The Bible, the Church, and the Poor: Economic Justice in the New Testament

(2 of 3)

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The subject that has been assigned to me for this morning is "economic justice in the New Testament." As I approach this subject, I wonder why it refers specifically to the New Testament, and not to the entire Bible. I do not know the answer to that question, which lies in the bosom of those who planned this event. However, the question itself prompts me to a number of reflections.

The most important such reflection is that it is important to read the New Testament in light of the Old. I do not know about you, but when I was growing up, I was told the opposite quite frequently: One must read the Old Testament in light of the New. That is quite true. But the other side of the same coin is that we must also read the New Testament in light of the Old.

There are many reasons why this is important. It is important, first of all, because it affirms the unity of the Bible. The Bible does not consist of two parts, one old and one new, in the sense that one counts, and one does not, or one is passé and the other valid. The God who spoke "in many and various ways ... to our ancestors by the prophets" is the same God who "in these last days has spoken to us by a Son." Naturally, the message is different, because the circumstances and the times are different --the times are different, above all, because now Jesus has come in the flesh, but God is the same, and both the New Testament and the so-called Old Testament are still God's word to us.

A second reason why it is important to read the New Testament in light of the Old is that it is historically accurate. The early Christians had no other Bible than what we now call the Old Testament. I am always surprised by the almost dishonest ease with which Christians quote Timothy 3:16 as proof of the authority of the Bible: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Historically and quite honestly, that text refers, not to the whole Bible as we now know it, part of which still did not even exist, but to what we now call the Old Testament, about whose authority there was some debate at the time.

In any case, it was in light of the Old Testament that the early Christians interpreted the events they witnessed. They had no other Scripture.

As a result, most of the New Testament is interspersed with references to the Old Testament, far beyond the obvious quotes --and this is the third reason why we must read the New Testament in light of the Old.

We are all well aware, for instance, of the reference to the Old Testament in Hebrews and also of the many times that a New Testament writer says that something took place, "so that what is written would be fulfilled."

But the Old Testament references in the New are many more than those very obvious ones. The New Testament is saturated with Old Testament references, just as many modern sermons are saturated with short phrases and images drawn from Scripture, in such a way that listeners who are familiar with the sacred text will recognize them. Later on this morning we will come across a couple of instances in which this is crucial to understanding the whole import of a particular New Testament.

Finally, the fourth reason why we must read the New Testament in light of the Old relates directly to our subject for this morning. The New Testament was written during a period of a few decades in the life of the early church. As such, it reflects the particular conditions of the church at that time. The Old Testament, on the other hand, was written over a period of several centuries and reflects a variety of conditions under which Israel had to live. Sometimes Israel was a people in exile, living under kings who did not worship the One God. Sometimes it was independent and relatively powerful, being able to chart its own destiny and social order. At other times, it was a province, or a vassal kingdom, to one of the mighty empires on either side of it.

The New Testament, on the other hand, written in such a brief time span, reflects the conditions of Christianity when it was a very small minority in the midst of one of the largest empires the world had ever seen. That is as it should be, and would be no problem, were it not that too often Christians have thought that part of what they need in order to be obedient is to

repeat the conditions that existed in the first century, or at least that, no matter what conditions they live in, their calling is to behave in all things exactly as the early Christians behaved.

The problem is that, in matters having to do with the social order, what believers are called to do depends very much on the circumstances in which they find themselves. Moses in Egypt, for instance, had to speak to his enslaved people a different word than Amos spoke to the rich and powerful northern kingdom. If not, imagine Moses calling together the children of Israel, in some secret meeting, lest the Egyptians know of their gathering, and saying to them:

> Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crunch the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!' The Lord has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. (Amos 4:1-2)

It would make no sense. The word that Amps spoke was and is the word of God. The word that Moses spoke was the word of God. But they were each spoken within their own social setting, and the demands of justice very much depend on the existing conditions.

The New Testament, written as it was at a time when Christians were few, mostly poor and often persecuted, says some very important things about economic justice. It says these things, however, in the particular context of a church that is poor, and whose members have very little influence. We should try to understand what it says and to apply it to our situation insofar as possible. But we must not forget that the Bible includes much more than the New Testament,

and that, if our condition today is not like that of the early Christians--poor, few, and persecuted--, we must look to the entire Bible for guidance.

This is the main reason why, when discussing questions of economic justice, I insist on the need to read, not only the Old Testament in light of the New, but also the New Testament in light of the Old.

And, let me add in passing, I suspect that this is also the reason why many Christians insist on the primacy of the New Testament to the point that they come to disparage or to ignore the Old. The New Testament says little about what Christians ought to do when they are in positions of power or when they are rich. That is to be expected, given the social and economic conditions under which the New Testament was written. But, for today's rich and powerful, concentrating exclusively on the New Testament may be a way to avoid economic and social responsibility.

Having said all that, I shall address the subject for this morning, namely, "economic justice in the New Testament." It is obviously a far-reaching topic, and one which we can only begin to explore in the time allotted.

In that exploration, as we read the New Testament in light of the Old, it is important to underline the fact that for the New Testament authors, the events that they were witnessing

were the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. This is true, not only of the events in the life of Jesus, to which the gospel writers refer repeatedly as the fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophets, but also of the church itself. The early church saw itself as an eschatological community, living in the end times, a sign that the Kingdom had indeed dawned.

The book of Acts makes this very clear. It says it explicitly in chapter 2, in which Peter explains the significance of the events of Pentecost. His words: "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh..." What Peter is saying is not simply that an ancient prophecy is being fulfilled. What Peter is saying, quite literally, is that a prophecy about the end-times is being fulfilled. The church is the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations, but not just of any expectations. It is the fulfillment of the great expectation, of the coming of the last days. "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: And in the last days it shall be..."

What Peter's words make explicit here appears throughout the entire book of Acts, except usually more implicitly, can be seen only as we remember that we are to read the New Testament in light of the Old. Let me give one brief example that does not relate directly to the question of economic justice, in order to move more directly into another example which will take us to the very heart of the issues at hand.

The first example is that of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. He is reading the last chapters of the book of Isaiah. (Incidentally, when Acts tells us what he was reading by providing a quote from Isaiah 53, that does not mean that this is all that he was reading. Remember that this was a time when there were no chapter or verse numbers. If you wished to refer to a particular portion of Scripture, you quoted part of it. Therefore, what Acts says is not that the eunuch was reading only these verses in Isaiah 53, but that he was reading that portion, and probably all that surrounds it.) In any case, you will recall that, after Philip speaks to the eunuch, they come to a place where there is water, and the eunuch asks, "What is to prevent my being baptized?" This is not just a rhetorical question. It is a very serious question. If the eunuch was sufficiently interested in the religion of Israel to come to Jerusalem to worship, he would know that the Law was quite clear on this point: "He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord" (Dt. 23:1). He would also have been aware of the prophecy in the book of Isaiah, just three chapters after the quote from Isaiah 53, a prophecy that touched him directly both as a foreigner and as a eunuch:

> Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off. (Is. 56:3-5)

Thus, to the question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The answer according to the Law should have been clear: "You are a foreigner and a eunuch." But, if in Jesus Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit the end-time has begun and the promises of old are being fulfilled, Philip has no other choice than to baptize him. And baptize him he does, thereby

announcing, just as Peter had done in Pentecost, that "this is what was spoken by the prophet ... and in the last days it shall be..."

So, when we ask about economic justice in the New Testament, we are asking about economic justice in a community that sees itself as the fulfillment of the prophecies of old, as a community of the end-times, the eschatological community that not only announces the Kingdom of God, but already begins to live in the first fruits of that Kingdom.

It is within this theological context that one must understand the two oft quoted, and just as often misunderstood, summaries in which the book of Acts describes the economic life of the early church:

> And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. . .
>
> Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. (Acts 2: 44-45 and Acts 4: 32-35)

Much has been written about these passages, mostly trying to show why we should ignore them. In general, supposedly objective scholars have tried to avoid the radical implications of these passages by one of two means.

The first is to claim that this never happened. Luke, we are told, was trying to depict an ideal society, such as the Pythagoreans and others had described it. In support of this argument, scholars then bring out an array of ancient philosophers whose ideal had been a community in which all things would be held in common.

The problem with this argument is, first, that the community which Luke describes is very different from the elitist community of the Pythagoreans. Those philosophical communities were essentially elitist, and in them the commonality of goods was a means to allow their members to devote themselves to the "philosophical life." In Acts, this is a community of commoners, bound together, not by a philosophical ideal, but by a common love, a common heart, and a common mind; and the purpose of sharing is simply to meet each other's needs.

The other way by which modern interpreters try to set aside the claims of these passages is to say that this did indeed take place, but that it was a disaster. According to this interpretation, the early Christians thought that the end of the world was at hand, so they "went on a happy," sold everything, put it all in a common kitty, ate it all up, and were left with nothing. Or, according to another interpretation, the episode of Ananias and Sapphira showed that the system did not work, and it was therefore abandoned.

There are several other arguments that could be adduced both against the notion that what Luke describes never happened and against the notion that it was abandoned because it was a

disaster. But the strongest argument is, simply put, that there are a number of texts that show that the commonality of property described here persisted, not just for a few months or weeks, but at least for over a hundred years. I will not quote those texts for lack of time. Let me simply say that they come from the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Address to Diognetus, and Tertullian, to name just the most important ones.

Having said all that, we can now look at the texts and point out a few elements that are important for their interpretation:

First element: These texts, and particularly the one in chapter 4, have an eschatological dimension that is often missed. The phrase "there was not a needy person among them" is not just a statement of success. It is also a theological statement, a fulfillment of the promise made in Deuteronomy 15:4 that "there will be no needy among you." The significance of what is described in Acts is not simply that they were so loving among themselves, but that in their midst the promises for the end-time were being fulfilled; that what was happening and what they were doing under the guidance of the Spirit was indeed what was expected "in the last days."

Second element: Most of the verbs are in the imperfect rather than in the aorist. What this means is that the text does not really say that they "went on a happy," sold everything, and then shared it. What the texts actually say is that, as the need arose, they would sell their properties (the passage from chapter 2 does not say what it was they sold; the one in chapter 4

says that it was real estate). They would then bring it to the apostles for distribution. It is not a once-and-for-all action, but a continuing practice.

Third element: The guiding principle is not the thought of an ideal community, where all things should be had in common. The guiding principle is the need of those who do not have enough. In both passages the phrase appears, "as any had need." The purpose is not to fulfill someone's ideological plan but to meet each other's needs.

Fourth element: As the continuation of the story in chapter 5 shows, all this sharing is voluntary. Peter makes it quite clear that Ananias and Sapphira did not have to sell their property, nor did they have to bring the proceeds to the church.

So what we have here is an ongoing, voluntary, selling and giving, in which, when a brother or a sister is in need, no one claims that what they have is their own. This system has its problems, as is shown in chapter 5 by the episode of Ananias and Sapphira, and in chapter 6 by the dissent about the daily distribution to the widows. Yet, nowhere in the book of Acts nor in the rest of the New Testament are we told that it was abandoned.

Now the question immediately arises: If we are not told that it was abandoned, are there signs that it was continued? As I have already stated, there are a number of explicit references to it in early patristic literature. But, what about the New Testament?

In response to that question, I would like to call your attention to a single, very common word. That word is probably the Greek term most commonly used in modern-day congregations: *koionía*. We all know what koionía means. It means "fellowship," doesn't it?

I am sorry to have to contradict the most common interpretation of that word, one which is quoted in many scholarly books, but if "fellowship" means having good feelings towards one another and having a good time together, that certainly is not the primary meaning of koionía. Koionía means much more than that. Strictly speaking, it is a community of sharing. In legal terms, it was employed in very much the same way in which today we speak of a corporation. In Luke 5:10, for instance, where the RSV says that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were "partners" with Simon, what the text says is that they were "koinonoi." They had a koionía on the boat. And this does not mean that they had fellowship on the boat, but that they owned it together --as our translation correctly says, that they were "partners."

Furthermore, throughout the entire patristic period, the term " *koionía*" appears most frequently in reference to sharing of food or goods, and hardly ever in a context in which it can be interpreted strictly as "fellowship." And the verb "koinonein" does not mean “to fellowship" (if such a verb exists) but to share.

In Acts 2:42, just before the words regarding the commonality of property, we are told that the disciples devoted themselves to "four things: the apostles' teaching, "fellowship" (koionía), the breaking of the bread, and prayers. If you then read the verses that follow, it is clear that they refer to these four things, each of which is then expanded by a parallel explanation in those verses that follow. According to that scheme, it is clear that the " koionía " is not "fellowship," but "sharing. " The koionía consists precisely in that they had all things in common, and they sold their possessions, and so on.

There is much more that could be said about this. But the main point, and one that should be applied throughout the New Testament, is that, wherever the Word "koionía" appears, the possibility should at least be considered that it may refer to economic sharing. For instance, in Philippians 1:5, where Paul speaks, according to the RSV, of "your partnership (koionía) in the gospel from the first day until now," the clear meaning, particularly when one knows the story of the Philippians and their material support for Paul's ministry and for the poor in Jerusalem, is that of sharing material goods. In this respect, the NRSV comes closer to the meaning of the Greek: "your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."

Having come to this point, and having almost run out of time, two things are clear. The first is that the matter of economic sharing is paramount in the New Testament and may be referred to as often as the very word koionía appears. What I have depicted is a church in which people share what they have, according to the needs of others and their own good will. Even though

Christians at that time had very few economic resources --or perhaps precisely because they had so few resources-- economic matters do appear repeatedly in the New Testament.

The second thing that should be quite clear is that all that I have said about sharing of economic resources must be understood in light of something I mentioned earlier in this lecture, namely, the eschatological nature of the Christian community. What does that have to do with economic justice, particularly justice beyond the confines of the church? That is a subject that I would like to leave for tomorrow, for it requires that we explore something of the manner in which the early church saw its relationship to the world at large.