

Christian Care for the Poor

A reflection piece for the Joint Commission on Theology and Doctrine

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“There will always be the poor in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your kindred and toward the poor and needy in your land.” Deuteronomy 15:11

Concern for the poor within and outside Israel’s covenant community, the requirement to do justice and give alms, the many parables of Jesus concerning care for the poor, his identification with the poor, and the long history of charity in the Christian church (beginning with Paul’s gathering of money for the poor of the Jerusalem church in Acts 20:1-5) leave little doubt about Christian obligation to care for the poor. There are even parables of judgment for those who do not care for the poor: the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31) as well as that of the Last Judgment (Matthew 24: 31-46)

In Reformation times Luther echoed these biblical and historical imperatives: “There is no greater worship or service of God than Christian love which helps and serves the needy.”¹ In the “Defense of the Augsburg Confession” in the *Book of Concord* we also find strong concern for the poor: “You ought to see the tears of the poor, and hear the pitiable complaints of many good men, which God undoubtedly considers and regards, to whom one day you will render an account of your stewardship.”²

Such concern is based theologically on two great convictions: that every human is created in the image of God and that Jesus died for all sinners. Both convictions bestow on every individual immeasurable worth. This Christian affirmation became so insistent in the Christian West that it became the center of political life, so the political philosopher Glenn Tinder argued in his famous essay “Can We Be Good Without God?” “It is hardly too much to say that the idea of the exalted individual is the spiritual center of Western politics.”³ By that Tinder meant that governments have been obligated to treat individuals with care by respecting their rights, to treat them equally before the law, and to include all within the orbit of their justice.

But before these theological convictions gained political relevance they fueled Christian concern for the poor both within and outside the church. The two central Christian theological convictions issued in action. Faith that they were true became active in love for the poor. That love has certain qualities, qualities that are reflections of the *agape* love of God in Christ for all humans. The love that sets us free in the Gospel at the same time calls us to reflect that love in lives of service and care for others. *Agape* love reaches out to the needy without regard for return. It is other-regarding love. *Agape* love includes all; it has a universal thrust. Paradoxically though, it strategically aims at those who need it most—the

¹ Martin Luther, LW 45: 172-3.

² Article XXVIII (XIV): Of Ecclesial Power, 3.

³ Glenn Tinder, “Can We Be Good Without God?” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1989, 76. Tinder argues that the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption make each individual “exalted,” even though “fallen.”

lost, last, and least. Agape love is steadfast; it is utterly reliable. Further, it aims at restoring the beloved to health and mutuality; it does not aim at keeping the beloved dependent. (All of these qualities of love are taught by our Lord in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10: 25-27.) Agape love is forgiving; it is willing to break the cycle of endless hurt and recrimination in a world of fractured relationships. (This quality is taught powerfully in the parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15: 11-32.) Finally, agape love appears as sacrificial love in a fallen world that does not reward but rather punishes it, the crucifixion of Jesus being the prime example.

However, this expression of Christian love toward the needy is complicated by the fact that each individual is not only “exalted,” but also “fallen.” The poor are sinners too.⁴ Even in personal relationships, the expression of love for the poor is shaped by prudence. What indeed will be helpful to the needy person? What will restore them to health and independence? Such concerns multiply exponentially when the expression of love in personal relationships is expanded to the expression of justice in social life. Though loving the poor neighbor is sometimes a simple and spontaneous thing, it is often not so. Careful thought must be the companion of love if it is not to become an exercise in sentimentality or worse.

Another complicating factor surrounds these questions: who are the poor and why are they poor? What income—or lack of income—defines the poor? Are the poor helpless victims of external circumstances they cannot control? Are they poor because they lack crucial capacities that enable them to contribute to the economy? Are they poor because they are improvident or lazy? The answer to each question conditions how we treat them, not only in our personal relations with them but especially in impersonal, corporate relationships that aim at justice.

In spite of these complications, we Christians are called to love the neighbor, especially the poor. We are to reflect God’s agape love for all, both near and far. What, then, are the ways that we express such love?

The most important way we love the poor is to share the Gospel with them and to invite them into the life of the church. These actions demonstrate our care for their eternal destinies. In addition, these evangelical approaches convey the love of God and the support of the Christian community to the poor in concrete, earthly ways. As we share and demonstrate the Gospel—through the teaching and support of the church—we also offer purpose and hope to lives that are often bereft of such goods. Faith and community support are precious gifts that we are called to offer the poor.

Care for the poor through the laity

Further, when our churches are alive and effective, as are many NALC and CORE parishes, we form our members in the virtues of love and justice.⁵ Those members then express their care for the poor in manifold ways. They volunteer their time in food pantries and kitchens, clothes closets, hospitality

⁴ It is important to note that those who care for the poor and the poor are likewise sinful human beings. Both are free moral agents and have the capacity for both positive and negative actions. The poor are not simply objects of our care; they are subjects as well and must be treated that way if positive outcomes are to be realized.

⁵ This formation is carried out in manifold ways: in teaching and learning, worship and prayer, and the provision of many opportunities for direct involvement in charitable and justice-seeking practices, both inside and outside the church. While the clergy cannot be involved in all this activity, they are crucial in seeing that it is carried out.

networks, home-building organizations, and countless other voluntary associations dedicated to alleviating the plight of the poor. They give their money to innumerable agencies—both large and small—that care for the poor. They organize voluntary associations to address newly discovered needs of the poor. Sometimes they not only offer poor families within their parishes support and aid, but also training in the disciplines that enable them to become independent.⁶ Some Christians are motivated to organize or participate in advocacy organizations that press for changes in public policy. As citizens they vote for candidates whom they think will initiate or support policies on behalf of the poor. Some will even become candidates themselves.

This indirect effect of our church through its laity on behalf of the poor is enormous in both size and impact. Some of it is the product of individual action but much of it flows through the voluntary associations so characteristic of American life. It is often effective because it grapples with plight of the poor in concrete and near-at-hand ways. Prudence and love work together. Some of the action aims at legislating policies that not only alleviate the conditions of the poor but also address the underlying conditions that increase poverty. In this civic exercise Christians of good will and intelligence often agree about the goals of policy but disagree about the means.

The direct role of the Church

Though the church's most lasting and pervasive care for the poor is done indirectly through its proclamation of the Gospel as well as through the work of the laity and their voluntary associations, there are good reasons for direct efforts by the church as an institution. Challenges of helping the poor often go beyond individual action, so the church throughout history has organized its own charitable institutions—hospitals, homes for the poor and elderly, orphanages, and many other organizations to alleviate poverty.⁷ Such institutions continue to be important institutional vehicles for Christian care for the poor. The best of them not only assuage the poverty of the body but also of the soul.

Further, churches have felt obliged to offer social statements that call attention to the plight of the poor, analyze the causes of poverty, and call for public policies that address those causes. Such efforts inevitably get into public debates in which the church has no special expertise. Good public policy is notoriously difficult to craft since it has to be attentive to unintended effects as well as to account for proper incentives and disincentives. Such legislation almost always involves compromises and uncertainties. Moreover, the movement from core Christian moral convictions to policy involves a number of steps at which Christians often diverge. There are few, if any, straight lines from that core to specific public policy. Given such complexities, it is best for our church forcefully to call attention to the problems of the poor and insist on public action to alleviate them rather than to advocate particular public policies.

⁶ One thinks here of the great work of Wesley's Methodists in the Victorian Era in which the degraded poor were transformed into good Christians and citizens. See Gertrude Himmelfarb's *Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians*, 1986.

⁷ Luther recommended that each German town develop a common chest that would provide interest-free loans to the poor, who would pledge to repay them. This development went beyond individual charity to an institutional approach. Soon there were scores of "inner mission" institutions in the Lutheran lands. This charitable impulse continued and flourished in America as Lutheran churches founded a profusion of such organizations. American Lutherans had their William Passavant, a remarkable founder of charitable institutions, who inspired many others to take up the cause.

However, there are some occasions when the church simply has to cry out a prophetic “no” when public policies actively and plainly oppress or violate the dignity of the poor. In those cases the church must not only object to such policies but resist them.⁸

Finally, churches have often engaged in the exercise of political power to affect policy on behalf of the poor. They organize advocacy offices in the midst of state and national governments. In these softer forms of exercising power, they exhort their members to apply pressure to their political representatives to promote specific public policies that they consider just-making. In harder forms they use boycotts and divestment strategies. Such efforts should be employed very carefully and infrequently lest the church damage its universal and transcendent message by involving itself too deeply in coercive and partisan strategies.

In summary, there is little question that we Christians are called to care for the poor. God has commanded such care in his Law and has given us freedom in the Gospel to love the poor neighbor. Our first and most important service to the poor is the sharing of the Gospel and the life of the church with them. Further, we are called to care for the poor in many other ways in our personal, associational, and civic lives. Our church can best motivate us to take up these callings by a vigorous ministry of Word and Sacrament, of worship and teaching, of modeling and practicing. Such a rich ministry will form in us the virtues of love and justice, which, when expressed in our callings, become the most effective way that we care for the poor. Yet, the church also has an institutional role in direct care and advocacy for the poor, a role that that is best carried out by those who are already formed in those virtues.

⁸ Our national history has had some horrific instances of mistreatment of the poor that were not—but should have been—protested by the church. Sterilization of the mentally challenged, medical experiments on poor people without their consent, the targeting of poor communities for promoting abortion services, and unjust loan policies foisted on the credit-worthy poor are some examples.