

RICH CHRISTIANS IN AN AGE OF HUNGER

Ronald J. Sider. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997),

Advertisement: Perhaps the most demonic part of advertising is that it attempts to persuade us that material possessions will bring joy and fulfillment. “That happiness is to be attained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to man, but is preached incessantly by every American television set ” (Sider 1997 P. 22).

”Possessions are the most common idol for rich Christians today. Affluence is the god of twentieth-century North Americas, and the adman is his prophet. The showers of luxuries has almost suffocated our Christian compassion” ” (Sider 1997 P. 191).

Rationalizing Our Affluence

Lifeboat Ethics:

Garrett Hardin, a distinguished biologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, popularized the term “*lifeboat ethics*. He argued that we should not help the poor with food or aid. According to his theory, each rich country is a lifeboat that will survive only if it refuses to waste its limited resources on the hungry masses swimming in the water around it. If we eat together today, we will all starve together tomorrow...” (Sider 1997 P. Ronald J. Sider. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), 33).

To Evangelize the Rich:

Some evangelical Christians argue that they must live in affluence to evangelize the wealthy. Robert Schuller, pastor of the Garden Grove Community Church in California defends his luxurious facilities by saying: “We are trying to make a big, beautiful impression upon the affluent non-religious American who is riding by on this busy freeway. It is obvious that we are not trying to impress the Christians ... nor are we trying to press the social workers in the County Welfare Department. They would tell us that we ought to give money to feed the poor. But suppose we had given this money to feed the poor? What would we have today? We would still have the hungry, poor people and God would not have this tremendous base of operations which He is using to inspire people to become more successful, more affluent, more generous, more genuinely unselfish in their giving of themselves ” (Sider 1997 P. 35).

Trickle Down Wealth

A third widespread rationalization. A prominent business leader insisted that the best thing he could do for the poor was to buy more things for himself. If he purchased more Jaguars, then the economy would grow and the poor would have more jobs ” (Sider 1997 P. 35).

3. GOD AND THE POOR

The Hebrew words for poor are *ani*, *anaw*, *ebyon*, *dal* and *ras*.

Ani (and anaw) denotes one who is “wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed.”

Ebyon refers to a beggar imploring charity. *Dal* connotes a thin, weakly person, that is, an impoverished, deprived peasant. *Ras* is a neutral term. In their persistent polemic against the oppression of the poor, the prophets used terms *ebyon*, *ani* and *dal*.

In the New Testament, the primary word for the poor is *ptochos*, which refers to someone, like a beggar, who is completely destitute and must seek help from others. It is the Greek equivalent of *ani* and *dal*. Thus the primary connotation of “*the poor*” in the Scriptures has to do with low economic status usually due to calamity or some form of oppression (Sider 1997. P. 41).

The Exodus(3:7-8) (6:5-7)

The God of the Bible cares when people enslave and oppress others. At the Exodus, God acted to end economic oppression and bring freedom to slaves. God also wanted to create a special people to whom he could reveal himself. Both of these concerns were central God’s activity at the Exodus. The liberation of a poor, oppressed people, however, was also at the heart of God’s design (Sider 1997. P. 43).

Liberator God (Deut. 5:6; Ex. 20:2)

Yahweh is the one who frees from bondage, The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed (Sider 1997. P. 43).

Ten Commandments

Destruction and Captivity

Soon after the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, they discovered that Yahweh’s passion for justice was a two-edged sword. When they were oppressed, it led to their freedom. But when they became the oppressors, it led to their destruction. When God called Israel out of Egypt and made his covenant with them, God gave them his law so that they could live together in peace and justice. But Israel failed to obey the law of the covenant. As a result, God destroyed Israel and sent his chosen people back into captivity (Sider 1997. P. 44).

Why? The explosive message of the prophet is that God destroyed Israel because of their mistreatment of the poor. Idolatry was an equally prominent reason (Sider 1997. P. 44).

The middle of the eighth century B.C. was a time of political success and economic prosperity, God sent his prophet Amos to announce the unwelcome news that the northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed. Behind the façade of prosperity and

fantastic economic growth, Amos saw oppression of the poor. He saw the rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (Amos 2:7). He saw that the lifestyle of the rich was built on oppression of the poor (Amos 6:1-7). He denounced the rich women “who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink’” (Amos 4:1). Even in the courts the poor had no hope because the rich bribed the judges (Amos 5:10-15) (Sider 1997. P. 44).

Archaeologists have confirmed Amos’ picture of shocking extremes of wealth and poverty. In the early days of settlement in Canaan, the land was distributed more or less equally among the families and tribes. Most Israelites enjoyed a similar standard of living. In fact, archaeologists have found that houses as late as the tenth century B.C. were all approximately the same size. But by the Amos’ day, two centuries later, everything had changed. Bigger, better built houses were found in one area and the poorer houses were huddled together in another section. No wonder Amos warned the rich “You have built houses of hew stone, but you shall not dwell in them” (Amos 5:11) (Sider 1997. P. 44-45).

God’s word through Amos was that the northern kingdom would be destroyed and the people taken into exile (Amos 7:11,17) (Sider 1997. P. 45).

A few years after Amos spoke it happened just as God had said. The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom and took thousands into captivity. Because of their mistreatment of the poor, God destroyed the northern kingdom –forever The nation’s idolatry was also a central cause of their destruction. (Hos. 8:6; 9:1-3) (Sider 1997. P. 45).

God sent other prophets to announce the same fate for the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah warned that destruction from afar would befall Judah because of its mistreatment of the poor; “*Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees - - to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right .. What will you do on the day of punishment, in the storm which will come from afar* (Is. 10:1-3) (Sider 1997. P. 45).

Micah denounced those in Judah who “covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance” (Micah 2:2). As a result, he warned Jerusalem would one day become “a heap of ruins” (Micah 3:12) (Sider 1997. P. 45).

Fortunately, Judah was more open to the prophetic word, and the nation was spared for a time. But oppression of the poor continued. A hundred years after Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah again condemned the wealthy who had amassed riches by oppressing the poor (Jer. 5:26-29) (Sider 1997. P. 46).

Even at that late date Jeremiah offered hope if the people would forsake both injustice and idolatry. “If you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow ... if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for

ever” (Jer. 7:5-7). As a result, Jeremiah persisted in warning that God would use the Babylonians to destroy Judah. In 587 B.C. Jerusalem fell, and the Babylonian captivity began (Sider 1997. P. 46).

God used the Assyrians and Babylonians to purge his people of oppression and injustice. In a remarkable passage, Isaiah showed how God would attack his foes and enemies (that is, his chosen people) in order to purify them and restore justice (Is. 1:21-26) (Sider 1997. P. 46).

(Luke 4:18-19) The Incarnation (Sider 1997. P. 47)

Jesus’ words in the synagogue, spoken near the beginning of his public ministry, throb with hope for the poor. He read from the prophet Isaiah: *“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 favor* (Luke 4:28-19).

The mission of the Incarnate One included freeing the oppressed and healing the blind. The poor are the only group specifically singled out as recipients of Jesus’ gospel. Certainly the gospel he proclaimed was for all, but he was particularly concerned that poor realize that his good news was for them (Sider 1997. P. 47).

Some try to avoid the clear meaning of Jesus’ statement by spiritualizing his words. Certainly, as other texts show, he came to open our blinded hearts, to die for our sins, and to free us from the oppression of guilt. But that is not what he means here. The words about releasing captives and liberating the oppressed are from Isaiah. In their original Old Testament setting they unquestionably referred to physical oppression and captivity. In Luke 7:18-23, which contains a list similar to the one in Luke 4:18-19, it is clear that Jesus is referring to material , physical problems (Sider 1997. P. 47).

In Luke 7:18-23 “The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples 19 and sent them to the Lord to ask, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? 20 Then the men had come to him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? 21 Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. 22 And he answered them, go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. 23 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Matt. 25:31-46). Jesus’ actual ministry corresponded precisely to the words of Luke 4. He spent considerable time ministering to lepers, despised women, and other marginalized folk. He healed the sick and blind. He fed the hungry. And he warned his followers that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation (Matt. 25:31-46) (Sider 1997. P. 48).

Ps. 146 is a ringing declaration that to care for the poor is central to the very nature of God. The Psalmist exults in the God of Jacob because he is both the creator of the universe and the defender of the oppressed.

The nature of God: According to the Scripture, defending the weak, the stranger, and the oppressed is as much an expression of God's essence as creating the universe. Because of who he is, Yahweh lifts up the mistreated. The foundation of Christian concern for the hungry and oppressed is that God cares especially for them (Sider 1997. P. 49).

God Identifies With the Poor (Sider 1997. **P. 49**)

Prov. 14:31 puts it negatively: *“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.”* Even more moving is the positive formulation: *“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full”* (Prov. 19:17). Assisting a poor person is like helping the Creator of all things with a loan (Sider 1997. P. 49).

Only in the Incarnation can we begin to perceive what God's identification with the weak, oppressed, and poor really means. “Though he was rich,” Paul says of our Lord Jesus, “yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9) (Sider 1997. P. 49).

Jesus was poor: Jesus was born in a small, insignificant province of the Roman Empire. His first visitors, the shepherds, were viewed by Jewish society as thieves. His parents were too poor to bring the normal offering for purification. Instead of a lamb, they brought two pigeons to the Temple (Luke 2:24: compare Lev. 12:6-8). Jesus was a refugee (Matt. 2:13-15). Since Jewish rabbis received no fees for their teaching, Jesus had no regular income during his public ministry. (Scholars belonged to the poorer classes in Judaism). Nor did he have a home of his own. Jesus warned an eager follower who promised to follow him everywhere, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt.8:20). He sent out disciples with very little to sustain them (Luke 9:3; 10:4) (Sider 1997. P. 49).

Jesus identified with the poor in important ways. He insisted that his preaching to the poor was a sign that he was the Messiah. When the John the Baptist sent messengers to ask him if he were the long expected Messiah, Jesus simply pointed to his deeds: he was healing the sick and preaching to the poor (Matt. 11:2-6) (Sider 1997. P. 50).

What he was doing made him Messiah (Matt. 11:2-6):

2 Then John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? 4 Jesus answered them, go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

What he was doing and preaching to the poor validated his claim to Messiahship. His extensive engagement with the poor and disadvantaged contrasted sharply with the style of his contemporaries (Sider 1997. P. 50).

The clearest statement about Jesus' identification with the poor is in Matthew 25: 35-36, 40: “ 35: *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, 36 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...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” (Matthew 25: 35-36, 40)

Its parallel is terrifying “*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. (v. 45).*

What does that mean in a world where millions die each year while rich Christians live in affluence? What does it mean to see the Lord of the universe lying by the roadside starving and walk by on the other side? (Sider 1997. P.50).

God’s Special Instruments (P. 50)