maximize the return on investment. The poor are almost always victims of marketing principles. The vision of Christ among the poor can only be realized by our embracing the "reversal motif" so prevalent in the Gospels.

**C. Calling the Poor.** People have problems with the expression "preferential option for the poor" because it suggests the poor are more important than others or that God cares more for them than others. Do not all people experience, somewhat equally, guilt, loss, pain, suffering, loneliness, and therefore stand in need of the grace of God? Indeed they do, and not to acknowledge it for the sake of ministry to the poor is bad theology and unfaithful ministry. But when all is said and done, we cannot avoid the obvious, namely, that the Gospels seem clearly to show that the good news is for the poor. It will not help our understanding merely to cite a catena of texts as though to proof-text a point. These texts - both Old Testament and New Testament - have been frequently rehearsed and are well known.

Yet some texts seem to be of a programmic nature. That is, they point to a larger than life picture; they describe an agenda; they seem to summarize or to stand out as headlines. They define. (1) I draw attention, first, to the first beatitudes in both Matthew's and Luke's versions of the sermon. I think a case may be made that these beatitudes are, as it were, a text with the rest of the sermon being commentary. In Matthew's text the first four form a group as do the next four. Only the first group finds an echo in Luke's sermon. These - the poor (in spirit), those who mourn, the lowly and those who hunger (for righteousness) are the people for whom Jesus' words are good news. It is, I think, quite observable, that we have preferred Matthew's version because they appear to be more inclusive. Not only the poor, but the spiritually poor; not only the hungry, but those who hunger for righteousness. But a study of the semantic field of the poor suggests, I am convinced, that Matthew is saying what Luke is saying rather than the opposite. The expression "poor in spirit" describes the spiritual and social consequences of poverty. That is

<sup>17</sup> "Jesus: History and Remembrance," in Jesus Christ and Human Freedom, edd. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel. New York, Herder and Herder, 1974. p. 53.

to say, the poor in the oppression they experience in society. The meek (Greek, πραῖς) are not the humble but those who have been humbled by their circumstances. We know from the Old Testament that the opposite of the poor are not the rich but the oppressors. Similarly "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" should not be seen as the ethically earnest, the devout who seek to be upright. The Greek term δικαιοσύνη and its Hebrew antecedent צִדְקָה frequently carry the idea of vindication or deliverance and are so translated often in our English Bibles. The thrust of the beatitude is that those who, in virtue of their condition, hunger to be vindicated will be satisfied. The Kingdom opens up to them. God will deliver them. The Kingdom brings their vindication.

2. I turn next to the text Jesus read in the synagogue according to the Lukan narrative. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Then follows a reference to representatives of the poor - the captives, the blind and broken victims.<sup>18</sup> This is not just another text, for the significance of this narrative is to be seen in its place in the Lucan narrative. Following certain preliminaries - the birth narratives, the material on John the Baptist, the genealogy and the temptation narrative - this is the opening pericope of the ministry of Jesus and is to be understood as programmatic for Luke's Gospel. We may view it as the hermeneutical key to the rest of the Gospel.<sup>19</sup> According to Luke Jesus understands his ministry in terms of Isaiah 61, which is commonly understood as lifting up the motifs of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25)<sup>20</sup>, which along with the Sabbath Year, focuses on the restoration and well being of the poor. They are poor-oriented items of legislation. For Luke one cannot interpret the Jesus tradition apart from his open and vulnerable identification with the poor and their identification with the Kingdom.

(3) The story of the disciples of John the Baptist coming to Jesus to find answers to John's questions further supports our thesis. Among the signs defining Jesus are that "the blind are recovering their sight, the lame walk, lepers are being made clean, the deaf are hearing again, the dead are being raised to life, and the poor are hearing good news."<sup>21</sup> Placed where it is at the end of the list of signs, good news to the poor is shown to be the ultimate sign of the Kingdom. This is the sign of all signs. I quote Hans Küng: "More im-

<sup>18</sup> Luke 4. 18, from Isaiah 61.1 and 58.6.

<sup>19</sup> "... we possess in this text the entire outline of both the gospel and Acts *in nuce*." Walter E. Pilgrim, Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts. Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1981. p. 65. Cf., also Marcus J. Borg: "Luke obviously sees this to be a fitting crystallization of Jesus' ministry." (Jesus A New Vision: Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship. San Francisco, Harper Collins Press, 1991; p. 147)

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., John H. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans., 1972.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 11.2ff; Luke 7.18ff

portant than the number and extent of the cures, expulsions of devils and wonderful deeds is the fact that Jesus turns with sympathy and compassion to all those *to whom no one else turns* (author's emphasis): the weak, sick, neglected, social outcasts."<sup>22</sup> The power of the Kingdom is presently manifest in the ministry of Jesus and the most powerful, the most significant manifestation of that presence is that the poor are hearing the Good News. This is the supreme demonstration of power, the power to break cultural and religious chains in order to move to the margin.

(4) We come now to the "sheep and goats" pericope in Matthew 25.31ff. I am aware that some have suggested that "the least of these my brothers" refers not to the poor but to the evangelists and missionaries who were met with persecution and oppression. I am not yet so persuaded. Some have suggested that, though this is its meaning in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus spoke the words he was referring precisely to the poor and oppressed, the victims of society. The catalogue of the poor in the text is right out of the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> After the Gospel has been preached to all the nations (23.14), then all the nations shall be gathered for judgment. Did they hear the Good News? Did they respond to it? Sheep-ness and goat-ness are determined by their response to the Gospel to the marginalized as well as their participation in that marginalization.<sup>24</sup> Relationship to Jesus Christ is portrayed in our relationship to the poor. Disjunctures are not acceptable in the community of Christ.

(5) Finally we may note in passing that according to James 1.26 authentic fear of God (θρησκεία καθαρά) is expressed in the caring for widows and orphans, who are the archetypal representatives of the poor. This seems to be stated apodictically as though it was assumed. It is a common motif in the history of Israelite-Jewish tradition.

Perhaps other programmatic texts might be cited,<sup>25</sup> but these are offered to show that participation (κοινωνία) in the life of the poor is the anticipated response to the Good News in Jesus Christ. This is part of the generic theme of reversal, for these are the people who do not count, people whom religion commonly shuns or overlooks, either because of the opprobrium attached to them or because it is not profitable to be so engaged.

The Good News in Jesus Christ is Good News to and for the poor. This does not mean that others are not included in the invitation to follow. But the invitation of Jesus Christ is an invitation to follow (πίστις = faithfulness) Christ away from the old center to

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<sup>22</sup> On Being a Christian; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976. p. 235.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Isaiah 58.6; Ezekiel 18.7, 16; Sirach 7.35.

<sup>24</sup> J. Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit. New York, Harper and Row, 1977. pp. 126ff.

<sup>25</sup> We might mention also Gal. 2.10: when Paul and Barnabas reach an understanding with the pillars in Jerusalem regarding the gentiles, they also together assume that the poor are to be remembered. No discussion is needed.

the new Center where Christ himself is. Most of the history of the western Church has involved a posture toward the rich at the expense of the poor - if we may talk only in these two categories; to be sure to some degree we have included the poor, but primarily on the terms of the rich. This is a reversal of the reversal. Jesus welcomed the rich, but in terms that involved poverty.<sup>26</sup>

**D. The Cross.** For much of its history the western church has either spiritualized or demythologized the cross, which for the early church was the ultimate symbol not only of the achievement of Jesus Christ but also of Christian faithfulness and obedience.<sup>27</sup> To become a Christian is to take up the cross and follow. We have tended to reduce the cross to being a symbol of burden bearing or of martyrdom; and we use it this way in our speech. But it is infinitely more.<sup>28</sup> The cross represents victimization, loss of control over one's destiny, humiliation, deprivation, pain and suffering, loss of dignity and ultimately death itself. Crucified people are expendable and not needed. In short, it is the ultimate symbol of poverty. It represents the experience of the poor. To take up one's cross is so to identify with the marginalized as to experience their anguish and isolation, to serve them through participation in their struggle to exist meaningfully. We must recognize that Jesus did not take up his cross on Good Friday, but on the day of his baptism and the enduement with the Spirit. At that moment he "emptied himself." At that time his identification is established as one with sinners. Entrance into the Kingdom is entrance into the life of the poor.

Before moving on to discuss the truly poor church it is important to remind ourselves again that poverty is not only, or even primarily, an economic term. In the Bible "the poor" is a socio-political term. It is an inclusive term referring to the various types of people who have been pushed to the margin by their society and culture. Tax collectors were not necessarily poor, but they had been pushed to the margin by their identification with the Roman cause. All societies have their social outcasts. Ours, perhaps, is well represented by the homosexuals and by victims of the AIDS virus. Many homosexuals are very well placed people and highly successful, but they know what being marginalized means.

## V THE POOR CHURCH

**A. Non-Power.** How does the Christian community embrace poverty? As we have said, this is not an economic term - though it would include the economically poor. Rather it is a description of the experience of people who are on the margins of life. The fundamental characteristic of the marginalized is the absence of power in their lives, the absence

<sup>26</sup> Cf., e.g., the rich young ruler in Mark 10.17-22, parr.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 8.34, parr. Luke 9.23 adds the word "daily" to underscore the significance of "taking up".

<sup>28</sup> Martin Hengel, Crucifixion Philadelphia, Fortress, 1977.

of freedom, the absence of choices and the absence of status. On the other side the fundamental characteristic of what John calls "the world" is power and control.<sup>29</sup> The world is characterized by the desire for power and those who have power will do what it takes to retain it.

So I propose that the Christian community will only be an alternative community, authentically new, when it adopts a non-power stance in the world. To follow Christ is to embrace his rejection of common power. The Gospels indicate clearly that the fundamental temptation of Jesus was to use available power. This is seen in the opening scene in the devil's challenge to turn stones into bread, and in the closing scene at the cross when he was challenged to come down from the cross so they could believe in him. In between the religious leaders ask for a sign. The victory of Jesus is seen most clearly in his refusal to embrace power for the sake of the Kingdom. He chose obedience over power and thereby portrayed human-ness. Hans-Rüdi Weber, after an extended study of the biblical data concludes, "With a variety of emphases all New Testament witnesses testify that Jesus made a total abdication of power as power is commonly understood. He did so in order to endow us with a new kind of power."<sup>30</sup> Dorothy A. Lee-Pollard, in a study of Mark's Gospel, writes similarly: "It is my view that, in his theology of the cross, Mark demonstrates that in the final analysis God's power is the power to *renounce* power." (Author's emphasis)<sup>31</sup> She adds, "... the presence of God is to be found not in the human institutions of power but rather in those places where human beings experience powerlessness as an oppressive and life-denying force."<sup>32</sup> A final word from Martin Hengel: "The overwhelming, disarming power of Jesus' message - then as well as now - lies not least in this fundamental renunciation of external means of exerting power."<sup>33</sup> We are now talking about what Paul Tournier called Constantine's "poisoned gift."<sup>34</sup>

Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became a leader in the anti-slavery movement asserted, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." His statement concurs with sentiments about power expressed by, among others, Reinhold Niebuhr (theologian), Herbert Butterfield (historian) and Paul Tournier (psychiatrist) who point out that people in power relinquish it only under pressure when they have few options. This, it seems to me,

<sup>29</sup> What Walter Brueggemann calls the "royal consciousness." See his The Prophetic Imagination, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Rüdi Weber, Power. Focus for a Biblical Theology. Geneva, WCC Publications, 1989. p. 167.

<sup>31</sup> "Powerlessness as Power: A Key Emphasis in the Gospel of Mark," Scottish Journal of Theology, 40 (1987) p. 173f.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., , p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Hengel, Christ and Power. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1977. p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Tournier, The Violence Within. New York, Harper and Row, 1978. P.151 [first published in England under the title The Violence Inside]

is the whole purpose of the church as the Body of Christ in the world. The Church is called to demonstrate that for at least one community this pursuit of power and retention of power at all costs is not true. A community does exist which does not find power an asset for its special purpose. A community actually exists and fulfills its mission and grows [consider the church in China] without the common power which all other structures strive to possess. When the church fails to do this, it fails not only itself and its Lord, but also the world in which it is called to live. The Church is the grand corrective in the fallen order.

Power remains the most important theological and ethical issue facing the western church and thus far that church has not, except for a few voices, faced it in any radically honest way. Part of the problem lies in the fact that power is so ingrained in us and is said to be inevitable. But a larger part of the problem is the fact that power is so obviously effective and useful. Its utilitarian value cannot be questioned.

**B. A Non-success Posture.** This, however, only points to how deep the problem is in that it points to the issues that lie behind power, namely the issues of success, achievement. That is to say, the repudiation of common power requires that we relinquish the quest for achievement and success. To embrace non-power is to embrace non-achievement and non-success *as goals*. The only way we can make this case is to realize that faithfulness to Jesus Christ requires it. This is the claim of William Stringfellow. "The categories of popularity or progress or effectiveness or success are *impertinent* to the Gospel. . . . Since the rubrics of success or power or similar gain are impertinent to the Gospel, the witness of the saints looks foolish where it is most exemplary."<sup>35</sup> (Emphasis mine) The Church embraces power because it embraces success and achievement as its goals rather than faithfulness and obedience. The enigmatic Ellul<sup>36</sup> in reminding us of the inutility of the cross only underscores the significance of Paul's words to the Corinthian community that the cross is, by all human standards, both foolishness and weakness, yet at the same time it is the power of God. Again, Tournier, writing from the point of view of a psychiatrist states, "The intoxication of success is a perfidious snare even in the best causes - especially in the best causes."<sup>37</sup>

Just as the effectiveness of power is never doubted, so also the destructive and dehumanizing effect is seldom acknowledged. Tournier continues, "For one is never powerful except at the expense of someone else, nor rich except at the expense of many who are poor."<sup>38</sup> In discussing the problem of violence in modern society Tournier roots it in the all

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<sup>35</sup> William Stringfellow, Conscience and Obedience. Waco, Tx, Word Books, 1972.

<sup>36</sup> J. Ellul, The Politics of God and the Politics of Man. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972. P. 190ff.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., p. 148

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 122. See the entire second half of the book.

pervasive desire for power. It is the supreme value and the only one universally recognized. "Power is secured by violence, and violence is justified by power!"<sup>39</sup>

Cultures require structures and structures require instruments for measuring achievement, which in turn require goals. The problem lies in the fact that the goals of the churches are commonly quantitative so that they may be measured. A non-measurable goal is not a goal in our culture. We forget that faithfulness, obedience and love do not submit to measurement. If there is such a thing as "Christian culture", it would be at this point of refusing to participate in the struggle to dominate and determine the future. The instruments of power are abandoned for the sake of allowing the Holy Spirit to engage us and demonstrate his presence. It may fairly be said that the only way to demonstrate the reality of the power of the Holy Spirit is by refusing to embrace common power. The Church does not openly assert that it is wiser than God, but the words of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov have a ring of truth historically: "We have improved on your ways."

**C. The Gifts of the Poor Church.** If the abandonment of power comes at great cost to the Church, it also offers great benefits.

1. **Community.** Participation in the experience of the poor brings a more powerful sense of community in that it creates a greater sense of dependence. Oppressed people have a more profound sense of community in contrast to the common loneliness and competitiveness of those in power. They experience their own humanity more transparently and more honestly. The bond among the poor is infinitely stronger than that among the rich or powerful. The latter live by calculation. The poor share out of their poverty rather than their wealth. Their self-understanding contrasts with the self-sufficiency of the rich. The establishment (Brueggemann's "royal Consciousness") cannot understand the capacity of the poor to laugh and hope, to share and to care. The circumstances of the poor are beyond the comprehension of the powerful who see nothing good in deprivation. The monastics and ascetics are viewed as quaint. Such groups as the Amish are curious and maybe admired. But they do not represent a paradigm. I am not suggesting that what I have called the poor church is to be modelled after the ascetics or the Amish. But we ought to see their joy and their sense of community. Again from Tournier: "The resources we need are not to be found among the rich, the learned and the powerful, but among the poor; among God's poor."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 184. Cf., J. Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 357: "The true fellowship of the poor is of more value than all the alms and development aid of the rich. The problem of poverty in the world is not solved by programmes which mobilize 'the church for the poor' or try to 'win' the poor for the church, but only through the church of the poor itself."

2. **Koinonia.** Linked to the sense of community we find among the poor the sense of inter-dependence. The best translation of this Greek word is solidarity, which reminds us of both the strength and the weakness of the poor. They make no pretense of independence. They know and confess that they need each other. They share their poverty which means they share themselves. This is seen in the fact that the poor are commonly in geographical proximity in the slums, isolated by zoning restrictions, while the rich are scattered. On the other hand when the rich share, they do not share themselves, but rather out of their wealth and power; the result is that they can maintain a distance from their beneficiaries. Benevolence replaces solidarity. This is what comprises 99% of the benevolence of the churches. The experience of solidarity and the practice of benevolence are worlds apart.

3. **Freedom.** Along with the sense of community, the poor offer us a portrait of freedom. None are so free as the poor. None so lonely as the rich. The capacity of the poor to care is an extension of their freedom, which is their gift to humankind. In Christ this freedom is true freedom. (John 8.36) The insertion of the adverb "truly" ["you shall be truly free"] reminds us of how deceptive is the pursuit of freedom and the almost infinite variety of false freedoms that are found among the rich and powerful.

4. **Suffering.** The poor introduce us to the experience of suffering, which is to be seen as the experience of the Church in that it participates in the suffering of Christ and continues the witness of Christ in the world. Redemption and atonement are through suffering. Apart from suffering there can be no redemption, no New, no justice and no peace. This is way the Church is able to witness to what Kitamori<sup>41</sup> refers to as "the pain of God", for through suffering love is most deeply experienced and most authentically communicated. Atonement, that is, the healing of alienation, is an act of love achieved through suffering. Without in any way detracting from the finality of the work of Christ or the sufficiency of his atoning work, it must be said that the posture of the church in the world is to be one of atonement, given to the healing of the many breeches and rifts in humankind as well as between God and humankind. Only through poverty can this be portrayed. The history of the church is a history of the circumvention of this spiritual reality. The church must exhibit this element of atonement in its living and loving, a participation in the suffering of the poor, a concrete engagement at the most fundamental levels of people's lives. The vicarious suffering of the church is to be the bridge between the Word of God in Christ and human experience. The vicarious suffering of the Church is its word to the

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<sup>41</sup> Kazoh Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God*; Fifth Edition. Richmond, John Knox Press, 1958. This book went through five editions between 1946 and 1958 and deserves more attention than I think it presently receives.



world, for this is how it effectively communicates and offers Christ the suffering servant. The world only hears the gospel in the suffering of the Church. Suffering and power are alternatives, and the Church must find a way to turn away from the more attractive to the more faithful.

But the Structures - and by this I am focussing primarily on the western Church - find suffering alien to their experience. Only the poor can communicate the experience of suffering for the sake of others. A very honest question must be raised as to whether the western Church, being so removed from suffering and marginalization, can bear witness to the suffering Christ. The poor, on the other hand, do this well, as we see in the experience of the black slaves in The United States and the legacy of spirituals they have left us. The "wounded healer" alone heals.

In closing I would like to suggest that the poverty of the Church is its sacrament to the world, a means of grace opening up the world to the Word of God and the grace of God. Its freedom promotes the freedom of humankind and sets in bold relief the new vision of both the present and the future as designed by God so that we all together might "glorify God and enjoy Him forever." It is also a sacrament to itself in promoting the growth of the body until we all attain to the fulness of the stature of Christ. and to the end that "we may evermore dwell in Him and he is us."