

**A MODERN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON GLOBAL POVERTY IN LIGHT OF
ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION**

an Honors Project submitted by

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Approval Sheet

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GLOBALIZATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

The initial intention and focus of this honors thesis involved examining the implications of the modern phenomenon of economic globalization for the modern Christian church generally and individual Christians specifically. In light of consultation with the Honors Council during the initial hearing, the focus and the scope of the project have been narrowed. The council helped to clarify what the actual passion and direction of the project should be. The examination of the phenomenon of globalization was far too broad a topic. The examination of economic globalization is also, however, potentially too broad as well. The focus and thrust of the project, therefore, has become a delineation of a modern American Christian's response to global poverty in light of the phenomenon of economic globalization.

This project will follow a specific methodology to develop a modern Christian's response. The project begins with the initial assumption that the Christian faith does indeed speak on the topic of poverty. While this assumption will be made initially and generally, it will not be taken for granted that all of the readers of the project have a thorough understanding of the nature of the Christian tradition regarding poverty.

The initial component of the project, therefore, will be the development of a Biblical paradigm regarding poverty. As the traditionally accepted canon and scripture of the Christian faith, both the Old Testament and the New Testament will be consulted as the primary authorities for the development of a modern Christian perspective. Texts from both the Old Testament and the New Testament will thus be included in the literature reviewed for the project.¹ A project of

¹ Specific scripture passages regarding the issue of poverty and the treatment of the poor will be both provided and explored in the actual text of the project. Once again the assumption is made, for the time being, that the Christian canon indeed contains passages regarding poverty.

this nature cannot exhaustively examine all of the relevant passages of scripture regarding poverty and will thus seek to be representative rather than exhaustive.

The Old Testament paradigm will show common themes among the many voices of the writers of the Old Testament regarding poverty. However, the focus of the paradigm will be on the Prophets as the most essential part of the Old Testament for the discussion of poverty.²

The development of a New Testament paradigm regarding poverty will follow the pattern of the previous chapter in choosing selectivity over exhaustiveness. While the chapter will cover relevant passages throughout the New Testament, the main focus of this section will be on the teachings of Jesus as contained within the Gospels.³

A Biblical perspective on poverty having been established, the following section will provide an examination of conceptions of poverty within Church history. The main stances regarding poverty will first be provided. These stances will then be examined to determine coherence with the previously established biblical paradigm. A presentation of two particular strands of theology focused specifically on poverty and the poor will then be undertaken to show the relative merits of each and to glean from them theological characteristics relative to a modern perspective.⁴

The project will culminate with the development of a Modern American Christian response to world poverty in light of economic globalization. The idea of globalization as a concept will first be presented in order to understand the modern state of economic affairs. A presentation of the two major sides of the debate regarding the predominant theory of economic

² The section developing an Old Testament paradigm will not neglect examination of other parts of the Old Testament. The primary focus will be on the Prophets and this choice will be adequately defended.

³ The choice of a focus on the teachings of Jesus will also be adequately defended.

⁴ The examination of the entire two thousand year scope of Christian history is, also, not feasible in a project of this nature.

globalization (neoliberal economic globalization) will then be presented. The examination will highlight the proposed advantages of the theory and subsequently examine the problems and shortcomings associated with it. The work of two major critics of the current theories will be examined as well.

The chapter will then turn to an examination of a variety of modern Christian responses to the problems associated with economic globalization.⁵ In order to gain a larger cross-section of perspectives, this section will look briefly at a variety of pieces including, among others: a Catholic response, a Latin-American response, and a response from the perspective of minority women. This examination, as with previous examples, will seek to be representative rather than exhaustive.

The final section of this chapter will include the author's own synthesis of what the implications of the previous chapters mean for modern American Christians. While it is not the intention of this project to devise a new global economic plan, the author will provide suggestions for bringing a modern American Christian perspective into line with the witness of Scripture and tradition in light of the implications of economic globalization.

⁵ The author does not, once again, assume to have examined all of the modern Christian responses.

II. THE OLD TESTAMENT

As previously discussed, this thesis is operating under the foundational assumption that a modern Christian response to global poverty in light of economic globalization necessitates an examination of Christian scripture (as does any “modern Christian perspective”). While a unified and singular biblical perspective on poverty will be admittedly elusive and almost impossible to achieve in a work of this length, a thorough (yet cursory) examination of both the Old and New Testaments will be provided. This section of the thesis will focus on a perspective regarding poverty as found within the Protestant canonical Old Testament.

A. Israel’s Canon and Scripture

Yet another foundational assumption must be stated here. This section of the essay presupposes that the Old Testament provides not merely a valuable perspective on poverty, but an essential perspective on the issue. The *NRSV Concordance Unabridged* lists 134 occurrences of the word *poor* and 12 occurrences of the word *poverty*.⁶ The Old Testament writers are not silent on the issues of the poor and poverty.⁷

Borrowing from Walter Brueggemann’s chapter on “Scripture: Old Testament,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, this essay understands ancient Israel as the “community of the Old Testament.”⁸ Brueggemann notes that the debate over the actual

⁶ John R. Kohlenberger III, *The NRSV Concordance Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 1024, 1028.

⁷ This figure is included merely to provide perspective on the relevance of the Old Testament to the issues of the poor and poverty. This figure is taken from an unabridged concordance dealing specifically with the occurrences of the English words within the New Revised Standard Version. This is not an exhaustive concordance, including references to the manuscripts in their original languages. This essay is not dealing with translational issues or practices, however, and the English should thus be sufficient. This figure also does not assume that these occurrences represent all that the Old Testament has to say on poverty, the word *poverty* does not necessarily have to be used to discuss the principles of the issue.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, “Scripture: Old Testament,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 7-20.

historical practices of ancient Israel, and how to discern what those practices actually were, rages on unendingly. Yet Brueggemann offers the suggestion that we “accept as roughly reliable the self-presentation of Israel as a clue to its self-discernment, and to realize that even if this self-presentation is not historically reliable, it is in any case the preferred self-presentation with which interpretation must finally deal, albeit with great critical caution.”⁹ This examination thus will deal solely with the perspectives and practices regarding poverty and the poor as presented by the writers of the Old Testament.

This project does not focus on Old Testament biblical criticism. A cursory presentation of the composition of the Old Testament, however, will be helpful in tracing the theological threads contained therein. The Old Testament is commonly divided into three parts: the first section called the “Torah” in Hebrew or the “Law” in English, the second section called the “Nevi’im” in Hebrew or the “Prophets” in English, and the “Ketuvim” in Hebrew or the “Writings” in English.¹⁰ The Torah consists of the first five books of the Old Testament, including: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The second division, the Prophets, consists of the former and the latter prophets. The Former Prophets consist of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings. The Latter Prophets consist of the books named after specific prophets and include the “major” prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the twelve “minor” prophets, or the books Hosea through Malachi. The third division, the Writings, consists of all of the remaining books in the Old Testament. The Writings contain a variety of genres ranging from

⁹ N. K Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 BC* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) cited in Brueggemann, “Scripture: Old Testament,” 7.

¹⁰ Michael David Coogan, *Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4. The Old Testament is henceforth to be understood as describing the books of Hebrew Scripture contained within the modern Protestant canon.

poetry to narrative.¹¹ This extremely basic framework will provide reference points when discussing the views on poverty contained within the Old Testament.

B. Israel's Covenant with Yahweh Included Economics

Brueggemann also notes that caution must be taken when using the Old Testament to determine the economic and political views and practices of ancient Israel, but that:

Like every political community, ancient Israel had to devise institutions, policies, and practices that apportioned power, goods, and access in a manageable, practicable, sustainable way. And, as in every such community, those ways of managing were endlessly under review and sometimes under criticism and assault.¹²

In not so many words, Brueggemann states the fact that the nation of Israel had to deal with not only politics generally but economics specifically.

Unlike the tendency of modern and post-modern society to separate faith and religion from politics and the public sphere, the politics and religious belief of ancient Israel are virtually inseparable. The primary theme in Israel's self-presentation within the Old Testament is the understanding of Yahweh as the primary force behind and factor upon which Israel's politics, and also economics, should be based.¹³ As summarized by Brueggemann, "Israel's self-presentation is inescapably a *political theology* in which YHWH, the God of Israel, is intensely engaged with questions of power and with policies and practices that variously concern the distribution of goods and access."¹⁴ Even more succinctly, "in Israel's self-presentation, there is no politics not theologically marked, no theology not politically inclined."¹⁵

¹¹ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 4-6.

¹² Brueggemann, "Old Testament," 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

This paradigm of struggle is essential to understand one of the main political and economic issues constantly in tension in ancient Israel; namely, the perennially debated issue of the distribution of goods and wealth between the “have’s” and the “have-not’s.” This ethical struggle can be most clearly seen in the stark tension between “the monopolizing, marginalizing propensity of monarchy that reached its zenith of power and prestige under Solomon [...] that featured an inordinate standard of extravagance (1 Kgs. 4:20-8),” and the counter-theme of “vigorous advocacy for ‘widows, orphans, sojourners, and the poor’ through economic provisions that seek to curb unfettered accumulation. (Deut. 15:1-18)”¹⁶

The political theology or the theological politics of ancient Israel, revolving around covenant with Yahweh, yields distinctive understandings of the distribution of wealth and the proper treatment of the poor. First, the economic and political processes of Israel are to be an open process in continuing a dynamic covenant with Yahweh rather than a fixed or absolute system. Second, the political economy is to operate under the understanding of Yahweh as generous creator providing abundance rather than the fear of scarcity as displayed by Pharaoh. Third, covenantal law necessitates that all are entitled to an adequate share and that communal goods are to be distributed to rich and poor alike rather than justifying a policy of accumulation and monopoly (the curbing of which is evident in the “Year of Release” as seen in Deut. 15: 1-18). Fourth, that concern and advocacy must be exercised for the widows, orphans, and the poor, with the constant reminder that, “You were slaves in Egypt.” Finally, Israel must act in a generously covenantal manner “so that social relationships are congruous with YHWH’s own

¹⁶ Brueggemann, “Old Testament,” 9.

generosity. That is, social relationships fully express and embody the reality of YHWH's sovereign practice of generosity."¹⁷

This framework regarding Israel's theological understanding of an economic process based around covenant with Yahweh provides the context for understanding an Old Testament perspective on the poor and poverty. The Old Testament perspective on the poor is centered on economic ethics. Economic ethics and the treatment of the poor are paramount in the ethics of the Old Testament as "the ethics of the Hebrew Bible is most characteristically associated with the economic aspect of Israel's society. At the root is a fundamental concern for those who were vulnerable to economic exploitation or who were greatly worse off than others in the community."¹⁸ The ethics of the Old Testament are thus inextricably tied to Israel's economic understanding, the basis of which is a primary concern with the poor and exploited.

i. Torah

The Pentateuch contains numerous examples of the ethical concern for the poor. The Old Testament offers a defining case study for the political and economic struggles of Israel in the form of the Exodus narrative. This narrative provides a picture of the covenantal Yahweh as confronting and overthrowing the absolutism of the political power of Pharaoh. This paradigm can be seen time and again throughout the Old Testament in the constant conflict of political absolutism and acquisitiveness, as represented first by Pharaoh, against the covenantal generosity of Yahweh.¹⁹ God requires Israel to treat the poor with the same generosity that he has shown them by bringing them out of Egypt. This is clearly displayed in Exodus 22:21-25:

¹⁷ Brueggemann, "Old Testament," 12.

¹⁸ Douglas A. Knight, "Ethics in the Old Testament," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Watson E. Mills; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 267-270.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. (Exod 22:21-25 NRSV)²⁰

Leviticus also contains provisions, in line with the paradigm, for the just treatment of the poor. An example of this is the provision of multiple concessions for the poor who could not afford the standard offerings. Leviticus 5:7 and 11 state that, "if you cannot afford a sheep, you shall bring to the Lord, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering the other for a burnt offering," and, "if you cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, you shall bring as your offering for the sin that you have committed one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour for a sin offering" (Lev 5:7, 11). Leviticus 12:8 and 14:21 echo these same provisions. Leviticus 25:38-40 echoes the reminder of Yahweh's covenantal generosity and the requirements that this brings:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God. If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of jubilee. (Lev 25:38-40)

Deuteronomy perpetuates this paradigm as well. Deuteronomy 15:10-11 and 15 state Yahweh's demand to "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land,'" and the reminder to treat slaves justly because "remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for

²⁰ All biblical citations that follow will be from the NRSV.

this reason I lay this command upon you today” (Deut 15:10-11, 15). Deuteronomy 24:14-15 commands that:

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

ii. Writings

Both Proverbs and some of the Psalms contain passages regarding poverty that continually echo this paradigm. Proverbs specifically addresses poverty in several places. There are passages within Proverbs that suggest that poverty can be caused by laziness. Proverbs 6:10-11 is one of these passages and warns that “a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want, like an armed warrior” (Prov 6:10-11).

However, the just treatment and appropriate aid for the poor are also found within Proverbs. The passages addressing the need for sensitivity toward the needy are found throughout Proverbs.²¹ One passage points to the fact that poverty is often caused by injustice by stating, “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice” (Prov 13:23). Another passage highlights the benefit of aiding the poor by saying, “those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor” (Prov 12:21). Proverbs 21:12 warns, “If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard” (Prov 21:12). Yet another passage suggests, “Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will only lead to loss” (Prov 22:16). Proverbs 28:27 states, “Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but one who turns a blind eye will get many a

²¹ M.D. Carroll R., “Wealth and Poverty,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 881-887.

curse.” While some of the passages in Proverbs suggest poverty *can* come about because of laziness, the larger message within Proverbs advocates the just treatment of the poor.

Psalm 10 speaks directly to the plight of the poor at the hand of the wicked and pleas for God to strengthen the oppressed. The Psalm begins with the question in Psalms 10:1-2, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised” (Ps 10:1-2). Psalm 12:5 holds out for the time when the poor will hear the voice of God saying, “‘because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,’ says the Lord; ‘I will place them in the safety for which they long’” (Ps 12:5).

C. Israel’s Covenant Challengers-The Prophets

As previously discussed, the most common division of the Old Testament includes the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The previous brief presentation of positions on poverty contained within the Law and the Writings is by no means exhaustive; rather, it was intended to be representative. The main focus of this section of the project will be on the perspective of the Old Testament prophets.²²

i. Defining Prophet

A brief understanding of what a biblical prophet was will prove to be useful in understanding the prophetic message. An important understanding of the Old Testament prophets

²² This focus is by no means based on a random choice or without the understanding that the other sections of the Old Testament indeed contain perspectives on wealth and poverty and the status and treatment of the poor. It is also understood that the perspectives on these issues contained within the Old Testament are often competing. This project will not seek to harmonize or ignore these competing perspectives. This project will argue instead that on the issue of poverty and the treatment of the poor, the prophetic voice and the perspective contained within the prophetic writings can be considered as normative and fundamental within Old Testament theology and ethics. For a more thorough discussion of poverty in the other parts of the Old Testament see: M.D. Carroll R., “Wealth and Poverty,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 881-887; Gerald T. Shepard, “Poor,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Watson E. Mills; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991) 700-701.

involves a clarification of the word *prophet*. The word ascribed to the vast majority of the Old Testament prophets is the Hebrew word *nabi*, most often translated as “proclaimer.”²³ The earliest Greek translators most often translated this to the word *prophetes*, or “interpreter,” from which the English word prophet is derived. This is an important understanding in light of the common misinterpretation of the word prophet as primarily meaning “predictor.” The Old Testament prophets are, thus, better understood primarily as “proclaimers” rather than “predictors.”²⁴

The understanding of the prophets as “proclaimers” does not detract from the power of the prophetic voice. The Old Testament prophets were understood to be proclaiming the special word of God to the people of Israel, and to be acting as intercessors to God for Israel.²⁵ This understanding of “a direct connection between the purpose and plans of the Lord and the mission and message of prophets,” is powerfully displayed by the fact that the words of certain prophets were preserved and transmitted and have attained scriptural status in both Judaism and Christianity.²⁶ The frequent inclusion of the phrase “Thus says the Lord” at the beginning of certain passages within the prophetic literature indicates that the speeches of the prophets were

²³ John. F.A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1.

²⁴ Robert L. Cate, “Prophet,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Watson E. Mills; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 715-717. For a more thorough treatment of various theories regarding the essence and roles of Old Testament and Israelite prophets and prophecy see: Robert P. Gordon ed., *The Places is Too Small For Us: The Israelite prophets in Recent Scholarship* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995); Robert R. Wilson, “Early Israelite Prophecy,” *Interpreting the Prophets* (eds. James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1-13; David E. Aune, “Prophecy,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Watson E. Mills; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 714-715; John. F.A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); John W. Miller, *Meet the Prophets: A Beginner’s Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

²⁵ Robert L. Cate, “Prophet,” 715.

²⁶ James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier eds., *Interpreting the Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), ix.

presented as God's own speech.²⁷ This formulaic expression positions the legitimate prophets of Israel essentially as the messengers of Yahweh.²⁸ An extremely succinct presentation of this idea comes from Rabbi David J. Zucker, "The prophet is the spokesperson of God."²⁹

ii. The Rise of the Prophetic Voice

According to Gerhard von Rad, one important common factor in the message of the prophets was a distinct element of reformation.³⁰ The prophets sought change of some sort for Israel. Cate echoes this further by saying that the prophets "were activists, concerned with life as it is, with people as they are, with blindness that did not see God at work and with deafness that refused to hear God's warnings."³¹

The change sought by the prophets involved foundational changes in the political, social and economic aspects of Israelite society. The time period from 1000 B.C.E. to 500 B.C.E included some of the greatest reformatory messages of the prophets.³² Although Israel had previously known the influence of a prophetic voice, the development of a political monarchy provided the background from which the prophetic tradition really began to develop. As stated by Peterson, "Thus, there is a strong correlation between Israel's existence as a monarchic state

²⁷ David L. Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

²⁸ David Hill, "Prophets," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 620-623.

²⁹ David J. Zucker, *Israel's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1994), 7.

³⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 11.

³¹ Cate, "Prophet," 715.

³² Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature*, 8.

and the presence of prophets in its midst.”³³ Israel’s economic life specifically underwent significant change with the advent of a united monarchy.³⁴

Israel had previously experienced an apparent relative socio-economic homogeneity with the people living in similar settlements. However, the rise of the monarchy, the growth of cities, and the amassing of wealth and power by a select few caused increasing economic disparity between the rich and the poor.³⁵ The prophetic voice is most unified at this intersection between the former norms of a local subsistence economy and the developing regional market economy.³⁶ Gerhard von Rad said the emergence of the prophetic message was precipitated by certain key features within the history of the nation of Israel. One of these features involved Israel’s systematic emancipation from Yahweh’s control in favor of the protection and power provided by the nation’s own political autonomy. Another key feature can be seen in the economic development and shift of wealth to powerful landowners. This newfound wealth gave them increasing amounts of control over the poor and decreased the ability of the poor to own their own land.³⁷

This development has been called “early capitalism” in some studies. This term reflects the changing focus from the usage of land as support to the usage of land as capital, and the changing focus of the goal of society from personal values to economic profit.³⁸ This changing

³³ Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature*, 8.

³⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 69.

³⁵ Knight, “Ethics in the Old Testament,” 269.

³⁶ David C. Hopkins, “Economics in the Old Testament,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Watson E. Mills; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 229-231.

³⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 9-10.

conception of land, property, and wealth, coinciding with the development and rise of the monarchy, came with a significant price. The rise of political and economic autonomy in the Israelite people came with both a decline in focus on their covenantal relationship with Yahweh, and with a decline in concern for the poor.

iii. The Message of the Prophetic Voice

In light of the fact that there exists such a wide variety of material attributed to the Old Testament prophets, a singular and coherent “prophetic voice” or message is essentially impossible to determine. Yet as stated by John F.A. Sawyer, “it is not hard to identify common themes, particularly when we take into account the final shaping of the prophetic corpus.”³⁹ As Craig L. Blomberg expressed this fact, “Although each prophet addresses distinct and at times unique historical circumstances, there are numerous themes, not least with respect to material possessions, that justify our treating this material together as one, admittedly heterogeneous, unit of God’s Word.”⁴⁰

As previously established, a singular prophetic voice is impossible to determine. The most common and coherent theme among them, however, is this general prophetic stance toward poverty and the poor. Conrad Boermas says, “in addition to criticism implicit in specific legislation, there is a direct attack on poverty from the prophets. They do not mince words about the rich. The rich are the enemies of the poor.”⁴¹ The prophetic voice sounds clearly on behalf of

³⁸ James L. Mays, “Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition,” *Prophecy in Israel* (ed. David L. Peterson; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 144-158.

³⁹ Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 42.

⁴⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, 69.

⁴¹ Conrad Boerma, *The Rich The Poor—and the Bible* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 36.

the powerless, and especially those powerless who were oppressed by the powerful.⁴² The prophetic voice sounds loudly for those whose lives were caught in economic processes that they could not control.⁴³ The prophetic voice sounds ominously with devastation for the powerful because of the suffering of the oppressed.⁴⁴ The prophetic voice consistently demands economic justice, covenantal care, and legitimate concern for the poor.

Common to this prophetic concern was the cry for justice echoed again and again throughout the prophetic literature found in the Old Testament. The prophets concluded that Israel's ritualism and system of sacrifice had become not only worthless but detestable, and that there should be an inextricable link between ethical standards and proper ritual practices. Israel was maintaining the traditions of ritual and worship to Yahweh.⁴⁵ They had chosen, however, to neglect justice. The rights of the widow, the poor, and the orphan were largely neglected in the developing economy.⁴⁶ For the prophets "sacrifice without justice is worthless; and justice for the prophets means protection of the underprivileged members of society."⁴⁷

Jeremiah warns that Israel had become:

Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? Says the Lord, and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? (Jer 5:27-29)

Micah summarizes the fact that Israel's sacrifice had become meaningless:

⁴² Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature*, 13.

⁴³ Hopkins, "Economics in the Old Testament," 231.

⁴⁴ Cate, "Prophet," 715.

⁴⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 9.

⁴⁶ Mays, "Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition," 148.

⁴⁷ Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, 44.

‘With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with then thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:6-8)

Amos states, “thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6).

Isaiah asserts:

The Lord rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? Says the Lord God of hosts. (Isa 3:13-15)

iv. Coherence with the Covenantal Relationship

The prophetic appeal to justice for the poor can be understood as normative to the theology of ancient Israel. First, the prophetic appeal for justice was firmly rooted in the theological history and tradition of the Israelite people.⁴⁸ The prophetic voice calls Israel to remember the ways in which Yahweh had been faithful in the past. Yahweh’s faithfulness provides Israel with an imperative to behave in a certain and similar manner. This manner involves an explicit consideration of the status and needs of the poor in Israel’s midst. The prophetic voice calls Israel back to what they originally had believed.

The prophetic call for justice toward the poor is not only rooted in the theological tradition of Israel, it is calling Israel back to their normative relationship to Yahweh. Martin Buber states that Israel’s “faith in YHWH, which throughout the period of the wanderings and the conquest of Canaan remained essentially unimpaired in spite of all the deviations and

⁴⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 11; Paul D. Hanson, “Prophetic Political Engagement in Ancient Israel,” *Let Justice Roll: Prophetic Challenges in Religion, Politics, and Society* (ed. Neil Riemer ; Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1996), 1-21; Mays, “Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition,” 147.

aberrations, was forced to come to grips with the weighty question raised by the growing consolidation of economic and political conditions of life.”⁴⁹

Israel’s covenantal relationship to Yahweh had remained relatively intact until the period of economic change associated with the rise of monarchy. Israel’s theology involved full faith in and dependence upon their covenant with Yahweh. Whereas the earlier nomadic life of Israel involved both familial kinship and kinship with Yahweh, the later moral code of the nation began to be shaped by those in power who controlled the economic, political, and religious life of the nation.⁵⁰ The distinctiveness of the prophetic voice lies in the message that Israel’s relationship to Yahweh involves a covenant, and that this covenant carried with it clear demands upon the moral life of Israel.⁵¹ Israel had neglected to remember the moral imperatives necessitated by their covenant with Yahweh. Central among these demands upon Israel’s moral life, and part of the demands that Israel had forgotten, are the fair and just treatment of the poor.

The prophetic voice speaks not only of the nature of the normative relationship between Israel and Yahweh, but also of what this relationship means for the ethical life of the nation. The prophetic voice points Israel to their normative ethical standards of righteousness and justice. For Israel, “righteousness involves the principle of beneficence, doing the good thing (e.g., in Israelite language to aid the widow or orphan.) Justice addresses the question of how. In concrete terms, should one offer ten pounds of wheat to one widow or one pound of wheat to ten widows?”⁵² The normative ethical standards for ancient Israel thus involve both the imperative to

⁴⁹ Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1949), 80.

⁵⁰ Levi A. Olan, *Prophetic Faith and the Secular Age* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 30.

⁵¹ R.E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 127.

⁵² Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature*, 40.

do the righteous act, specifically to act with benevolence toward the poor and the widow, and the provision for the consideration of how to enact this justice.

During the period of ancient Israelite history in which the Israelites were either enslaved in Egypt in bondage and poverty, or wandering nomadically, a relative economic homogeneity and the dependence of the nation upon the covenant with Yahweh and each other provided conducive conditions for maintaining the ethical standards of righteousness and justice toward the poor. The development and rise of the monarchy, and the increase of the political and economic autonomy of the nation, included an emphasis on economic prosperity that caused a gradual negligence of both their covenantal status with Yahweh and the ethical imperatives of justice and righteousness toward one another implicit in Yahweh's demands. As Israel tasted the fruits of economic development, namely wealth and accumulation, they partook of these fruits at the expense of the poor.

The prophetic voice reaches its fullest crescendo when reminding Israel of the righteousness and justice required by Yahweh. The righteous and just treatment of the poor are not arbitrary ethical standards set by the community, but instead are normative ethical imperatives demanded by Yahweh. The prophetic voice will not let Israel forget these ethical requirements. Righteousness and justice toward the poor are thus established as Yahweh's requirement for Israel. The prophetic voice calling Israel back to these standards can thus be understood as the normative position on economic justice within the Old Testament.

D. Summary

The practical application of righteousness and justice toward the poor will involve different practices and solutions in different historical contexts and situations. This was assuredly true in ancient Israel. When wandering nomadically, Israel's accumulation of wealth is not a

consideration and relative economic homogeneity prevents the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich. However, in a developing autonomous economic situation where wealth becomes concentrated in the hands of a few, Israel must remember or be reminded that the blessing of wealth is to be shared.

Within the Old Testament the wealthy are sometimes seen as blessed and the poor as not, but sometimes the poor are understood to be the blessed of God. The prophetic voice, however, calls Israel to return to the normative ethical standard of the righteous and just treatment of the poor regardless of their position as blessed. However, the prophetic voice does not pass judgment on wealth as an inherent evil. Rather, judgment is passed on the exploitative rich who accumulate wealth at the expense of others. Wealth is to be shared, and with increased wealth comes increased responsibility to care for the poor. Even with various conceptions of the merits of wealth and poverty within the Old Testament, one theme is present throughout the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. This theme involves the fact that the key to evaluating the ethical usage of material possessions by an individual or group lies in an examination of how effectively the individual or group provides for the poor and powerless in their midst.⁵³

These ethical standards provide all Christians with some challenging questions. How ethically have we used our immense wealth? How well have the poor in our midst been provided for? Which of the modern poor are within our sphere of influence? What would the prophetic voice have to say to the modern American Christian?

⁵³ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 84.

III. THE NEW TESTAMENT

As discussed in the previous chapter, a discussion about poverty is in essence a discussion of ethics. Determining a New Testament position on poverty is thus a discussion of New Testament ethics. Defining a unified ethical position on poverty from the New Testament would be an almost impossible and at the very least insurmountable task in a project of this nature. The various voices heard within the New Testament canon sing in polyphony rather than monotony. These voices can be understood, however, as singing in the same symphony rather than in dissonant songs. With the understanding of the unifying proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and subsequently raised from the dead comes “the exhortation to form conduct and character and community into something ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ’ (Phil. 1:27).”⁵⁴ This chapter will thus seek to determine a *normative*, if not definitive and singular, position on poverty and the treatment of the poor as displayed in the New Testament.⁵⁵ Ultimately necessary in this examination will be the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ A.D. Verhey, “New Testament Ethics,” *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (eds. David J. Atkinson and David F. Field; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 56-64.

⁵⁵ Certain foundational assumptions used in the previous chapter will continue as a basis for this chapter. One of these key assumptions is that this project does not carry the purpose of examining the validity of the sources within the New Testament. The New Testament will be understood as the essential body of material held as scripture within the Christian faith, and that the New Testament provides the best backdrop that Christianity possesses upon which to gauge its ethical behavior. It will also be admitted that biblical interpretation is an ever shifting and constantly developing field of study. The opinion set forth in this chapter will not be purported to be the authoritative nor even the correct interpretation of scripture. It will be humbly presented, rather, as a singular interpretation regarding a scriptural position toward poverty and the treatment of the poor.

⁵⁶ Once again, it is by no means assumed that the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul represent the exhaustive position regarding a New Testament ethic. It is understood, however, that the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul offer the most assuredly normative position regarding poverty and the treatment of the poor.

A. Jesus

A normative New Testament ethical perspective on poverty must first examine the teachings of Jesus, as found in the Gospel narratives, as “ethics and pastoral theology which do not relate to Jesus could scarcely be called Christian.”⁵⁷ Admittedly much can be learned from the Gospel narratives regarding the actions and dialogue attributed to Jesus. In favor of selectivity over totality, however, a paradigm must be set forth. This chapter will proceed with the understanding of two groups of material as paradigmatic for an understanding of the teaching of Jesus regarding the poor: the parables of Jesus, and the Sermon on the Mount. The material regarding the response of Jesus to the rich young ruler will also be examined in light of its particular relevance to the topic at hand. A brief examination of other teachings of Jesus will also be used to demonstrate coherence with the paradigms.

i. Parables

No group of material is more crucial for understanding the ethical teachings of Jesus than the parables. This is primarily true because the parable is the most frequent medium that Jesus chose to utilize in order to explain not only the nature of God and of his kingdom, but more importantly for this study, the expectations that God holds for his people.⁵⁸ Not only are the parables the most frequent manner in which Jesus taught regarding ethical expectations, but

⁵⁷ P.J.H. Adam, “Jesus,” *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (eds. David J. Atkinson and David F. Field; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 507-510. As the Christian faith does not possess any material purported to have been actually written by Jesus, this chapter will proceed with the foundational understanding of the Gospel narratives as authoritative, if not exhaustive, for determining the nature of ethical teachings of Jesus regarding poverty and the treatment of the poor.

⁵⁸ K.R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 591-600.

many scholars agree that the parables contain some of the most authentic and reliable examples of the teachings of Jesus.⁵⁹

The interpretation of the parables of Jesus, like the interpretation of virtually all of scripture, has undergone significant change and development throughout history.⁶⁰ This chapter, however, does not seek to establish a particular method of interpretation for the parables as the correct method. The purpose of this examination, rather, is to determine a position specifically regarding poverty from the parables. This position will be determined by examining over-arching themes and common positions from the parables regarding the issue at hand.

While various methods of interpretation of the parables undeniably exist, unifying concepts and commonalities can nonetheless be determined. As agreed upon by various major scholars, the essential concept upon which the parables are based is the idea of the Kingdom of God.⁶¹ Even more specifically, the parables echo the key concept of the preaching of Jesus that the arrival of the Kingdom of God was imminent and that this imminence carried with it an expectation of repentance and discipleship.⁶² A common theme of the parables can thus be understood as a call to a particular ethic in light of the imminence of the coming of the Kingdom

⁵⁹ Snodgrass, "Parable," 596.

⁶⁰ For an excellent summary of both this history of interpretation and of the actual methods of interpretation as well see Peter Rhea Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon, Ga: Smyth and Helwys, 1999).

⁶¹ Peter Rhea Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), 35; K.R. Snodgrass, "Parable," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 591-600. Jones summarizes well this position as postulated also by C.H. Dodd and J. Jeremias, two of the major scholars who have greatly influenced the interpretation of the parables.

⁶² Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 113; K.R. Snodgrass, "Parable," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 591-600; A.D. Verhey, "New Testament Ethics," *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (eds. David J. Atkinson and David F. Field; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 56-57.

of God. A significant characteristic of the parables is thus a strongly ethical teaching.⁶³ The next step is, therefore, to determine the nature of this ethical requirement specifically for the issue of poverty and the treatment of the poor within the parables of Jesus.

The appropriate use of wealth is undeniably a specific aspect of the ethics of the Kingdom of God dealt with in the parables of Jesus.⁶⁴ Several of the parables of Jesus highlight his teachings regarding wealth, poverty, and the treatment of the poor. Most specifically and notably the Gospel of Luke contains not only extremely specific parables regarding the ethics of wealth and poverty, but perhaps some of Jesus' most direct teachings on the issue.⁶⁵ Luke contains not only many of the parables found within the other synoptic gospels, but also at the very least fifteen parables unique to his gospel.⁶⁶

Of these parables unique to Luke, two passages stand out as particularly significant examples of a paradigmatic nature regarding Jesus' teaching on wealth and poverty: the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13-21, and the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.⁶⁷

Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool as follows:

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is

⁶³ Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, 39.

⁶⁴ Snodgrass, "Parable," 599.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 600.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 596.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 595.

being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-21)

The indictment of the rich fool presents a picture of Jesus’ teachings regarding the nature of true wealth and the danger of greed. Jesus never speaks of wealth as intrinsically evil. The sin of greed and the amassing of wealth, however, are the dangerous results of such a focus on material possessions.⁶⁸ An important repercussion of the rich fool’s sin of greed arises from the self-serving nature of his desire to save and amass his surplus. Jesus offers an example of the appropriate use of wealth a few verses later. Rather than amass wealth, Jesus suggests to his disciples that they sell possessions and give alms to the poor. (Luke 12:33) Consistent in the teachings of Jesus is the imperative to give of one’s over-abundance to those who have less than enough.⁶⁹ Wealth is not to be amassed, for self-indulgence leads to poverty of the soul.⁷⁰

Whereas the rich fool amassed wealth for himself, the only responsible use of wealth involves the care of the poor.⁷¹ Abundance is to be met with thanksgiving to God as a provision of his blessing, is to be shared with the needy, and is never to be seen as an ends in and of itself.⁷²

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, appearing in Luke 16:19-31, offers a presentation of the potential consequences of the unethical use of wealth. The parable involves the story of two individuals at opposite ends of the economic spectrum:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the

⁶⁸ P.H. Davids, “Rich and Poor,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 701-710; Peter Rhea Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), 155.

⁶⁹ Davids, “Rich and Poor,” 706.

⁷⁰ Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, 154.

⁷¹ Davids, “Rich and Poor,” 705.

⁷² John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 176-177.

dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. (Luke 16:19-31)

The parable offers a distinct reversal in roles in which the man who was rich in this life is punished in the life to come, and Lazarus who was poor in this life is comforted in the life to come. The rich man is not punished intrinsically because of his wealth, however. As previously discussed, Jesus never teaches that wealth is inherently evil. The misuse and abuse of wealth in light of the suffering of others is the evil for which the rich man receives punishment. This is evidenced by the fact that the rich man pleads for a message to be sent to his family so that they may repent. The rich man's family, and he himself, knew the message of Moses and the prophets regarding the just treatment of the poor.⁷³ Mercy toward the poor is an ethical imperative in the teachings of Jesus, and "this parable is not intended to provide a description of judgment so much as it is to underscore the eternal consequences of failing to show mercy."⁷⁴

While other parables of Jesus speak to various issues of wealth, poverty, and possessions, these two parables speak most directly to the just use of wealth and the righteous treatment of the poor. These attitudes, however, found within the Lukan

⁷³ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 171; Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 123.

⁷⁴ Snodgrass, "Parable," 600.

parables are consistent with the attitudes presented in the other synoptic gospels. Intrinsic within this imperative for abundance to be shared is the ancient Mediterranean viewpoint of goods as limited. Over-consumption or the amassing of wealth by some necessitates the poverty of others.⁷⁵

An example found within the teachings of Jesus, contained within the gospels, which echoes the paradigm set forth in these parables regarding the just use of wealth and the treatment of the poor can be found in Jesus' response to the rich young ruler. Jesus encounters a man wishing to inherit eternal life:

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:17-25)

This story, found in all of the synoptic gospels, highlights the previously established dangers of wealth. F.F. Bruce includes an entire chapter devoted to this saying in his work *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Bruce highlights the fact that modern readers of this passage are tempted to think that this was simply a singular test of one man's devotion. Bruce points out, however, that this advice is a regular feature within the teachings of Jesus.⁷⁶ While some men and women of wealth supported the ministry of Jesus, placing the Kingdom of God above their worldly

⁷⁵ Davids, "Rich and Poor," 705.

⁷⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 175.

possessions, experience shows that this is the exception rather than the norm.⁷⁷ The imperative of justice and righteousness inherent in Jesus' teachings regarding seeking the Kingdom of God were to take precedence above all else.⁷⁸ A focus on material wealth severely inhibits this focus, and for those who have attained great material wealth this becomes nearly impossible.⁷⁹ In this command, however, Jesus is once again not attacking wealth as intrinsically evil. He is, rather, realigning priorities. The priorities that Jesus teaches include the fact that the "plight of the poor takes priority over the desires of the affluent."⁸⁰ The desire to accumulate and maintain wealth is fundamentally inconsistent with the kingdom imperative to share abundance with the poor, especially within the ancient Mediterranean conception of limited goods. Perhaps this is why Jesus states the near impossibility of the ability of the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.

ii. Sermon on the Mount

The next example within the teachings of Jesus to be used paradigmatically regarding poverty and the treatment of the poor is the Sermon on the Mount. As previously stated, a discussion of the teachings of Jesus regarding poverty is essentially an ethical discussion. The Sermon on the Mount has historically been one of the most widely discussed passages within the Bible. Christians, and some non-Christians, have held the Sermon on the Mount as providing a clear ethical message "for all people of good will."⁸¹

⁷⁷ Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 176.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 140.

⁸¹ G.N. Stanton, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 735-744.

As with other scriptural passages, the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount has undergone radical change and development throughout history.⁸² Involved in these changing interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount is the comparison of the relationship between the two apparent versions of the sermon: the Sermon on the Mount contained within Matthew's gospel, and the "Sermon on the Plain" contained within Luke's gospel.⁸³ The two distinct interpretations of the relationship between the two are that: A. the two sermons are integral parts of the individual gospels, possibly adapted from the Q source to match the particular thrust of each, or B. the two sermons are collections of the actual sayings of Jesus.⁸⁴

While the purpose of this chapter is not to provide an analysis of different hypotheses within biblical criticism, these competing theories can be used to make a nuanced point regarding a position on poverty within the sermons. Regardless of whether the two gospel writers drew their material from some source other than the actual sayings of Jesus for their respective sermons both of the sermons present some resonant words regarding the poor.⁸⁵

⁸² For a summary of this history of interpretation see: G.N. Stanton, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 735-744; Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1999).

⁸³ Stanton, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," 736.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ While the selective usage of verses out of context to establish an ethic is a practice to be avoided at all costs, the relevance of certain verses to a larger established position is often greater than others. The attempt will be made to keep the understanding of the verses regarding poverty in-line with the context of the sermon as a whole. An explanation of the entire Sermon on the Mount is not the aim of this chapter, however. The body of literature written about this passage is extensive and thorough. The expertise of the great exegetes throughout history has provided invaluable to this project, and a full explanation of this passage is left to their far more capable hands. For a summary of the interpretations of Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin see G.N. Stanton, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 735-744. See also: John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985); W.D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); F.B. Meyer, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Directory of the Devout Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1959); Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount:*

In the section of both sermons containing the beatitudes, a very interesting similarity emerges. While Matthew's version contains nine Beatitudes, Luke's contains only four. The four contained in Luke are also contained in Matthew's nine, contributing to the theory that both authors drew upon the Q source.⁸⁶ The striking issue of relevance to this chapter comes in the nature of the four beatitudes shared by the two gospels and thought to have been from the earlier Q source. The four beatitudes that the gospels share are as follows:

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.' (Luke 6:20-23)

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.' (Matt 5:3-4)

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.' (Matt 5:6)

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.' (Matt 5:11)

The four beatitudes common to both of the gospels are those that refer specifically to the poor, mourning, persecuted, and hungry.⁸⁷ For the purpose of this chapter, this point provides a clear stance toward the poor; the poor are blessed. This point stands unchanged by the nature of their source. The gospel writers may have taken these points from the Q source, or possibly from the actual sayings of Jesus. Either way, the gospel writers agree that the blessedness of the poor is a clear and distinct part of the larger message of Jesus that needed to be transmitted.⁸⁸

While Luke's gospel speaks of the blessedness of the poor and Matthew the blessedness

Inspiring the Moral Imagination (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1999); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 105-197.

⁸⁶ Stanton, "Sermon on the Mount/Plain," 741.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ This point should be clarified by the fact that this in no way devalues anything unique to any of the gospel writers. The point is simply that the resonance of the two gospels on a certain point provides an even more exceptionally clear message.

of the poor in spirit, both clearly speak to the blessedness of those who are oppressed and downtrodden. Blomberg points out the necessity to understand both of the gospel writers as speaking of a poverty that possesses both a spiritual and a physical element. In accordance with the rest of the beatitudes, the attribute of poverty is neither purely spiritual nor physical.

Blomberg quotes D.A. Carson as saying that both Matthew and Luke picture the blessed as “those who because of sustained economic privation and social stress have confidence only in God.”⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer also makes this point in a very succinct manner:

Matthew is not spiritualizing the beatitudes, and Luke giving them in their original form, nor is Luke giving a political twist to an original form of the beatitude which applied only to a poverty of disposition. Privation is not the ground of the beatitude in Luke, nor renunciation in Matthew. On the contrary, both gospels recognize that neither privation nor renunciation, spiritual or political, is justified, except by the call and promise of Jesus, who alone makes blessed those whom he calls, and who is in his person the sole ground of their beatitude.⁹⁰

Lisa Cahill also agrees that in harmony with Jesus’ teaching that material wealth can be a hindrance to discipleship; the beatitudes may well refer to not only a spiritual position but also a social position of poverty.⁹¹

Scholars have debated the distinction between Matthew and Luke’s conceptions of the poor. It should be understood, however, that as previously shown it is neither purely spiritual nor physical. This point is extremely important when faced with the suggestion by some scholars that Matthew is speaking entirely metaphorically. There is little debate that Luke’s presentation of the beatitudes is referring very specifically to those who are in actuality economically disadvantaged. Even when Matthew pronounces blessing on the “poor in spirit”, however, the term poor carries with it a sense of oppression and disadvantage. This is most clearly

⁸⁹ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 129.

⁹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 106.

⁹¹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The Ethical Implications of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 144-156.

summarized by Davids:

In the case of the two Beatitudes, groups experiencing real impoverishment are blessed. While one could be materially poor without receiving this blessing because of not following Christ/having the right spirit, there is no intention in either these or any similar passages that one can hold onto wealth or other security and yet claim such blessings because one's spirit is 'poor.' It is significant that the blessings are never pronounced on the rich, either in this passage or elsewhere.⁹²

A paradigm has been established, thus far, that follows a train of logic: 1. Though there are various methods of interpreting the ethical teachings of Jesus, it is widely agreed that Jesus' ethical teaching must be understood in light of the Kingdom of God. 2. This is especially true within the parables in which participation in the Kingdom of God (whether present or future) brings with it an ethical imperative. 3. This ethical imperative includes a particular stance toward the appropriate use of wealth, the treatment of the poor, and the status of poverty. 4. Certain parables and the Sermon on the Mount provide a paradigm for this ethical imperative, and this paradigm resonates in all of the synoptic gospels.⁹³ 5. The paradigm itself has been established as including these teachings: a. That the *amassing* of wealth is inherently wrong, b. that abundance is to be understood as a blessing from God that is to be shared with those in need, c. that the amassing of wealth severely inhibits the ability to participate in the Kingdom of God, and d. that the poor and oppressed are in actuality those who are *blessed* within the Kingdom of God.

iii. Other Material

A brief presentation of other New Testament material containing aspects of and teachings from Jesus' ministry will be provided to demonstrate coherence with the paradigm. Luke's gospel provides the clearest presentation of Jesus' solidarity with and love for the poor. A striking example demonstrating the blessedness of the poor is provided by Luke in his

⁹² Davids, "Rich and Poor," 706.

⁹³ It should be noted that the gospel of John is not overlooked because of any competing conception with this paradigm. As noted by Davids, John's gospel can be understood as "having relatively little to say on this topic." Davids, "Rich and Poor," 705.

description of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Jesus is one of the poor and this is clear from the beginning of Luke's gospel. Luke's gospel shows Jesus' parents to be poor by the fact that in Luke 2:24 they offer the sacrifice of two turtledoves or two pigeons, the traditional sacrifice of the poor. The *Magnificat* of Mary in Luke 1:46-55 also includes rejoicing in the fact that God lifts up the hungry and the poor.⁹⁴ Most striking, however, may be the nature of Jesus' actual birth. Jesus is born in a building intended for animals rather than an actual house, and is visited first by the poor shepherds rather than the wealthy magi.⁹⁵ These events resonate with Jesus' teaching that God views the poor as blessed.

Another example of Jesus' views toward the poor that resonates with the previously established paradigm can be found in both Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke include Jesus defining his message in terms of Isa 61:1-2⁹⁶:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Isa 61:1-2)

'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.' (Matt 11:5)

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:18-21)

God's care for, and special interest in, the poor as in the Old Testament is affirmed as a part of Jesus' mission.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), 93.

⁹⁵ Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*, 93.

⁹⁶ Davids, "Rich and Poor," 706.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

While the above examples are not considered by any means to be exhaustive, they are representative. The paradigm regarding the ethical treatment of the poor, and the status of the poor in the eyes of God, holds fast in light of the account of the teachings of Jesus within the gospels. The proper ethical treatment of the poor and the use of wealth, unlike some more nuanced theological issues, are fairly unambiguous within the record of the teachings of Jesus. The poor are blessed, rather than cursed. The amassing of wealth is disadvantageous to participation in the Kingdom of God, rather than advantageous as in the world. Wealth is to be shared, rather than amassed. Jesus not only identified with and cared for the poor; he is one of the poor. As said by Allen Verhey, “No one may call this Jesus the ‘anointed’ (i.e., Christ) and be unaffected by his sympathy for the poor and oppressed.”⁹⁸

This section can be appropriately closed with a parable found in Matthew’s gospel suggesting the ramifications for neglecting to serve “the least of these”:

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ (Matt 25:31-46)

⁹⁸ Verhey, *The Great Reversal*, 92.

B. Paul

As previously discussed, this project makes no claim of an exhaustive presentation of all possible New Testament positions on poverty. The presentation is meant to be representative rather than exhaustive, and works to establish paradigms and a potential normative position. The previously established position from the teachings of Jesus could very well be considered the normative position for a Christian perspective. Any position presented by the apostle Paul, however, cannot be overlooked. There are more books attributed to Paul than any other New Testament writer, and because of this any presentation of a New Testament ethic must deal with Paul's works. Jesus and Paul are the most dominant figures, Jesus as subject and Paul as writer, within the New Testament and a Pauline position must not be ignored.⁹⁹

This being established it should be understood that the Pauline corpus has very little to say on wealth, poverty, and the treatment of the poor.¹⁰⁰ The Pauline ethic is not as concerned with issues of wealth and poverty, and Paul never provides imperatives regarding wealth and poverty as strong or radical as those provided by Jesus in the gospels.¹⁰¹ This lack of focus and intensity regarding poverty and the poor, however, does not put the Pauline position toward the poor in opposition to the previously developed paradigm from the teachings of Jesus. On the contrary, on some of the few occasions when Paul speaks regarding the poor and their

⁹⁹ Victor Paul Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1. As with the previous section of this chapter on the teachings of Jesus, this will not be purported to be an exhaustive examination of the entire Pauline corpus. Traditional debates regarding authorship, pseudonymity, usage of sources, etc., will not be discussed in this chapter either. The relevance and coherence of the Pauline ethical stance toward poverty will be examined rather in light of the previously established paradigm.

¹⁰⁰ T.E. Schmidt, "Riches and Poverty," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (eds. Gerald P. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 826-827.

¹⁰¹ Verhey, *The Great Reversal*, 118-19.

appropriate treatment his position often strongly echoes the teachings of Jesus.¹⁰²

The clearest and most developed example of a Pauline ethic regarding the appropriate treatment of the poor can be seen in Paul's collection for the poor. After Paul's second visit to Jerusalem, at which it was decided that Peter would minister to the Jews and Paul the gentiles, the leaders of the Jerusalem church gave a special request to Paul, "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do." (Gal 2:10) This led to Paul's campaign, or "the collection for the saints," among his churches to collect contributions to aid the poor within the Jerusalem church.¹⁰³

There is significant debate among scholars regarding the nature of the collection, the purpose of the collection, the reception of the collection, and many other details surrounding Paul's collection. The debate over these historical details will not be continued in this chapter.¹⁰⁴ This section, rather, will focus on the nature of the ethical implications of the collection.

The passage in 2 Cor 8 Paul's request for the collection contains one of Paul's few clearly defined examples of a position toward poverty and wealth:

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." (2 Cor 8:13-15)

Paul is here quoting the Old Testament passage surrounding Exod16:18 in which God

¹⁰² David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 239-40.

¹⁰³ S. McKnight, "Collection for the Saints," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (eds. Gerald P. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 143-147.

¹⁰⁴ For more detail, however, see S. McKnight, "Collection for the Saints," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (eds. Gerald P. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 143-147; T.E. Schmidt, "Riches and Poverty," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (eds. Gerald P. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 826-827.

provides manna enough for one day at a time, and which could not be amassed.¹⁰⁵ This balance between the abundance of some and the needs of others resonates perfectly with the paradigm established from the teachings of Jesus. Paul, and Jesus, expects that those who have abundance are to share with those who lack.¹⁰⁶

Another instance showing the resonance of the ethic within the Pauline corpus with the ethic of Jesus within the gospels regarding the nature of wealth and poverty appears in 1 Tim. First Timothy 6:17-18 echoes the paradigm of the teachings of Jesus, “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” (1 Tim 6:17-18) This warning to the rich, paired with the expectation upon them, parallels Jesus’ teaching in Matt 6 and Luke 12.¹⁰⁷ Those who are rich are to be careful of placing hope in their riches, and are to share of their abundance.

The absence of an intense focus on wealth and poverty within the Pauline corpus does not change the value of the over-arching coherence with the teachings of Jesus. While Paul is clearly less radical than Jesus at the points when he does speak of wealth and poverty, his message regarding the appropriate treatment of the poor by the rich is consistent with the teachings of Jesus and fits well within the established paradigm. As before, abundant wealth can be understood as a blessing. It is also, however, an extreme danger. The ethical imperative thus becomes the sharing of abundance by the wealthy with the poor.

¹⁰⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 465.

¹⁰⁶ David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 305.

¹⁰⁷ Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, 239.

C. Other New Testament Sources

References to poverty and the poor within the other parts of the New Testament while few and far between deserve mention. Within the general letters the letter of James speaks most directly to the issue of the just treatment of the poor. James 2:2-7 indicts the audience and the reader:

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? (James 2:2-7)

This passage echoes the paradigm set forth in the other literature within the New Testament.

The other notable example of specific reference to wealth and poverty is found in the apocalyptic literature of the book of Revelation. In the command to write to the angel of the church of Laodicea, Rev 3:15-17 says, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev 3:15-17). This passage resonates with the paradigmatic appropriate use of wealth as previously established. The wealthy here have become content with their status and are thus unethically using the blessing of wealth.

D. Summary

As previously stated, the voices within scripture do not sing in monotone. There are different types of writing, different audiences, different authors, and different contexts for the various books contained within the New Testament singing in a more polyphonic or symphonic

manner. Some theological and ethical questions run into difficulties when held against the backdrop of this plethora of voices. Certain question may very well be met with competing scriptural answers. The ethical imperative regarding the treatment of the poor and the responsible use of wealth, however, follows a coherent paradigm and, “the challenge of the New Testament is clear: from Matthew to Revelation, the New Testament writers bear witness passionately about the economic imperatives of discipleship.”¹⁰⁸ Despite the limited scope of examination within this chapter, the evidence shows that the New Testament speaks clearly and coherently to the fact that the only appropriate use of wealth and abundance is in sharing with the poor.

¹⁰⁸ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 464.

IV. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The development of a modern Christian perspective on poverty must, as previously attempted, examine common themes of a biblical perspective on poverty. Of equal importance, however, is an examination of theological trends on the issue of poverty within the rich history of the Christian tradition. The development of a modern Christian perspective will examine both biblical perspectives and the two millennia of Christian theological tradition. Few would argue we should ignore where we came from as we seek to understand where we are and where we are going. Thus, modern Christian perspective would be remiss if it neglected the rich Christian history of the last almost 2000 years.

As with the Old and New Testament perspectives, an examination of Christian history must begin with an understanding of the foundational assumptions under which this examination will proceed. It should first be understood that this essay is dealing with actual material poverty rather than spiritual poverty. Yet, some interpreters throughout history have paired the two inextricably.¹⁰⁹ While the one may, in some instances, give rise to the other and vice versa (in a classic chicken or the egg dichotomy), the relationship is rarely a simple one-to-one equation. The relationship between the two is complex; therefore one cannot assume a universal connection.

The theological varieties within Christian history are as numerous as they are diverse, which must necessarily be understood when undertaking any examination of the Christian theological tradition. It is entirely impossible and inadvisable to assume that any examination of

¹⁰⁹ The Puritans, for example, connected the two. Perpetuated in Victorian attitudes toward the poor, the idea that physical poverty is the result of some spiritual flaw has not disappeared. Michael H. Taylor, "Poverty," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (eds. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pyper; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 552-554.

this nature will be exhaustive. A project of this scope must be selective rather than exhaustive. The examples that will be included in this project will thus represent the points within Christian history during which the issue of poverty was vital or at the heart of the theological debate. This writer will offer a synthesis of *one* modern Christian perspective on poverty to be gained from a review of the rich history of the Christian tradition.

A. Major Historical Positions

As summarized in the *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* there have been several major recurring themes within Christian theology regarding poverty. These summary positions can be organized into four groups. The first recurring position is the idea that poverty is essentially a curse and that the poor are entirely to blame for their own poverty. Citing scriptural examples of prosperity as a sign of God's blessing, this tradition infers that poverty must obviously be a sign of God's disfavor. This attitude has existed from pre-Christian history and continues to be one position in modern Christian thought.¹¹⁰

In nearly antithetical opposition to this tradition lies the idea of the blessedness of poverty and the poor. "Holy poverty," as demonstrated by the renouncing of material wealth such as in the monastic movements, has been thought to bring reliance upon and closer fellowship with God. Those falling under this theological tradition see poverty as a positive characteristic rather than a negative one, citing as evidence the biblical warnings against riches, as well as the call by Jesus to renounce everything to follow him.¹¹¹

A third major theological position on poverty can be found in the advent of various liberation theologies during the 20th century. This theological position places poverty foremost in

¹¹⁰ Taylor, "Poverty," 552-553.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 552.

the gospel message of Jesus Christ. The poor are essentially God's chosen people, and scriptural passages such as the announcement by Jesus of his mission to the poor are utilized to support this viewpoint.¹¹²

A fourth recurring position within Christian history sees poverty in a negative light as well, but posits that rather than being a just form of punishment, poverty is *unjust*. Often this stream of Christian thought has not only acknowledged poverty as unjust but also sought ways in which to combat and counteract poverty. The view that poverty is unjust has existed since pre-Christian periods (see Chapter II regarding an Old Testament perspective on poverty), and also continues to be a recurring theme within modern Christian thought.¹¹³

B. Paradigmatic Coherence

A brief examination of each of these trends in light of the previously established biblical paradigms will be undertaken in order to understand areas of coherence and divergence.

The idea of "Holy Poverty", or the blessedness of poverty, finds both some coherence and divergence with the previously established biblical paradigms. As discussed in Chapter III, there are biblical examples citing the "blessedness" of the poor. The discussion presented of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain is of particular relevance to this idea. Jesus succinctly states, "blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). Jesus' call to forsake all things in order to follow him can be interpreted in the sense of material possessions. The strong warnings against wealth within the New Testament witness also cannot be ignored. The larger message of the biblical witness as previously discussed, however, points more to the appropriate use of wealth than to the specific blessedness of the lack of material possessions.

¹¹² Taylor, "Poverty," 553.

¹¹³ Ibid.

The position that the poor are somehow to blame for their poverty finds the least coherence with the overall biblical paradigm established in the previous chapters. This position is largely based upon the inference that the biblical passages attesting to affluence and privilege as blessings from God mean that the poor must necessarily lack God's blessings. This is often taken one step further by those who posit that poverty is actually a punishment from God. The biblical support for this position is, however, weak at best.¹¹⁴ As previously established, those with wealth are expected to aid the poor rather than condemn them for their position. The overall biblical message does not blame the poor for their position.

The larger position developed by the liberation theologians that the salvation of the poor is the central position of the gospel message takes a step toward the previously established biblical paradigms. The just treatment of the poor is an inextricable part of the gospel message of Jesus. In seeking justice for the poor, however, liberation theologies can become exclusive in the representation of salvation as referring solely to the poor.

Most nearly coherent with the paradigm established in the earlier chapters of this work is the position that the poor are to be treated justly and that abject poverty is unjust. The biblical witness points time and again to the idea that while salvation may not be exclusively referring to the poor, justice for the poor is an inextricable part of the message of the Old and New Testaments.

C. Historical Examples

The focus of this chapter will now turn to an examination of examples within the history of the church when the issue of poverty was most central to theological thought and debate. The

¹¹⁴ This position is inversely reasoned from passages that attribute wealth to the blessing and favor of God. These passages can be found largely in the Old Testament in reference to Abraham, and proclaimed in the Psalms. However, the inverse of this idea is not coherent with the larger biblical message.

historical examples will be presented and then examined in order to determine what a modern Christian perspective on poverty can glean from them.

The totality of Christian history is undeniably important. The examination of certain streams of theological thought, however, is more clearly traceable in specific times. Some historical periods are more relevant to some theological discussions and some are not as pertinent. A discussion of the historical church's view on poverty is no exception. During some periods of history the issue of poverty was simply not a discussion within the church. As previously discussed, this chapter will focus on examples of occasions within history during which the issue of poverty was a central theological consideration within the church.

The relevance of history to modern considerations is an oft-debated ideal. The parameters of some debates change over time, while some discussions lose relevance altogether. The issues of poverty and the appropriate use of wealth and possessions belong to the former category. While the nature of the debate has changed, the discussion has existed throughout recorded history. As Martin Hengle so insightfully writes, "People today are fond of talking about the 'crisis of private property.' Yet this 'crisis' seems to be as old as mankind itself. One might almost say that it is of the 'essence' of mankind, which is always 'in crisis'."¹¹⁵

As the previously developed paradigm suggests wealth and possessions are not intrinsically evil. Possessions become evil when they are seen as ends in themselves, or when they are not appropriately used. When speaking of the history of the early church Hengle points to the idea that, "The struggle for individual possessions destroys the original good order of the

¹¹⁵ Martin Hengle, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 1.

world, as all had an equal share in God's gifts."¹¹⁶ Possessions are to be used in the aid of the poor rather than accumulated for one's selfish ends.

Of the four major traditions within Christian history regarding poverty, the position that poverty is an injustice that should be opposed and reversed is the lens through which the following historical examples will be examined.

No other period within the history of Christianity holds more relevance to the debate over poverty than the period from the advent of the Industrial Revolution to the modern day. The advent of liberalism, the Social Gospel, Liberation Theology, and other such ideas, all point to the fact that the past one hundred or so years have seen the most rigorous discussion of poverty in Christian history. While the early church struggled with and debated the issue of possession and poverty, the parameters of the debate have changed. The modern period has seen a crescendo in the struggle for individual possessions previously unsurpassed in all of history. The nature and magnitude of poverty have changed.

Two particular movements within this contemporary period are of particular relevance to the paradigm of the just usage of possessions and treatment of the poor. The Social Gospel and Liberation Theology have spoken directly to the question of this just treatment of the poor. These two movements will be briefly examined in order to determine their relevance to the developed paradigm more specifically.

The Social Gospel began as a movement within Christian theology that involved the assertion that the message of the gospel is of particular relevance to social ethics.¹¹⁷ This

¹¹⁶ Hengle, *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, 1.

¹¹⁷ R. Dean Peterson, *A Concise History of Christianity* (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing, 2000), 316.

movement is associated most closely with its leading proponent Walter Rauschenbusch.¹¹⁸ In the impoverished New York neighborhood known as Hell’s Kitchen, Rauschenbusch was confronted with “the pressing social problems of the times—the terrible human effects of insecurity, unemployment, poverty, wretched housing, malnutrition, disease, ignorance, and crime.”¹¹⁹ Rauschenbusch was the major developer of the Social Gospel as a response to this situation in order to “remedy the problems caused by urbanized, capitalistic, industrial society.”¹²⁰ Rather than the traditional ideals of individualistic salvation, Rauschenbusch pointed to the fact that Christianity had forgotten the decidedly social dimension of the gospel message of Jesus.¹²¹

The theological thrust of the Social Gospel movement lay in the idea that the Kingdom of God could only be brought about by Christians who would work to change social forces in order to bring them into line with the gospel message of Jesus.¹²² When faced with the abject poverty associated with the industrialization of American cities, the response of the Social Gospel movement followed the paradigm, previously developed in this essay, that the poor must be treated justly and that Christians have a responsibility to bring about this justice.

Rauschenbusch was aware that the advent of the Social Gospel was a watershed moment in Christian thought. In *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch says that the argument of the Social Gospel was “built on the conviction that the social gospel is a permanent addition to our spiritual outlook and that its arrival constitutes a stage in the development of the Christian

¹¹⁸ Thaddeus Posey, “Christianity in the USA,” *The Christian Theological Tradition* (eds. Catherine A. Cory and David T. Landry; Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000), 340-359.

¹¹⁹ Robert T. Handy ed., *The Social Gospel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 254.

¹²⁰ Peterson, *A Concise History of Christianity*, 316.

¹²¹ Posey, “Christianity in the USA,” 358.

¹²² Peterson, *A Concise History of Christianity*, 318.

religion.”¹²³ Rauschenbusch highlights the distinctiveness, importance, and implications of the

Social Gospel by saying:

The social movement is the most important ethical and spiritual movement in the modern world, and the social gospel is the response of the Christian consciousness to it. Therefore it had to be. The social gospel registers the fact that for the first time in history the spirit of Christianity has had a chance to form a working partnership with real social and psychological science. It is the religious reaction on the historic advent of democracy. It seeks to put the democratic spirit, which the Church inherited from Jesus and the prophets, once more in control of the institutions and teachings of the Church.

The social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul that comes to him. But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within it. It has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion. Both our sense of sin and our faith in salvation have fallen short of the realities under its teaching. The social gospel seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensible and more modern conscience. It calls on us for the faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of nations.¹²⁴

The poor were being treated unjustly; Walter Rauschenbusch and other proponents of the Social Gospel felt that this situation was unacceptable. The Social Gospel movement sought reform for the institutions that caused poverty. This theological ideal, that the poor should be treated justly, falls firmly within the previously established paradigm.

Liberation Theology, a later 20th century Christian theological development, took the treatment of the poor and poverty a step further. A background understanding of the cultural milieu in Latin America, where Liberation Theology was developed, is stated well by saying:

Over the centuries since the first Spanish and Portuguese conquests, Catholic church leaders in Latin America have usually supported political and economic leaders who oppressed their people. Theological arguments have often been used to support that oppression. For example, the poor were told that it was their obligation to be obedient to the authorities.¹²⁵

¹²³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1945), 2.

¹²⁴ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 4-6.

¹²⁵ Terence Nichols, David Smith, David S. Cunningham, “Christianity and the Contemporary Situation,” *The Christian Theological Tradition* (eds. Catherine A. Cory and David T. Landry; Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000), 360-378.

Liberation Theology was developed as a response to these centuries of established institutional oppression. As Social Gospel was developed by Rauschenbusch, Liberation Theology developed largely under a major influence in the person of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez.¹²⁶ Like the Social Gospel movement, Liberation Theology called for a struggle against institutions that cause oppressive economic conditions. Liberation Theology, however, called also for a change in theological perspective. Liberation theologians thought that theology should be understood primarily from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.¹²⁷ This perspective became known as “the preferential option for the poor.”¹²⁸

In what is arguably the most influential text of the new movement, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez outlines the distinct coherence that Liberation Theology shares with the paradigm developed within this essay: “In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.”¹²⁹ Gutierrez, however, recommends both a protest against poverty *and a solidarity with the poor*:

Poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has a redemptive value. If the ultimate cause of man’s exploitation and alienation is selfishness, the deepest reason for voluntary poverty is love of neighbor. Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice. The commitment is to witness to the evil which has resulted from sin and is a breach of communion. It is not a question of idealizing poverty, but rather of taking it on as it is—an evil—to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it. As Ricoeur says, you cannot really be with the poor unless you are struggling against poverty. Because of this solidarity—which must manifest itself in specific action, a style of life, a break with one’s social class—one can also help the poor and exploited to become aware of their exploitation and seek liberation from it. Christian poverty, an expression of love, is solidarity *with the poor* and is a protest *against poverty*. This is the concrete, contemporary meaning of the witness of poverty. It is a poverty lived not for its own sake, but rather as an authentic imitation of Christ; it is a poverty

¹²⁶ Terence Nichols, David Smith, David S. Cunningham, “Christianity and the Contemporary Situation,” 370.

¹²⁷ Peterson, *A Concise History of Christianity*, 326.

¹²⁸ Nichols, “Christianity and the Contemporary Situation,” 370.

¹²⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 291.

which means taking on the sinful condition of man to liberate him from sin and all its consequences.¹³⁰

Liberation Theology falls in line with the previously discussed ideals in its effort to fight the injustice against the poor at every turn. As with any theological system, Liberation Theology has weaknesses and limitations. The idea of exclusivity of salvation for the oppressed can be a danger of the system. The focus on fighting the oppression of the poor, however, is a prime strength.

D. Summary

These historical examples also have limitations for modern application. Both of these movements originated in very specialized situations. The industrialized cities and the Latin American countries are distinctly different situations. The value of these two movements is immeasurable, however. Both seek precisely what the biblical paradigm calls forth and requires. Poverty has been, and most probably always will be, an economic issue and a human reality. It was as much of an issue in ancient times as it is today. The just treatment of the poor, however, must always be a consideration for anyone claiming to be a follower of the gospel message of Christ. Parts of Christian history echo the imperative of the biblical message in demanding this very justice. These examples were included to demonstrate coherence with this imperative.

¹³⁰ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 300-301.

V. A MODERN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON POVERTY IN LIGHT OF ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION

Adapting a particular ideology to fit a context in which the variables and circumstances are undeniably different than the one out of which the ideology was born can be a treacherous journey. While relevance is a necessary characteristic of any theological ideal, both total absolutism and total relativity are not. No situation is absolutely similar or absolutely different. This assertion is relevant when developing a *modern* Christian perspective on anything. An established biblical paradigm, or an examination of historical church examples, is necessarily relevant but at the same time limited contextually. As the context of a situation changes, the application of a paradigm changes along with it.

This section of the essay will develop a modern Christian perspective on poverty and the treatment of the poor in light of the ever-changing context of economic globalization. Globalization will first be explored as both a phenomenon and an economic theory. The globalization debate will be briefly in order to provide a cursory understanding of the competing theories. The effects of economic globalization on the world's poor will then be examined as well. A presentation of various Christian responses to the debate will then be presented in order to understand the current state of affairs. The section will culminate with the author's own synthesis of a modern Christian response.

A. Globalization as a Phenomenon

A universally accepted definition of globalization is impossible to reach. But *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* provides a definition of at least the general concept by saying:

At one level it appears simple. Globalization is about the universal process or set of processes which generate a multiplicity of linkages and interconnections which transcend the states and societies which make up the modern world system. It involves a dramatic increase in the density and depth of economic, ecological, and societal interdependence, with 'density' referring to the increased number, range, and scope of cross-border transactions; and 'depth' to the degree to

which that interdependence affects, and is affected by, the ways in which societies are organized domestically.¹³¹

In Oxford University Press's *A Dictionary of Economics*, globalization is further clarified as:

In a general sense, the increasing worldwide integration of economic, cultural, political, religious, and social systems. Economic globalization is the process by which the whole world becomes a single market. This means that goods and services, capital, and labour are traded on a worldwide basis, and information and the results of research flow readily between countries.¹³²

There is little debate that the process of globalization as a phenomenon has both occurred throughout history and has intensified in the past few decades, largely due to the massive strides made in technology, especially computer technology. Wayne Ellwood of *The New*

Internationalist publication states that:

Globalization is a new word which describes an old process: the integration of the global economy that began with earnest with the launch of the European colonial era five centuries ago. But the process has accelerated over the past quarter century with the explosion of computer technology, the dismantling of trade barriers and the expanding political and economic power of multinational corporations.¹³³

Globalization has, over time, increased the interconnectedness of the entire world. With the advent of the worldwide proliferation of the Internet and the increasingly interconnectedness of all communication technologies, this phenomenon has intensified. Ellwood believes that this has been and will continue to be an inevitable process.¹³⁴ Thomas L. Friedman develops the

¹³¹ AHU, "globalization," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (eds. Ed Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), *Oxford Reference Online*, n.p. [cited 6 February 2010]. Online: <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.library.acaweb.org/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t86.e554>.

¹³² "globalization," *A Dictionary of Economics* (eds. John Black, Nigar Hashimzade, and Gareth Myles; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), *Oxford Reference Online*, n.p. [cited 6 February 2010]. Online: <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.library.acaweb.org/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t19.e1359>.

¹³³ Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2001), 12.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

metaphor that this interconnectedness has led to a “flattening” of the world in his appropriately titled, best-selling book, *The World is Flat*.¹³⁵

The phenomenon of globalization is most succinctly summarized as the continuing process of the increasing interconnectedness of the world. Economic globalization, more specifically, is the process by which the economies of the world look more and more like a singular economy.

B. Current Economic Globalization: Good or Bad?

The debate over the relative benefits and disadvantages of different theories concerning economic globalization is extremely nuanced. A project of this limited scope cannot delve into all of the intricacies of this debate, and thus paints a more cursory and broad picture of the various competing theories. The major division in the debate lies in the designation of those who are in support of the current trends and practices in economic globalization and those who are against them.

i. Neoliberal Economic Globalization

Many economists believe that the current forms of economic globalization are a purely positive force for good that will improve the lives of everyone in the world, including the poor.¹³⁶ Often described as “neoliberalism,” the current system most often supported by those proclaiming the incredible advantages of globalization is based on the economically “orthodox theory of competitive free markets.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005).

¹³⁶ John Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 321-339.

¹³⁷ Anwar Shaikh, *Globalization and the Myths of Free Trade: History, Theory, and Empirical Evidence* (London: Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2007), 1-21.

The view that a truly free-market world economy will be the saving grace of the world's poor has arguably been the most dominant theory within economic orthodoxy in this period of intensive modern globalization. Support of the theories of neoliberal globalization has “dominated the rhetoric of global economic policy and much of its practice since the early 1980s.”¹³⁸ This process of implementation gathered even more force in the 1990s. The debate focuses around neoliberal globalization because the ideals of this position have been the central practice.¹³⁹

Three particular organizations have been instrumental in the proliferation and implementation of these neoliberal ideas within modern economics. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have become increasingly more influential on the world economy in the past decades. Ellwood states of these three organizations that:

It is their vision and their agenda which continue to shape the direction of the global economy. Together, they are fostering a model of liberalized trade and investment which is heartily endorsed by the world's biggest banks and corporations. A deregulated, privatized, corporate-led free market is the answer to humanity's problems, they tell us.¹⁴⁰

These three organizations are widely considered to be the driving forces in economic globalization and the main implementers of neoliberal economic ideals.¹⁴¹ A full investigation of the precise practices and policies of these organizations cannot be undertaken in a project of this

¹³⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University, 2005). As cited in Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 322.

¹³⁹ Shaikh, *Globalization and the Myths of Free Trade: History, Theory, and Empirical Evidence*, 1-2.

¹⁴⁰ Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization*, 37.

¹⁴¹ Oskar Gruenwald, “The Globalization Paradox,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 20 (2008): 1-20; Anwar Shaikh, *Globalization and the Myths of Free Trade: History, Theory, and Empirical Evidence* (London: Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2007), 1.

nature, however.¹⁴² These organizations are cited to show that the major influential forces in economic globalization have espoused neoliberal economic ideals.

Neoliberal globalization is, thus, the proliferation of an economic model touting the advantages of free trade.¹⁴³ A very common metaphor used by proponents of this theory is the idea that, “a rising tide lifts all boats.”¹⁴⁴ In neoliberal globalization, the free market economy is seen as the ultimate key to the economic salvation of the world. The ever-increasing amount of trade between countries is thought to be purely beneficial. Ellwood summarizes this perspective by saying, “the rationale is that all countries and all peoples benefit from the results of increased trade.”¹⁴⁵ Nobel prize-winner in economics and former head economist for the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz states:

The great hope of globalization is that it will raise the living standards throughout the world: give poor countries access to overseas markets so that they can sell their goods, allow in foreign investment that will make new products at cheaper prices, and open borders so that people can travel abroad to be educated, work, and send home earnings to help their families and fund new businesses.¹⁴⁶

As previously stated, a full exploration of the intricacies of the economic policies involved in neoliberal globalization is not possible in a project of this nature.¹⁴⁷ However, some

¹⁴² For a more thorough explanation of these organizations their policies, practices, and statistics see: Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty* (Quebec: Global Research, 2003); Peter Townsend, David Gordon eds., *World Poverty: New Policies to Defeat an Old Enemy* (Bristol, United Kingdom: The Policy Press, 2002); Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2001).

¹⁴³ Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 322.

¹⁴⁴ Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 51), 51.

¹⁴⁵ Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Stiglitz, *Making Globalization Work* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 4.

¹⁴⁷ For a more thorough examination of the actual practices and policies of this theory see: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University, 2005); Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty* (Quebec: Global Research, 2003); Peter Townsend, David Gordon eds., *World Poverty: New Policies to*

of the methods of implementation involve “decreased governmental regulation, privatization of government-owned enterprises, reduced government spending, and the lowering of barriers to international trade and investment.”¹⁴⁸ For proponents of neoliberal globalization, the key to “overcoming poverty therefore requires creating ‘market friendly’ social structures in the poorer countries and strengthening existing ones in the richer countries.”¹⁴⁹

These arguments are not completely without merit. Most economists and scholars agree that the phenomenon of globalization has provided some examples of economic advantage throughout the world. Best-selling author and world renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs points out that of 6.3 billion people in the world, 5 billion have reached the first level of economic development, and that five sixths of the population of the world is above the level of extreme poverty. Sachs also points out that 4.9 billion people live in countries where the average income as measured by GDP per person has increased between the periods of 1980 and 2000. Sachs also points to the impressive statistic that even more people, 5.7 billion, live in countries where the life expectancy has increased. Sachs states that, “the extent of extreme poverty is shrinking, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the world’s population.”¹⁵⁰

ii. Critiques of Neoliberal Economic Globalization

This overall economic growth within the world has not come without costs. Many leading world economists have become outspoken critics of neoliberal economic globalization policies.

Modern globalization has led to a paradox. Oskar Gruenwald observes that:

Defeat an Old Enemy (Bristol, United Kingdom: The Policy Press, 2002); Wayne Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2001).

¹⁴⁸ Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 322.

¹⁴⁹ Shaikh, *Globalization and the Myths of Free Trade: History, Theory, and Empirical Evidence*, 1.

¹⁵⁰ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2005), 51.

Globalization holds great promise of extending the benefits of science, technology, trade, communications, and economic prosperity throughout the world. Paradoxically, globalization can also deepen the divisions between rich and poor nations, contribute to the revolution of rising expectations in the Third World, and exacerbate frustrations caused by the accelerated pace of socio-economic and political development and cultural change.¹⁵¹

The economic costs of the current trends in globalization have been especially severe.

The most shocking cost of the massive levels of economic growth across the world is the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. While the world has indeed experienced economic growth, it has been far more concentrated in some areas than in others. This has led to a greater disparity between the richest and the poorest in the world than at any other time in history. The two tables illustrate this rising gap across different periods represented by different standards:

Table 5.1-The Rising Gap¹⁵²

Year	Ratio of rich-to-poor country GDP per capita
1830	3 to 1
1913	11 to 1
1950	35 to 1
1973	44 to 1
1992	72 to 1

¹⁵¹ Gruenwald, "The Globalization Paradox," 1.

¹⁵² United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report* (1999, 38) cited in Shaikh, *Globalization and the Myths of Free Trade: History, Theory, and Empirical Evidence*, 60.

Table 5.2-Share of Global Income Over Time¹⁵³

Year	Richest 20%	Poorest 20%	Ratio of Rich/Poor
1960	70.2	2.3	30:1
1970	73.9	2.3	32:1
1980	76.3	1.7	45:1
1989	82.7	1.4	59:1
1997	90.0	1.0	74:1

While economic growth has occurred due to globalization, in many instances the poverty of some nations has gotten worse. These inequalities in wealth are staggering and have gotten progressively worse as well. A shocking statistic is the estimation that the 500 wealthiest people in the world have an annual combined income that nearly equals that of the 416 million poorest people. This disparity means that each one of the “500 wealthiest persons has an average annual income equivalent of the average income of 832,000 of the poorest persons combined!”¹⁵⁴

Joesph Stiglitz, Nobel-prize winning economist and former head economist for the World Bank, and Jeffrey Sachs, best-selling author and former director of the United Nations Millennium Project, are critics of the current methods that have led to these inequalities. In *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*, Sachs proposes several methods of correcting the current system in light of the fact that the system provides results only in certain

¹⁵³ United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report*, (1992), cited in Ellwood, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization*, 101.

¹⁵⁴ United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report*, (2005), cited in Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 328-329.

situations. Some of these methods include debt relief, increased foreign aid to support the building of infrastructure, and provision of better medical care for poor countries.¹⁵⁵

In *Making Globalization Work*, Stiglitz sees both globalization's potential for good and the large amounts of damage that it already has caused. Stiglitz advocates major reform for organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF because their neoliberal policies have caused the effect of "the benefit of the few at the expense of the many, the well-off at the expense of the poor."¹⁵⁶ Stiglitz also advocates policies such as debt relief, increasing amounts of aid, and higher taxes for the wealthy.¹⁵⁷

Both of these world renowned economists bring heavy indictments upon the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and the organizations that perpetuate such policies. Both share a concern for poverty and the poor nations of the world, and have gone beyond theoretical ivory tower academic critiques by spending time working with such nations. Their theories may not be the perfect nor ultimate solutions to end poverty, but the world would be wise to heed their warnings for corrections.

The data points to the fact that world poverty is not only a widespread and dire issue, but by some indications has gotten worse in this age of intense globalization. Studies by the United Nations Development Program show that, "Despite a quarter century of neoliberal policies, however, and over 60 years of 'economic development' policies in much of the world, hunger and poverty continue on a vast scale. More than a billion people currently live in extreme

¹⁵⁵ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), summarized in Sniegocki, "Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives," 329.

¹⁵⁶ Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2002), 20, cited in Sniegocki, "Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives," 330.

¹⁵⁷ Joseph Stiglitz, *Making Globalization Work* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) summarized in Sniegocki, "Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives," 331.

poverty, on an income of under \$1/day.”¹⁵⁸ This data further shows that, “Approximately 2.5 billion people (nearly 40% of the world’s population) live on under \$2/day, most of them unable to meet basic needs.”¹⁵⁹

Both Stiglitz and Sachs maintain that the current system needs to be reformed. The data showing the severe amounts of extreme poverty that still exists supports their position. Something within the system, a system that allegedly has the potential to end poverty, is not fulfilling this goal.¹⁶⁰

C. Some Current Christian Responses to the Debate

Modern Christians must necessarily give careful thought and consideration to the issues at hand. Many modern theologians and Christian scholars have weighed in on the issue.¹⁶¹

John Sniegocki, a theology professor at Xavier University who holds a Ph.D. in Christian ethics from Notre Dame, summarizes well a modern Catholic response. The response of the Catholic Church to neoliberal globalization has not only been wary but highly critical. Pope John Paul II warns that:

Special interests and the demands of the market frequently predominate over concern for the common good. This tends to leave the weaker members of society without adequate protection and can subject entire peoples and cultures to a formidable struggle for survival. Moreover, it is disturbing to witness a globalization that exacerbates the conditions of the needy, that does not

¹⁵⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2005: International Cooperation at a Crossroads: Aid, Trade, and Security in an Unequal World* (N.Y.: Oxford University, 2005), 3, cited in Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 327.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶⁰ For a fuller exploration of why neoliberal globalization is falling short see: Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2002); Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives”; Joseph Stiglitz, *Making Globalization Work* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

¹⁶¹ As with various other presentations within this project, for the sake of brevity this presentation is intended to be representative rather than exhaustive.

sufficiently contribute to resolving situations of hunger, poverty, and social inequality, that fails to safeguard the natural environment.¹⁶²

Pope Benedict XVI further insists that, “We cannot remain passive before certain processes of globalization which not infrequently increase the gap between the rich and the poor worldwide. We must denounce those who squander the earth’s riches, provoking inequalities that cry out to heaven.”¹⁶³ The Catholic Church has not been silent on the economic crisis of the poor caused by globalization. In light of the policies that have led to the staggering poverty statistics, this critique from the Church is well placed.

Lilian Dube, an assistant professor in the department of theology at the University of San Francisco, speaks out on the effect that globalization is having on women and especially migrant women. Dube opens her critique by citing the opinions of other scholars regarding the effects of globalization on women and quotes Christa Wichterich as saying that the debates over the effects of globalization have left minority migrant women entirely behind because “the global market place is white and male.”¹⁶⁴ She also cites the opinion of another scholar that those who are benefiting most from globalization are “almost exclusively male elite who head the transnational companies and the national and international bureaucrats who facilitate the process.”¹⁶⁵ Dube then develops the thesis that the church must heed the call of Jesus to practice extreme love of neighbors and further suggests that the church should realize that these are precisely the kind of

¹⁶² John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (2003), <http://www.zenit.org/article-7158?1=english>, cited in Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 338.

¹⁶³ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis* no. 90 cited in Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” 338.

¹⁶⁴ Christa Wichterich, *The Globalized Woman: Reports from a Future of Inequality* (New York: Zed Books, 2000) viii, cited in Lilian Dube, “Maids for Madams: Toward a Theology of Global Neighbors,” *Word & World* 29 (2009): 262-269.

¹⁶⁵ Haleh Afshar and Stephanie Barrientos, eds., *Women, Globalization and Fragmentation in the Developing World*, Women’s Studies at York (London: Macmillan, 1999), 3, cited in Lilian Dube, “Maids for Madams: Toward a Theology of Global Neighbors,” *Word & World* 29 (2009): 263.

neighbors that Jesus requires the church to love. Furthermore, she seeks to develop a systemic response that this love might entail, and finally asks “the prophetic question, ‘What ought we do about our global neighbors?’”¹⁶⁶ Clearly, then, in the debate over the effects of globalization on the world’s poor, Christians must remember the poor *and* the poor and marginalized.

Theodor Damian, professor of philosophy and ethics at the Metropolitan College of New York, argues that Christianity possesses not only a valuable answer to the debate, but that Christianity itself is the ideal paradigm of globalization.¹⁶⁷ Damian then presents several doctrines and historical church practices that could provide valuable tools to develop “a type of globalization that enriches human life and dignity, and that integrates and builds unity and hope.”¹⁶⁸ Damian surveys a wide variety of the effects of globalization and examines how these may relate to the Christian church. On the issue of the poverty caused by globalization Damian suggests:

Ideally, religion should work for a globalization that narrows the gap between rich and poor, and is ground for hope. The opposite of this image renders globalization a desert of despair for the majority. Based on Christ’s model, globalization should be able to bring the periphery to the center as He did with the oppressed, rich and poor, sinners all. Based on the Trinitarian model, globalization should thrive with no center because the center is everywhere. This is how globalization can become a process that brings about help, social and economic justice for all, and moral renewal, and thus become a liberating factor that generates unity and hope.¹⁶⁹

Damian concludes that only a theory of globalization based on core religious values can provide hope for improvement, and states this outright: “Only a globalization that grows out of religious values can promise a better future.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Lilian Dube, “Maids for Madams: Toward a Theology of Global Neighbors,” *Word & World* 29 (2009): 264.

¹⁶⁷ Theodor Damian, “Christianity as Ideal Paradigm of Globalization,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 20 (2008): 155-170.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Pablo Guillermo Oviedo offers a view from a Latin-American perspective. His view insists that in light of the fragmentation caused by globalization, the New Testament idea of a communion of the saints in the Holy Spirit provides a way in which to understand the mission of the church.¹⁷¹ Oviedo suggests that looking to the Holy Spirit and the community available in the Spirit provides a way in which both to understand and to enact the mission of the church. In this community of the Holy Spirit one can know the way in which to offer agape love to a fragmented world that needs, “Dios y de pan, de amor y de justicia” [God, bread, love and Justice].¹⁷² Oviedo’s contribution is a valuable consideration for the Church, especially within America, as he provides a perspective from a different cultural and theological viewpoint. One can never overstate the merit of consideration of theological viewpoints from other cultures, especially when considering a response to issues affecting the whole world.

The variety of modern Christian viewpoints that have joined the debate over the effects of globalization provides a rich array of perspectives. The merits of each should be considered when developing any Christian perspective, as all have something of value to contribute. The world Church is not remaining silent on the hotly debated issues of globalization and its economic implications. This variety of viewpoints is proof of this fact.

D. A Modern American Christian Response

The scope of this project has been admittedly and decidedly narrow. No singular response to any issue of such great importance can serve as the authoritative response. Every responder brings his/her own unique and valuable viewpoints to the table along with individual biases.

¹⁷¹ Pablo Guillermo Oviedo, “El Espíritu de Dios: el desafío de la comunión y la misión en un mundo fragmentado,” *Caudernos de Teología* XXVII (2008): 79-103.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 79.

With this in mind, a synthesis of the author's own response to the issue will be presented as another voice in the myriad array of perspectives.

Though no definitive response has been proposed in this project, several core themes have become clear:

1. From the Old Testament witness, the prophetic voice cries out that Israel be ever mindful that the covenant with Yahweh yields economic imperatives. The poor are Yahweh's people and Yahweh often identifies specifically with them. The poor are to be treated with justice *always*, regardless of their individual circumstances. Additionally, the Torah and the Writings provide views about the poor consistent with these prophetic imperatives. There are definitive commands from Yahweh that abundance is to be shared with those who are less fortunate. Just as Yahweh was merciful in bringing Israel out of Egypt, so should Israel be merciful to the oppressed.

The American Christian Church should never forget these Old Testament themes. In a land of abundance, we always must remember that the only ethical use of abundance is sharing it with the poor and oppressed. Modern America has experienced a level of abundance unsurpassed in history. The poor in America are rich from the rest of the world's point of view. The American Church has the resources and opportunity to behave as Yahweh demands and obviously ignores the message of the Old Testament if she suggests that her affluence is to be kept to herself.

2. The New Testament perspective on poverty and the poor, centered specifically on the Gospel message of Jesus, continues the Old Testament theme of God's identification with the poor and oppressed. Jesus himself is poor, and calls his followers to develop a counter-cultural ethic on poverty. The poor are blessed, not cursed. Jesus demands that his followers leave everything behind in order to follow him and this demand often entails forsaking all monetary

possessions. Regardless of the question of the universality of this demand, the ethical treatment of the poor remains a constant theme. While not a complex theory of economic doctrines, love of neighbor must produce the willingness to give of oneself in preference for the ethical treatment of the poor neighbor. While not treated as directly as in the gospels, the issue of poverty is dealt with in the other divisions of the New Testament. Paul affirms that the poor must be treated with justice, as do passages in the general letters and Revelation. The just treatment of the poor is a consistent New Testament theme.

As with the Old Testament perspective, American Christians must necessarily heed the New Testament perspective regarding the just treatment of the poor and oppressed. A biblical theology regarding the poor must take seriously the teachings of Jesus. Jesus constantly affirms both the special designation that the poor hold with God, and the radical love of neighbor that requires sacrificial giving and sharing of economic resources. As previously discussed, America's affluence is nearly boundless. If proclaiming to be true followers of Christ, American Christians must take seriously his call to forsake all for the sake of the kingdom and remember the great degree to which wealth inhibits entrance into the Kingdom of God. The American Church must continually consider how much its affluence is truly worth. A change must come in each Christian where contentment with affluence becomes a thing of the past, and love of Christ and subsequently love of one's neighbor trumps any ties to one's wealth.

3. Church history shows the American Church that there have been more missed opportunities for providing justice for the poor than fulfilled opportunities. This discrepancy often can be tied to the fact that the church frequently has held positions on poverty that are not coherent with the biblical witness. Poverty cannot be universally classified as punishment. The biblical narrative does not support this perspective at all. Poverty is not a preferred state that

should be sought out either; nowhere does the biblical text make any designation of poverty as inherently good state. While salvation is not reserved solely for the poor, God's identification with the poor must be taken seriously. The biblical witness, however, does point to the fact that poverty is an injustice that should be corrected. The overall theme of the biblical treatment of poverty involves seeking justice for the poor and oppressed.

4. The modern American Church must rid itself of incomplete and inconsistent views regarding the nature and appropriate treatment of poverty. The Church should never sound like the friends of Job. Blaming the poor and downtrodden for their position must also become a thing of the past. The Church must learn from the times in Church history when Christianity spoke out for the poor and oppressed and not miss its chance to do the same now. The Church can be a powerful voice within society, when it wants to be. American Christians must *want* to have an influence in the fight against poverty.

5. Globalization provides the American Church with a unique opportunity to join the fight against poverty on a global scale. No other generation in history has had as prime a situation as the modern American Church has before it to truly affect the economic future of the poor of the world. The voices within modern economics who are crying out because of the injustice of the poor cannot stand alone. The message of the hope of redemption and transformation found within the gospel of Christ will lose its luster if the economists cry out for justice and the Church does not. The affluence of American society must not set the standard for the ethical use of wealth in light of extreme poverty. In the classic *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* Ron Sider brilliantly and succinctly states:

In an Age of Hunger most Christians (regardless of theological labels) will be severely tempted to succumb to the liberal heresy of following current cultural and societal values rather than biblical truth. Society will offer demonically convincing justification for enjoying our affluence and forgetting about a billion hungry neighbors. But if the Christ of Scripture is our Lord, then we will

refuse to be squeezed into the mold of our affluent culture. In an Age of Hunger Christians of necessity must be radical nonconformists. But nonconformity is painful. Only if we are thoroughly grounded in the scriptural view of possessions, wealth and poverty will we be capable of living an obedient lifestyle.¹⁷³

E. How?

It is not a question of *if* the American Church should use its affluence to combat poverty; only a question of how. The author does not claim to have a new economic model to follow, nor a systematic way in which to eradicate global poverty. When examining the evidence of the biblical narrative, Church history, and the uniqueness of the present situation, however, some potential ethical actions become clear:

1. The blind consumerism injected into us by American society must be rejected wholesale. The neoliberal ideals of the value of the free market and consumption driving the economic well-being of the entire world forward have proven time and again to fall short in real life situations. Free market capitalism is neither a perfect economic system nor the saving grace of the world's poor. Consumption simply for its own sake is inherently contradictory to the biblical witness of the appropriate use of wealth. Wealth is not meant to be used for buying, purchasing, and accumulating more things.

2. American Christians should take seriously the prospect of living more simply. America is a land of excess that knows no bounds. When will American Christians reach the point when they will no longer feel the need to engage in conspicuous consumption? The American Church must hold itself to a higher ethical standard regarding wealth and possessions. Nowhere does the biblical narrative condone excess and extravagance as a virtue. Temperance in

¹⁷³ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978) 26-27.

all things must come to include the food that we eat, the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, and the houses that we live in.¹⁷⁴

3. American Christians must both cry out against the injustices of world poverty more profoundly than ever before and 4. constantly seek new ways to counteract it. As previously stated, the American Church is confronted with a unique opportunity on the stage of history. The world today is more connected than ever before in history. Because of globalization as an interconnecting concept, the American Church not only has the opportunity to fight poverty at every corner of the world but also the *responsibility*. The current generation is the first generation in history that truly cannot claim ignorance to the plight of the poor throughout the world. The gap between the richest of the world and the poorest of the world is larger than ever before and still widening. If the American Church claims to take the message of Jesus seriously, this gap in wealth must become unacceptable. The question “Who, then, is my neighbor?” has taken on an entirely new meaning. All the people of the world have effectively become our neighbors. As the American Church we must continually seek new ways to fight for economic justice for our neighbors; our claimed allegiance to Christ requires it.

There are literally thousands of ways in which the American Church can combat the injustice of world poverty. The avenues through which American Christians can contribute to the battle against world poverty are nearly endless. No single strategy or avenue of aid will solve the problem entirely. In order to make a dent in the problem of world poverty, many different actions must be undertaken simultaneously. It is impossible both to herein list all of the available

¹⁷⁴ For more detailed explorations of the implementation of more simple living see: Richard J. Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985); Ronald J. Sider ed., *Living More Simply: Biblical Principles & Practical Models* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980).

avenues of action and to formulate the perfect plan. It is possible to enumerate some of the options that exist.

What then are some of the available options for American Christians desiring to help in the fight against world poverty? Listed below are just a few of the thousands of options:

- Supporting and voting for government foreign policies promoting fairer trade
- Purchasing products that have been certified as fair trade products
- Voicing support for debt relief and debt forgiveness for poor countries
- Providing financial support to organizations that combat world poverty
- Choosing to carefully consider the implications of purchases (i.e. does this product contribute to or fight against world poverty?)
- Supporting technological research on the provision of clean water and medicine
- Providing educational resources for those stuck in poverty
- Supporting large-scale secular efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals
- Utilizing the Internet to combat ignorance about the issues of world poverty
- Educating other Christians about these issues
- Engaging in international trips centered on relief efforts
- Refusing to accept the notion that world poverty is someone else's problem

VI. CONCLUSION

Every generation imagines that they have something new, be it something concrete or theoretical, to contribute to the world. The initial curiosity surrounding this project arose from this desire. As developed herein, the current generation is faced with a world in which the opportunity to contribute something new is not only a possibility but also a necessity.

The current generation of Christians has an opportunity to find their voice and to let it then be heard throughout the corners of the earth. The level of interconnectedness in the world, unsurpassed throughout history, gives the present generation a unique opportunity.

In America, world poverty used to be an abstract concept; a sad situation relegated to some faraway country, out of sight and out of mind. However, ignorance is no longer bliss. The modern American Church can no longer act as though they are unaware of the plight of millions of the world's poorest people. The current generation of American Christians has a responsibility to look to the witness of scripture and the guidance of God in order to determine what is to be done in aid of the least of these.

In one of the most commonly told parables of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, the pivotal questions concern the nature of what constitutes a "neighbor" and how to inherit eternal life. A lawyer asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks the lawyer what is written in the law. The lawyer replies with the affirmation that, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself," to which Jesus responds, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:27-28).

The lawyer responds with the question, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Within the parable Jesus shows that the

Samaritan, the most hated and unlikely character for a hero, shows mercy to the man and thus fulfills his role as a neighbor. When Jesus asks the lawyer which of the men in the story was a neighbor to the downtrodden man he says, “The one who showed him mercy,” to which Jesus replies, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

Let us, as the modern American Church, no longer ask “Who, then, is my neighbor?” The lawyer sought limits for the reaches of the mercy that he must provide. Jesus shattered those limits. The modern Church must not fall into the trap of trying to define the limits of the reach of our mercy.

This parable teaches that to inherit eternal life we must provide mercy *whenever* we encounter a need for it regardless of race, class, or social stigma. The modern American Church, however, has another requirement: we must provide mercy not only whenever we encounter it but also *wherever* it is needed in the world. The question, “Who, then, is my neighbor?” was never an excuse for withholding mercy; Christians must provide mercy wherever it is needed. For the modern American Church, however, the question has become irrelevant. We know that mercy is needed for all of the poor throughout the entire world, and there are no longer any geographical limits to our “neighborhood.” Every single individual in the world who is poor, and thus needs mercy, are now our neighbors.

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