

Winner of Second Annual Rauschenbusch Center Seminarian Award

December 9, 2003

PROPHETS, POLITICS, AND POWER:

**The Bible, Evangelicalism, and The Poor—Application of the
Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch to the 21st Century
Economic Crisis**

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Topic: How would Walter Rauschenbusch have approached the problem of poverty in today's America? How does his approach to the social gospel inform our understanding and our action on these issues in today's context? From a biblical and theological perspective, what is the role of government; what is the role of the private sector; and what is the role of the church, in assuring that the basic needs of low-income Americans are met?

I. Introduction: The Social Gospel, What Is It?

"It was given to Rauschenbusch to feel in his bones what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom of God."¹

A. Description and history of the Social Gospel

The writings of Walter Rauschenbusch, the early 20th century Baptist theologian who felt compelled by the economic crisis of his day to relate theology to modern political, economic and social realities, are returning to relevance today, nearly 100 years after the initial publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in 1907. The economic crisis we are experiencing today, with the disempowerment and disenfranchisement of an entire class of workers, and the polarization of society into haves and have-nots, is surprisingly parallel to the situation addressed by Rauschenbusch. But when one discusses the theories of Rauschenbusch with present-day theologians, the near-universal response is, "Oh, yes, I read that book in seminary years ago..." No one seems to really recall what exactly Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel really was, and there are more misconceptions floating around about it than truths. If we want to be able to apply his ideas to our situation today, we first must more closely examine what it was he actually said.

Rauschenbusch's vision, distilled down to its essence, was actually very simple: he believed that the Bible had something to say about the way that people live together in society concretely, economically, and politically; and that that "something to say" was relevant to our own day, not just for the people living at the time the Bible was written. He therefore believed it was incumbent on Christians to act on that "something to say" that we derive from our faith in God's Word—not just in our individual personal lives, but in society at large.² His phrase "prophetic vision" inspired the title of this paper and refers to the use of biblical truths to inform analysis of today's society. His critique of "unearned wealth" gives a new twist to interpretation of Paul's words that "those who do not work" should also not eat.

Subsequent theologians have been influenced by Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. read *Christianity and the Social Crisis* at the outset of his career, and it played a role in starting him on the crusading path which he was to follow for the rest of his life. Dr. King himself said later about this experience:

I was immediately influenced by the social gospel. In the early fifties I read Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, a book which left an indelible imprint on my thinking...Rauschenbusch gave to American Protestantism a sense of social responsibility that it should never lose...Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.³

David Garrow, in his book *Bearing the Cross*, which is more of a movement chronicle than a biography, writes that King was influenced to enter into his pivotal role in the 1960's Civil Rights Movement by his feeling, derived from his early experience with Rauschenbusch, that "the

¹McGuire, Rachel: "Dare We Be Christians Today? Reflections on the Current Relevance of Walter Rauschenbusch's Theology of the Social Gospel," p. 1 (hereinafter "McGuire")

² Rauschenbusch, pp. 338, 341 (A note on format: due to limitations of space, I am going to assume basic familiarity with the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch for readers of this paper. Quotes from the book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, his most influential work, will be cited as "Rauschenbusch" and referenced but not included in the text or footnotes of the paper. Those who wish to peruse the citations may refer to the appendix for full list of quotations.)

³King, Martin Luther, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," essay in Washington, James (ed), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, jr.* New York: HarperCollins, 1986/1991, pp. 37-8.

capitalistic system was predicated on exploitation and prejudice, poverty, and that we wouldn't solve these problems until we got a new social order."⁴ One of his most notable biographers, Stephen B. Oates, says about the later King that his ideas maintained this "Rauschenbuschian" tendency to the end of his life:

"White America must recognize...that justice for black people cannot be changed without radical changes in the structure of our society," changes that would redistribute economic and political power and that would end poverty, racism, and war. This was reminiscent, of course, of Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel...the poor people's campaign was King's "last, greatest dream" because it sought ultimately to make capitalism reform itself...the forging of a Christian commonwealth that was neither capitalist nor Communist, but a synthesis of the best features of collective and individual enterprise, a commonwealth that cared for its weak and handicapped even as it encouraged its strong and gifted...anything less than the poor people's campaign was not enough.⁵

Thus, we don't understand fully about the theological impetus behind the social reformers of the Civil Rights era unless we understand the Social Gospel.⁶

Rachel McGuire, writing from Colgate Rochester, writes about the Social Gospel that

the social gospel *is* the gospel. It was the answer to the oppression of the Roman Empire in Jesus' and Paul's time...It was the driving force behind the ending of slavery and mission of the black church as a...social...institution. It was the powerful force underneath 20th century movements to become free of political and racial oppression, particularly the Civil Rights movement. And it is the only way out of the global oppression...and unprecedented economic imperialism (...mass human suffering and environmental destruction) being wrought by the United States today. (McGuire, 4, emphasis mine)

Hence the Social Gospel is merely and purely a method for application of Scripture to the problems of our times. I believe that it has something to say to us today, something that if we heed it, can help us in our current predicament of poverty in the midst of affluence; but before we launch off into our exploration of these issues, I want to clarify why this paper (or any paper on the topic of social, economic, and political themes in biblical theology) must focus so sharply on poverty.

B. Why is it all about poverty?⁷

One of the main issues that has occupied my research for quite some time is the lack of enthusiasm displayed by much of evangelical Christianity towards social action and social justice. I came across a very interesting book in the course of this research, written by a group of evangelical authors from across the political spectrum writing on the topic of "Christianity and Economics."⁸ One of the

⁴Garrow, David. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: William Morrow, 1986, p. 43.

⁵Oates, Stephen B. *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, jr.* New York: Mentor Books, 1982, p. 446 (he does not state who he is quoting here)

⁶Another, more recent, example of a theologian influenced by the Social Gospel is Susan Pace Hamill, the professor of tax law whose master's thesis from Beeson Divinity School in Alabama was published as a book, *The Least of These*, hereinafter Hamill. She says on page 3:

Throughout American history, the moral principles of Judeo-Christian ethics have been used...to evaluate and reform a wide variety of social structures, and have continued to be invoked in political debates...proponents of the Social Gospel Movement...played major roles in the development of Populism under William Jennings Bryant and in the growth of the early workers' rights movement... President Woodrow Wilson...[was] a member of the Federal Council of Churches in America—an organization dedicated to the advancement of the Social Gospel Movement.

In other words, as we will discuss below, Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospellers, by influencing statespersons of their day, were instrumental in such reforms as the XVIth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (my favorite!).

⁷Gandhi said, "Poverty is the worst form of violence." Wallis, Jim, *The Soul of Politics*, p. 71 (hereinafter referred to as "Wallis.")

⁸Schlossberg et al., *Christianity and Economics in the Post-Cold War Era*, hereinafter referred to as "Schlossberg."

authors, a conservative, criticized the final document (The Oxford Declaration) for its focus on poverty: "Most of the participants assumed that a discussion of economics is really a discussion of poverty; that may be why Oxford I accomplished so little."⁹ I would have to side with "most of the participants" here. If one starts from the point of view that God is on behalf of the oppressed,¹⁰ any Christian theology of economics *will be about poverty* because in the field of economics the oppressed *are* the poor and vice versa.

I am not, of course, saying that the middle class and the wealthy do not matter to Christian theology. What I am saying is that in a discussion of a crisis, Christianity will naturally focus first on those who are most vulnerable to extremes of suffering caused by the crisis. In the economic crisis, those are the poor. Gustavo Gutiérrez, who was recently interviewed by Catholic theologian Daniel Hartnett, said:

I am firmly convinced that poverty—this sub-human condition...is more than a social issue. Poverty poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to theology as well. People today often talk about contextual theologies but...theology has always been contextual...Our context today is characterized by a glaring disparity between the rich and the poor...*poverty is not simply a misfortune; it is an injustice*...Theology...reminds us never to forget the poor and also that God is at stake in our response to poverty...Christians must take the Gospel message of justice and equality seriously...Pope John Paul II's approach to the phenomenon of [economic] globalization is...He constantly asks: "How is this going to affect the poor? Does it promote justice?"¹¹

Any Christian economic theology that cares about what God cares about will address poverty; any theology, of course, that does *not* care about what God cares about is not Christian. We will not belabor this issue, but suffice it to say that for the rest of the paper, when we are discussing other economic classes besides the poor, the focus will be on what is incumbent upon them in their treatment of the poor.¹²

C. Thesis and structure: a map for the journey

My thesis is as follows: 1) There is an economic crisis today, manifested in greatest part by the failure of government, society and Christians to defend the growing class of global impoverished victims of the rampant capitalistic machine; 2) The Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch addresses this issue, even though he wrote many decades ago (probably mostly because he was a biblical theologian and the Bible—interpreted appropriately—is always relevant and current); and 3) Christians today, if we want to follow Jesus and obey God's Word, will act in society, including politics, government and public policy, to address this crisis.

⁹Herbert Schlossberg, "What the Oxford Declaration Missed," quoted in Schlossberg, 108.

¹⁰A thesis which we will look at in the section below on biblical theology of economy.

¹¹Hartnett, Daniel: "Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez," p. 13, emphasis mine; hereinafter "Hartnett." Interestingly, Gutiérrez goes on, in this same interview, to explain the derivation of the famous phrase, "preferential option for the poor":

the term "preferential option for the poor" comes from the Latin American church, but the content, the underlying intuition, is entirely biblical. Liberation theology tries to deepen our understanding of this core biblical conviction...This is not a preferential option for the spiritually poor...The poverty to which the option refers is material poverty...The poor person is someone who is treated as a non-person, someone...insignificant from an economic, political and cultural point of view...But even though the poor remain insignificant within society, they are never insignificant before God...God's love excludes no one. Nevertheless, God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life...The option for the poor...involves standing in solidarity *with* the poor, but it also entails a stance *against* inhumane poverty. (14, emphasis his)

¹²For example, the discussion of economic inequality does not necessarily focus *exclusively* on the poor; yet the poor are its most serious victims, and thus the whole point of addressing this issue is poverty. If economic inequality did not result in the extensive impoverishment of millions of people, it would not be such an important problem.

In order to examine this thesis, we will look first at the current economic conditions, with attention to the development of today's crisis and the similarity to the crisis of Rauschenbusch's day; then we will attempt to develop (handicapped, of course, by limitations of space¹³), guided by the principles of Rauschenbusch, a theology that is biblically-based which addresses this economic crisis; and lastly, we will look at some concrete examples of actions which are in line with this thesis.

II. The Economic Crisis

*"Economic inequality...is the critical issue of our time."*¹⁴

*"Economy is not fated. Economy is historical. In principle everything about economy can be rethought and changed. Poverty is not an eternal condition of nature nor an intention of God...all economic 'laws' are historical and will be judged by God's economy."*¹⁵

What do we mean when we say "the economic crisis"? This means different things to different people. Catholic social teaching, as articulated by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, gives a good capsule summary of the economic crisis both in our country and abroad today:

The international economic order, like many aspects of our own economy, is in crisis; the gap between rich and poor countries and between rich and poor people within countries is widening. The United States represents the most powerful single factor in the international economic equation.¹⁶

There are many aspects of the economic crisis, but in this paper we will be concentrating on aspects of inequality and oppression as experienced by marginalized populations, as hinted in the above Catholic social teaching quote and also as emphasized by Rauschenbusch himself.

A. How did we get here? History of the economic crisis from Rauschenbusch's day to ours.

Rauschenbusch sees the roots of the modern economic crisis in the industrial revolution with its inherent social, economic and human rights inequalities.¹⁷ Because it took much more money or "capital" to own factories and industrial equipment than it did to farm or manufacture things by hand, society began to be stratified into rapidly-hardening classes of ownership vs. labor.¹⁸ The owner class developed into today's wealthy capitalist power elites; and the labor class, of course, parallels today's working class. Note that already by the time of Rauschenbusch this system had spun out into a self-propelled market economy in which the capitalists, other than owning the means of production, often contributed nothing necessary to the system in the sense of making or producing something. The true "Atlas"¹⁹ in this system is the worker, who makes the products that the market sells, cleans the offices the capitalists work from, and watches the capitalist's children and elderly parents.

This is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that the economic crisis with its inequalities is as old as the Rauschenbusch era. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, monumental work that it was, doesn't seem to have fixed this. The Social Gospel doesn't seem to have been the answer

¹³This paper is intended to be the basis for a future book. The portions included herein are of necessity greatly abbreviated.

¹⁴Collins, Chuck and Felice Yeskel, *Economic Apartheid*, p. 14, emphasis mine, hereinafter "Collins."

¹⁵Meeks, Douglas. *God the Economist*, p. 10, emphasis mine, hereinafter "Meeks."

¹⁶National Conference of Catholic Bishops: *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, hereinafter NCCB. This quote is from p. 141.

¹⁷This entire paragraph is excerpted from a summary of the following pages of Rauschenbusch: 158, 194-5, 217-8, 219, 228, 266-7, 350-1, 407, and 410-11. I especially love the quote on page 219 about the ineditability of the ballot!

¹⁸This is what happened. Can I help it if it sounds like the beginnings of a class struggle? Admittedly I got it from Rauschenbusch who reputedly was a socialist; however, his treatment does make a lot of sense in light of historical realities.

¹⁹Derived from the concept of the elites in society being the "Atlas" who holds up the world in the novel *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand.

(or if it was—and I believe it went a long way towards being so—too few people were asking the question). The good news, though, is that in response to these inequalities, *things started to happen* in the society of that day. If it had not been for the Robber Barons, the Industrial Revolution, and the great inequalities of the Rauschenbusch era, we would not have a federal income tax nor an estate tax. It is incredible to me that activists 100 years ago were able to actually *amend the U.S. Constitution* to enact the federal income tax in order to progressively tax the wealthy and make money for the government to distribute more equally in society. Yet, as chronicled by Collins and Gates, that is what happened (starting with the bad news first):²⁰ “between 1886 and 1910, Federal Courts, citing the Fourteenth Amendment, struck down hundreds of federal, state, and local laws enacted to protect people from the excesses of corporations.”²¹ In other words, corporations began to be granted rights equal to (and in the direction of becoming greater than) persons. So this inequality led to protest:

[T]he Social Gospel movement was making connections between biblical teachings and social conditions of the country. Protestant *evangelicals* deplored the moral crisis that accompanied industrialization and the lopsided distribution of wealth.²²

In the 1880s, as the United States went through the industrial revolution, there was grotesque inequality as the richest 1 percent owned an estimated 50 percent of all private wealth...As a result, a coalition of workers, farmers, and urban reformers created a social movement pushing for fundamental reforms to make the economy fairer and the distribution of income and wealth more equitable. The Populist movement...a powerful political movement that became a countervailing force to the agenda of big corporations and wealth-holders...They fought for reforms like...a constitutional amendment for the first income tax to break up overconcentrations of wealth...and cuts in special subsidies for the big trusts, a nineteenth-century version of cutting corporate welfare. (Collins, 8-9)

So these "civil society" movements, as they would be known today—Populism, Progressivism, and the Social Gospel—began to protest and *they pushed through changes*, first the income tax:

the income tax was initially the result of a nationwide, popular movement to amend the constitution. Populists in the 1880s advocated for a permanent progressive income tax system—not just to raise revenue for public services, but to break up overconcentrations of wealth and power that were threatening to a truly democratic, self-governing society...The first income tax...after the Sixteenth Amendment was ratified in 1913, was extremely progressive and taxed only the richest 5 percent of households. (Collins, 100)

Then the estate tax²³:

in 1916, our nation was deep in struggle over the values of equality of opportunity versus hereditary privilege. The accumulation of great wealth and the power of the great trusts lead [sic] to questions

²⁰Quotes that follow are from Collins, cited above; and Gates, William and Churck Collins, *Wealth and Our Commonwealth*, hereinafter referred to as "Gates."

²¹Collins, 81: there is a double irony here—the 14th Amendment was supposed to be against slavery; also the next section in the book is "attack on worker rights"—workers really *are* people and now have less rights than corporations which are not. Christians should be the first in line to be outraged about this because corporations are not the image-bearers of God so it is blasphemy to declare them persons. I will discuss this further below.

²²Gates, 33-5, emphasis mine. Evangelicals did it before, we can do it again!

²³The estate tax, since it only applies to less than 5% of the population and may be repealed by a vote of the Senate soon, seems to be getting a lot of attention from activists given that it is only a small provision in the tax code and accounts for only a negligible portion of federal revenue. However, because of its progressive nature, it is a very important tax for those who are against inequality in economic and political policy. If anything, the estate tax should be *increased*, especially in the highest income brackets, not repealed. Opponents of estate tax repeal, such as Bill Gates, Sr., father of Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates, propose "reform" of the estate tax to increase exemptions, probably to make it more palatable to its powerful opponents. However, in terms of justice, people who have accrued this much money should not be able to pass it on to their heirs tax-free while the poor among the living incur multiple federal and local taxes.

about the direction of our society. One of the expressed intentions of the tax, as articulated by Theodore Roosevelt, was to break up "those fortunes swollen beyond all healthy limits." (Gates, 13)

Many 1900-1918 Progressive Era reforms resulted from this period, such as...the establishment of an income tax, which required the extraordinary step of amending the Constitution. The estate tax was one of these reforms. Like the income tax, it was...rooted in...the belief that great aggregations of wealth were dangerous to our democracy and civic health. There was also a recognition that *great wealth should pay a greater portion of public need.* (Gates, 27, emphasis mine)

Despite these gains, however, capitalism still had its casualties. The nature of the free market is that people are inevitably going to be left behind, in a way that, as can be seen from Douglas Meeks, is reminiscent of slavery:

When land runs out, relatively few persons have property in land and working capital. But if I and no one else owns my labor, then I have a right to sell my labor as a commodity...I must sell my self-possession, my right to myself, in order to survive. Those without land to work or capital have to pay others for access to it by giving over...their labor.²⁴

How did this system evolve into the economic crisis of today? Walter Owensby's book, *Economics for Prophets*,²⁵ was written 15 years ago; yet some of his comments are still relevant:

the power of capital in modern U.S. society is not only concentrated in a few percent of the population who own it but further concentrated in the almost autonomous decisions of a few thousand individuals who manage it. (Owensby, 29-30)

This description of power being "concentrated and further concentrated" is a description of oligarchy, not democracy. But on top of this, recently there has been another revolution, a technological revolution, which affects economic relationships even further. There is a new displaced crop of "left behind" workers which parallels the industrial revolutions whose victims inspired Walter Rauschenbusch.

While this is happening in the corporate world, what is going on in society? Jim Wallis has perceptively noted that our acquisitive culture is beginning to tattoo itself on the attitudes of our youth, with predictably disturbing results:

their [gang-bangers'] frightening disregard for human life is a bitter reflection of the way these same young people have been utterly disregarded by their society. Their coldheartedness is now a judgment upon our coldness toward them. Indeed, we are reaping what we have sown. (Wallis, 5)

the images that assault them daily...all tell young people that their very worth and status as human beings come from how much they possess and consume. Fancy clothes, new cars, a nice house, and lots of gold around their necks become the aspirations of inner city youth. In fact, they are no different from most Americans. (Wallis, 67-8)

Much of the crime overtaking our society stems directly from the values of an utterly materialistic culture combined with the observation of many youth that the rich and powerful (both people and nations) generally take what they want and get away with it. (Wallis, 155-6)

²⁴Meeks, 109. This phenomenon, as old as Bible days, is share-cropping, which makes the proletariat the industrial equivalent of slaves. David Korten, in *When Corporations Rule the World*, hereinafter referred to as "Korten" (a = 1st edition; b = 2nd edition), has noticed this slavery phenomenon as well:

J.C. Penney, Victoria's Secret, IBM, Toys "R" Us, and TWA are among the U.S. corporations that have augmented their profits by employing prisoners...Combine long mandatory sentences for minor drug offenses, a strong racial bias, prisons run by corporations for profit, the sale of convict labor to corporations at sweatshop rates, and a charge for prison room and board and you have a modern system of bonded labor, a social condition otherwise known as slavery. (305b)

²⁵Hereinafter referred to as "Owensby."

Indeed, what were we to expect? Our children only learn what we teach them. The materialism and accumulation mentalities which so mark our society have far-reaching consequences. The same issues which Rauschenbusch (quoted below by McGuire) felt led to WWI still dog us today:

"The ultimate cause of the war was the same lust for easy and unearned gain which has created the internal social evils under which every nation has suffered. *The social problem and the war problem are fundamentally one problem, and the social gospel faces both.*" How much truer this statement is today, when in our "lust for easy and unearned gain" we calculate the cost of human lives lost in war against the financial spreadsheets of our mega-corporations. And at the end of the day, ill-gotten profit consistently comes out on top.²⁶

The only thing to add in our recap of the history of how we got to today from the Rauschenbusch era is that, since Owensby was writing in the 80's, things have not gotten better in terms of economic inequality. United for a Fair Economy's book, *Economic Apartheid in America*, has chronicled this development well:

Subsequent tax "reforms" have steadily pushed the tax burden onto lower- and middle-income households...In the last two decades, the U.S. tax system has become a two-tier, two-class tax system...there is one system for the wealthy ("the Privileged Person's Tax Law") and one for everyone else (the "Common Person's Tax Law"). *When Congress pushes for progressive tax changes that ask the wealthy to pay more, it is labeled "class warfare."* However, *when the tax burden is shifted onto middle class and poor people, it is packaged as "tax reform"*...Tax rates on the wealthy have dropped from 91 percent on incomes over \$400,000 in the early 1950s to as low as 28 percent in 1986²⁷

As we will discuss later in more detail, we have all encountered the phenomenon, "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." This statement, as we have seen, is not completely true. The rich don't just "get" richer; they actively change society so they can more easily accrue wealth and, once they have done so, can more easily keep what they have accrued. If they can actively do this, we should be willing to try actively to counter it.

B. Inequality and the crisis of exclusion. What are the problems with inequality?

*"Them as ain't got boats, drown in a rising tide."*²⁸

Rauschenbusch, nearly 100 years ago, knew about the insidious power of economic inequality. Against the claims of some conservative analysts, he realized that "the rich getting richer" is not a victimless crime—the rich getting richer is *causationally linked* to the poor getting poorer. Rich people, of course, especially those who think of themselves as compassionate, don't like to think about this. But the same policies which enrich them, also impoverish others. Some examples are as follows:

The equality of property in the sense of access of all to what they need to fulfill their lives became unthinkable because it would take from the rich the possibility of being rich.²⁹

²⁶McGuire, p. 3, quoting Rauschenbusch, emphasis mine—her words seem more predictive when it is recalled that she was writing *prior* to the declaration of war on Iraq; however, this administration did not really surprise anyone (dismayed, yes, but not surprised) in its actions in this matter.

²⁷Collins, 100, 105, emphasis mine. We should remember these italicized words when we come up against these "class warfare" accusations on the part of conservatives.

²⁸Jason Nelson, Ph.C., educational policy researcher, personal communication, 2003.

²⁹Meeks, 205—perhaps we need to rethink what is unthinkable. Also, I guess it depends on what you consider "the possibility of being rich." According to UFE, if the world's 225 richest people were to each pay 4% of their net worth, all people in poor nations could have access to "adequate food, safe water and sanitation, basic education, basic health care, and reproductive health care." (Collins, 62). Since their average 1998 wealth was \$4.5 billion, if they did this they would still have intact the "possibility of being rich."

the whole point of privatization is neither economic efficiency nor improved services to the consumer but simply to transfer wealth from the public purse—which could redistribute it to even out social inequalities—to private hands. (Korten, 93b)

In addition to being unchristian and unbiblical (which we will discuss below under the theology section³⁰), there are pragmatic problems with inequality as well. Some of them are that it:

1) isolates and separates people; 2) confers unequal political power upon those with unequal amounts of economic power; 3) is unfair, unjust, immoral, bad for democracy, and even uncaptialistic; 4) is bad for economic stability.

We will examine these issues one by one.

1. Isolation and separation. People were meant to live in community. Isolation and separation, as far back as Bible times, were seen as punishment. The "gap" between rich and poor in our society is not a physical one, but it is a real one, and it is experienced in multiple ways. We are supposed to be one human family, and this widening gap between two groups within the family is alienating us from each other. Rauschenbusch, probably drawing on Marxian analysis of the class struggle, implied that when there are differences in equality between classes of people they will have more and more trouble relating to one another.³¹ Conservatives don't like to talk of "class struggle" and "class warfare," but if they want to have a class-stratified society, some amount of friction between these two groups of strangers is inevitable. Owensby explains this further:

The main reason that Americans have such difficulty in speaking meaningfully about class is that it is perceived as part of the Marxist vocabulary. For Marxists, class is a technical concept that divides the population by the way in which income is derived rather than by the amount of income received. Capital owners (the bourgeoisie) live by the power and income their investments produce...Laborers (the proletariat) live by the incremental sale of their time, bodies, and minds...Workers have...no share in whatever profit is made. Thus the two classes are...hostile camps engaged in an unending economic struggle. Do such class realities exist in today's world, or is this merely the inflammatory vocabulary of dissidents who long for economic benefits they do not deserve and political power they cannot obtain?³²

Collins further draws the picture of how this develops into a situation where two different groups of people live in two completely different worlds.³³

³⁰As far as theology goes, though, suffice it to say here that the Catholics have systematized their social ethical theology, especially where economics and justice to the poor are concerned, to a greater degree than most evangelical Protestants. NCCB has this to say about inequality:

Social harm calls for social relief...the establishment of a floor of material well-being on which all can stand. This is a duty of the whole of society and it creates particular obligations for those with greater resources. This duty calls into question extreme inequalities of income and consumption when so many lack basic necessities. (p. 38)

³¹Page 251, see Appendix.

³²Owensby, 118. Let us ponder this phrase, "economic benefits they don't deserve". Why wouldn't anybody deserve them? Why wouldn't anyone deserve a political voice? Conservatives such as the authors of the conservative papers in the Oxford book like to harp on issues of "deserving" and whether poor people "deserve" consideration. As we will see in discussion below on reasons for social inaction on the part of Christians, there is really a lot of name-calling and victim-blaming, among the Christian right, towards the poor and also their advocates. But this is what happens when we are separated and isolated from each other—we are then able to dehumanize, even demonize, our opponents because we no longer see them as human beings. They are so different from us that they are absolutely outside of our sphere of experience.

³³Korten, too, talks about these two different worlds, using a metaphor from the Star Trek episode, "The Cloud Minders" (p. 107). These were two groups of residents of the planet Ardana who actually lived physically separately—the wealthy in an artificially suspended city in the stratosphere above the planet, and the workers on the surface of the planet and even below it in the mines. And Wallis has a metaphor of his own city of Washington, DC of the discrepancy between the "corridors of power" in the federal government vs. the nearby neighborhood of Columbia Heights in which he lives (p. xxiii).

What does it mean when this richest 10 percent have essentially privatized their personal needs and withdrawn to "prosperous enclaves"?...The richest 10 percent are less likely to send their children to public schools; they have private schools. And even when they do...schools in wealthy areas are more attractive and well-equipped because of the inequities in property taxes that fund public education...The wealthy are less inclined to use public parks and recreation areas because they have private country clubs and summer homes...They don't need Social Security, they have private retirement security. The wealthy have withdrawn from the institutions and public forms of shared common security that the majority of citizens depend on. They come to resent paying for public services they don't use. They lobby for reductions in money for public services...When the powerful no longer have a stake in the commonweal, the common good suffers. Antigovernment attitudes become self-fulfilling, self-reinforcing prophecies as resources for public services and institutions decline...Such patterns further reinforce existing racial and class divides in America. (33-4)

Nothing is really so wrong with this, I guess, unless one is either morally or theologically opposed to division of people into such stratified groups³⁴. However, don't think it doesn't affect the *attitudes* and behaviors of the people involved; In other words, when we live separately, we begin to see those whom God intended to be our neighbors as "other."³⁵ When this happens, we lose the capacity for empathy, for compassion for them. When this happens, we impair our capacity to be human ourselves.

Most middle-class Americans, if they are really honest, don't believe that the vulnerable children in the horn of Africa, on the streets of Calcutta, or in their own city's homeless shelters are as important as theirs. (Wallis, 190)

all persons are alike in ways...such as the capacity to feel pain and affection, and to desire self-respect. Love is denied when we rationalize someone else's suffering as less important than ours. We may see poor people living in circumstances which we would never choose yet convince ourselves that they are content and can be left alone...A sharecropper or a Latin American peasant feels just as deep a void at the death of a child as do we. The suffering people of the world do not have less refined sensitivity to hunger, or cold, or the pain of sickness. Che Guevara's last letter to his children addressed this implication of love: "Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world."³⁶

2. Economic power is political power. This, too, was something realized by Rauschenbusch when he said, "economic interests dominate...We have...one kind of constitution on paper, and another system of government in fact."³⁷ He also said, "If we want approximate political equality, we must

³⁴We mentioned in the previous section how numerous workers have been "left behind" in the current economy by changes in the job market. The phenomenon of exclusion is an important theological concept which we will sadly not be able to discuss at length here. Suffice it to say that if there are two separate, stratified societies, those who are "left out" of the wealthy society quickly find that there are aspects of society as a whole from which they are excluded—the old elementary school trauma of "you can't play," only writ large. Much of what falls under the rubric of "man's inhumanity to man" is caused, directly or indirectly, by the division of society into "in" and "out" groups, justifying cruel and unusual behavior towards members of the out groups. Meeks puts it thus:

When the logic of the market overreaches its proper sphere and begins to determine distribution in all social spheres we have what Karl Polanyi has called the "market society." Exchange relationships replace all other social relationships. The logic of accumulation and exchange invades every dimension of life. When this happens many persons are excluded from livelihood. "Surplus people," those who cannot be fit into the existing modes of production and consumption, are created. (38)

³⁵ For example: "All this [corporate raiding] is played out with a chilling sense of moral detachment. In the words of Dennis Levine, a Wall Street high-flyer who was imprisoned for insider trading: 'We had a phenomenal enterprise going on Wall Street, and it was easy to forget that the billions of dollars we threw around had any material impact upon the jobs and, thus, the daily lives of millions of Americans.'" (Korten, 199-200b)

³⁶Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, p. 51; hereinafter "Mott."

³⁷Rauschenbusch, xvi.

have approximate economic equality."³⁸ Gates quotes Samuel Huntington, stating, "Economic inequalities become evil when they are translated into political inequalities."³⁹ I suppose it is theoretically possible for that translation not to happen; but we can see from the following that it has already affected our society:

As the elites gained more financial power, they were able to pyramid their claims on the resources of society *without making a corresponding productive contribution*. As the economic borders were opened, the jobs of those who depended on earning wages for doing productive work became hostage to those who controlled capital. The more the government, in its desperation to keep jobs at home, gave in to the demands of the financial elite, the greater the amount of money that passed into their hands, the greater their power to dictate public policy in their own interests, and the greater the stresses on the social fabric. (Korten, 102b, emphasis mine)

Our society functions according to the definition of plutocracy quoted from Webster's Dictionary in *Economic Apartheid*: "a government or state in which the wealthy class rules;...a class or group ruling, or exercising power or influence, by virtue of its wealth."⁴⁰

Collins explains that society is set up this way because we allow it to be. By failing to organize and take up our rightful power, the people have left a vacuum which is filled by moneyed interests.⁴¹ Wallis says we should take back our power:

our personal habits of political acquiescence have been central to our problems. When politics is almost exclusively defined at the top of the society, it invariably will be defined more by power than by moral values. The search for a more ethically rooted politics is too important a task to be left to the powerful alone. (Wallis, 16-17)

How we could do this will be left to a future section.

Now that we have discussed economic power politics, however, we can understand how it comes to be that the economy is the way it is. Remember that I said that United for a Fair Economy says that economic inequality "doesn't just happen." The rest of that quote is:

economic inequality is not the result of some natural phenomenon...*It is the result of the rules that govern the economy—at least two decades of public policies and private corporate practices—that have benefited asset owners at the expense of wage earners*. Tax policy, global trade policy, government spending and regulation have all been tilted in favor of asset owners and large corporations.⁴²

³⁸ibid, p. 263; see also 254.

³⁹Gates, p. 18. Another quite prophetic book on inequality and taxation is from the Center for Public Integrity (hereinafter CPI), *The Cheating of America*. On p. 39, for example: "The tax code treats different kinds of money differently. Money spent to make more money is tax deductible. Money spent to meet one's basic needs is not." In other words, people who have only enough money to meet their basic needs—or less—are less favored by the tax code (surprise) than those who have enough to invest—and more. How is it moral, or even logical, when Gary Bielfeldt, who made millions selling U.S. Treasury Bonds—financed by the federal government, who gets their money from our taxes—evades his taxes, and says, "If someone could eliminate the IRS...more power to them"?(CPI, p. 180)

⁴⁰Collins, p. 28.

⁴¹ibid., p. 88.

⁴²ibid., p. 68, emphasis theirs—the importance of the categories of "asset owners" vs. "wage earners" is that people who are earning their income off of other income are not contributing to the economy and thus the market ideology does not even apply to them. All these decisions—tax policy, global trade policy, government spending and regulation—are conscious, willful decisions that have been made by people and people can unmake them; and Christians should be among the forefront of people working to do so. The issue of taxes especially goes to fairness, inequality, and morals and ethics. NCCB, for example, makes taxes a key issue in their recommendations for social reorganization based on fairness and justice (p. 38-9). They state on p. 61 that "Citizens have a moral obligation to pay...taxes." Several of Professor Hamill of Alabama's statements are quite relevant here: "taxes are a moral issue that must exemplify Judeo-Christian values as revealed in the

3. Fairness, justice, morality, democracy, and capitalism. We are all taught that we live in a democratic society where we have "liberty and justice for all." But how can that be if some are more equal than others (the irony, of course, is that this famous phrase comes from Orwell's critique of planned economies, assumedly written in defense of the free market)? All societies and economic systems will inevitably have *some* inequality. But how much is too much? As we will see, when there is too much inequality, our social fabric suffers—even the economic system of capitalism itself suffers. It is as if capitalism had spawned a monster child which it now cannot control.⁴³ Again, prophetically, Rauschenbusch critiqued the unfairness and injustice of it: "The bulk of the increase in wealth has gone to a limited class who in various ways have been strong enough to take it . . . Our blessings have failed to bless us because they were not based on justice and solidarity."⁴⁴ And: "If the rich had *only* what they earned, and the poor had *all* that they earned, all wheels would revolve more slowly and life would be more sane."⁴⁵

I have had the privilege of hearing Bill Gates, Sr.—a professor of tax law—speak on fairness, economic inequality, and the estate tax. He says that since American society has played a role in helping the rich to become wealthy in the first place (even if they inherited their wealth, society at least let them keep it—against my wishes and better judgment!), it is only fair that the rich should be obliged to contribute to society.⁴⁶ But who cares about issues of fairness? I'll tell you who—victims of injustice. An example is those who have been discriminated against by society. Collins has noticed that, "Since wealth accumulates over generations, discrimination has taken its toll on wealth accumulation for people of color."⁴⁷

And then there is the old "morality" card, which it seems theologians will never tire of playing—and non-theologians seem never to care about. But in the case of inequality, some of the aspects of immorality also don't seem to make much sense. For instance, what is someone realistically going to do with all that money? Doesn't it make more sense to do as Bill Gates (junior) has said he will do and attempt to give it away? After one has a certain amount of wealth, what more could one want? Or in the words of Collins:

Once a household accumulates wealth in excess of \$10 million, placing it in the richest one half of one percent, they have moved beyond meeting the needs and wildest desires of themselves and their heirs. (Collins, 28)

Bible" (ix) as well as "Truly poor people should pay no taxes." (x) CPI, although written from a secular point of view, weighs in heavily at times on the moral arguments. On p. 269, they quote Oliver Wendell Holmes, who is reputed to have said that "I like to pay taxes; with them, I buy civilization." They also make a statement which is a good capsule summary of Gates' moving exhortation on behalf of the estate tax (about a baby being about to be born in heaven and God charging for the privilege of being born an American, p. 122-3), "As nation-states go, and probably as long as nation-states exist, this is still the best show on Earth. And *taxes are the price of admission.*" (268, emphasis mine)

⁴³If this sounds like it verges on the demonic, it does; see below under the section on corporations.

⁴⁴Rauschenbusch, 233. Note that he has already—again, nearly 100 years ago—debunked the myth of the panacea of "growth."

⁴⁵ibid., 268, emphasis mine. The conservatives would have you believe—and had me believing, years ago, for a while—that *they* are "the productive members of society" and the poor are getting "what they deserve" because they are less productive.

⁴⁶See, for example, Gates, p. 81.

⁴⁷Collins, 53. I have mostly stayed away from the topic of racism per se in this paper since it is not as directly relevant as oppression on the basis of economic situation; however, of course, the statistics are overwhelming that these are causally linked in both directions. Hamill, for example, explains how racism played into the reasons behind Alabama's unfair tax laws:

Alabama's wealthy and powerful planters of 1901 had an immoral purpose for the low, inadequate, and regressive taxes enshrined in the 1901 constitution. In order to reverse the limited success enjoyed by some blacks and poor whites after the Civil War, they sought to deny all blacks and poor whites minimum health care and education. (xi)

I think this is sick, but perhaps we should leave any debate of this until after we discuss the theology. Owensby puts it like this:

The goal of an economic system...is not to guarantee the right of the individual to acquire and accumulate all that personal ability and drive make possible. The goal is to provide for the needs of the global human community in a way that will draw people and nations together rather than further divide them. We may endure systems at odds with that vision, but we must not celebrate them or defend them from challenge or change. (Owensby, xvii-xviii)

How can I say that economic inequality is undemocratic? Isn't a democracy the freedom to do anything one wants, including make as much money as one possibly can? Well, actually, according to Meeks, democracy is "the organized struggle, through the expansion of rights, against privilege and domination in all dimensions of life."⁴⁸ And lest you think this theologian's definition is too idealistic, Collins and Yeskel offer the following critique:

we must stress the dangers of overconcentration of wealth and the need for a real democracy. We must shift the basic ideological framework from, "free market capitalism is good, big government is bad," to "overconcentration of wealth and power are bad for our democracy, our economy, and our civil society." (Collins, 144)

Finally, overconcentrations of wealth are not even playing by the rules of capitalism itself. The rich, for example those spearheading the effort to repeal the estate tax, would have us believe that they are the biggest contributors to the economy. Lynn Cornwell, for example, president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, has gone on record saying, "the threat of having a tax like this takes away all incentive of growing your business."⁴⁹ Whenever rich people use the term "incentive," you know that they are equating their own enrichment with "growing the economy." The myth goes something like this: if you take away our chance for getting still richer, you are failing to reward those who are most industrious and contributing the most to society, which is unfair and will ruin the economy. However, rich people don't necessarily benefit the economy, especially in terms of production, as they enrich themselves. The second most common way of making money in our modern economy is with money, which usually doesn't help anyone and often hurts people.

In 1979 people with incomes of over \$1 million received less than 25 percent of the total from wages and salaries, professional fees, royalties, and business profits. The rest came from amounts generated by accumulated wealth. (Owensby, 114)

And the first most common way of making money in our society is, of course, the "old fashioned way"—to inherit it! According to United for a Fair Economy, "between 50 and 70 percent of all wealth is inherited."⁵⁰ This is one reason I am in favor of *increasing* the estate tax instead of repealing or "reforming" it (it has already been reformed away almost to nothing compared to the rates at which it was introduced): if they want to say they "earned" their money, let them do so!

4. Endangering economic stability. It only makes sense that people with less money will, when given more money, be more likely to spend it on things they previously could not afford, and now can⁵¹, for example a car:

nobody decides to sell things without people to buy them. Capitalists like Henry Ford understood that greater equality created a demand for his products. He publicly committed to pay *all* of his employees...enough so that they could all purchase Ford automobiles. He saw his long term self-interest tied to shared prosperity..."An unemployed man is an out-of-work customer. He cannot buy. An underpaid man is a customer reduced in purchasing power. He cannot buy. Business depression is

⁴⁸Meeks, p. 6.

⁴⁹Gates, 67

⁵⁰Collins, 60.

⁵¹This is why Bush's repeated tax cuts to the wealthy with the excuse that he is trying to "spur economic recovery" are completely backwards.

caused by weakened purchasing power...wages is...more important to business than it is to labor. Low wages will break business far more quickly than it will labor." (Collins, 27, emphasis theirs)

And it only makes sense that a society that spends less money on helping rich people keep their unneeded wealth will have more money for spending on real needs.⁵²

It is not at first obvious that economic inequality actually *directly* contributes to destabilizing the economy. The wealthy are, in fact, in the process of killing the goose that laid the golden egg. My husband once told me about an economics class that he took at the University of Washington whose bottom line, take-home lesson seemed to be simply: "Government regulation—bad; invisible hand—good." Well, the lesson could be applied to inequality, rephrased as follows: "Income disparity—bad; social safety net—good." Owensby⁵³ explains how the famous stock market crash of 1929 which led to the Great Depression was caused in part by economic inequality.⁵⁴ But what led to the Great Depression itself was not only the stock market crash in 1929, but the fact that there was an inadequate social safety net to keep the economy going when it hit the skids. Rauschenbusch said that nations could destroy themselves by inequality.⁵⁵

C. Corporations, control, and spirituality

1. Corporate hegemony

One of my strongest objections to corporations is that they are running the government out of one side of their mouths while refusing to pay for it and deriding it (usually for being "too big"—they should talk!) out of the other.⁵⁶ As long ago as 1907, when Rauschenbusch was writing, it was

⁵²Collins, 35:

a society with less polarization of income and wealth could invest more in the commonwealth and in our shared security. The need for privatizing security and other services would be reduced because the community institutions that provide for people's needs would be stronger.

⁵³On p. 88:

In the boom years of the 1920s, income was so heavily concentrated—the richest 5 percent received 33.5 percent of the income in 1929—that when the Crash came, large number of lower-income people went from just getting by to penury almost overnight. As a result, aggregate demand plummeted...The investment laws were reformed and the Securities and Exchange Commission was created to eliminate the wild speculation that led to the crash of the stock market in 1929...The key to a more stable economy, however, are the so-called *economic stabilizers*...unemployment compensation...Other income-strengthening government programs...for those who fall on hard times and are unable to pay full market rates. While such programs are praiseworthy on humanitarian grounds alone...their importance to the economy as a whole is often overlooked. They do not just provide food for the hungry and some measure of personal safety for the unemployed and the underemployed. They also protect the society against a sudden drop in general consumption that could push a weakened economy into depression.

(emphasis his)—in other words, economic benefits trickle up, not down—if you give money to the rich, it won't necessarily increase spending because they don't *have* to put it into the economy as the poor do. "Some economists have argued that growing inequality contributed to the Depression" (Collins, 130)

⁵⁴To understand better how, see Collins, p. 27:

past economic depressions are in part rooted in the concentration of wealth, as working people lack spending power and are unable to meet debt obligations. At the same time, wealthy people have so much surplus money that they begin gambling on risky, high-return investments. This speculation can be destructive and destabilizing for the economy, as investment is diverted from truly productive sectors of the economy.

⁵⁵p. 284, for full quote, see Appendix.

⁵⁶An example of the hypocritical doublespeak of corporations is how they are against "government intervention" when it is to control them and loudly in favor of it when it is on their behalf, to bail them out of some financial fix which their short-term speculative policies have earned them. For example, Owensby on the financial crises of corporations during the 80's:

the managers of threatened industries joined an anxious labor force in calling for...government subsidies and bailouts as well as lower taxes [for business]. Many of these pleas were honored during both the Carter and Reagan administrations. However, managers often used the reprieve to rebuild company profits (Owensby, 181)

in other words, the corporations pocketed the bailouts instead of using the money to help the economy or the workers as it was intended by the government.

recognized that corporations had too much power.⁵⁷ *People* should be running the government, as in the phrase, "of the people, by the people, and for the people," not corporations. Rauschenbusch recommended that people take back this power from corporations. What happens if we do not exert control over corporations? Left to their own devices, corporations (because they are not people and do not—despite David Batstone's visions to the contrary⁵⁸—have consciences) will run amok. Indeed, as we will see in a moment, they have to some extent done so already—there is evidence, which we will discuss, that no one is "at the helm" and corporations have to some extent usurped their own control.⁵⁹ If we do not intervene, we abdicate our voice and substitute the corporate voice in our stead.

With the voices of workers, consumers, community members, and environmentalists shut out of important debates about the economic priorities of our nation, the "mainstream" economic agenda becomes the agenda of big corporations and large owners of capital. This agenda includes cutting capital gains taxes, privatization of public service, deregulating corporations, and opening up international markets for trade with no consideration for human rights or environmental standards. (Collins, 89)

Thus, they subvert democracy into plutocracy—instead of "one person, one vote," it becomes, "millions of dollars, no vote needed..."⁶⁰

2. Corporate idolatry⁶¹ and the dehumanization of people.

⁵⁷Rauschenbusch, 386. He maintains that corporations were made to serve society, not the other way around.

⁵⁸See references under Recommended Reading (Batstone, David: *Saving the Corporate Soul*)

⁵⁹One way corporations exert control is through campaign contributions:

For many large corporations, campaign contributions have become the highest return investment they can make. For example, by investing \$1.2 million in campaign contributions Glaxo Smith Kline pharmaceutical corporation won a nineteen-month patent extension on the drug Zantac that was estimated to be worth \$1 billion, a net return of 83,333 percent... For a mere \$5 million the broadcasting industry secured free digital TV licenses worth \$70 billion for a 1,400,000 percent return on their investment. (Korten, 292b)

⁶⁰And the above are just a few examples of the benefits that corporations receive under the current system of government. Collins and Yeskel state that "corporate welfare is emblematic of the imbalance of power in this country and its effect on government policy." (p. 120) The way this works is that the government, not being content to pass legislation that financially benefits corporations, also directly gives them money in the form of subsidies, bailouts and tax breaks:

[In 1996, there were] 153 specific pieces of "aid to dependent corporations" totaling \$167.2 billion or \$1,388 per individual taxpayer. This is a conservative estimate... In contrast, welfare for very low income people including... TANF, food stamps, housing subsidies, and child nutrition cost \$50 billion per year or \$415 per individual taxpayer. (Collins, 121)

And it doesn't stop there. Corporations are also largely above the law, and it is very difficult to hold them accountable for their own behavior, even when they are convicted of wrongdoing:

In the early nineties, Columbia HCA was indicted for committing massive Medicare fraud and bilking taxpayers out of megamillions... Another problem with this story is that Columbia HCA deducts all of [CEO] Frist's paycheck and benefits from its corporate income taxes, lowering its tax bill by about \$40 million. The rest of us make up that \$40 million in lost tax revenue with higher taxes or cuts in services. (Collins, 124)

I happen to know for a fact that if this were to happen to an individual (say, a physician), they would no longer be able to participate in the economy in the future (for example, a physician convicted of Medicare fraud is "black listed" and never allowed to work in any remunerative way again in *any capacity* for any agency which bills Medicare—including as a desk clerk, janitor or cafeteria chef). The analogous thing to do (which I propose below) for a corporation would be to revoke its charter.

⁶¹Some general comments about idolatry in the theological sense follow, which are too technical to put in the text. What is the problem with free market capitalism? Theologically, it is not the fact that the market system is inherently flawed that is the problem, but the fact that its adherents practice it as a world view; a belief system; in other (less politically correct) words, a religion. The system, as it is presently set up to function, is significantly in excess of what would be dictated by a mere economic system. In other words, it has become an

ideology—an "ism," as implied by its title, *capitalism*. Any ideology—especially if it is not consciously recognized as such—is liable to take over unsuspecting areas of people's lives and become an end unto itself.

What should the church do in a situation in which the market has become an ideology? The first step is to recognize that when people speak of the market in life-or-death terms, they are probably following the market ideology. For example, when economic reforms are proposed, if people respond with catastrophizing predictions such as, "That will destroy the economy and end life as we know it!" they are probably using market ideology (I have heard such responses to seemingly reasonable economic proposals such as increasing the minimum wage or holding corporations accountable). Meeks puts it this way:

Biblical religion and economics...share a cluster of salvational words. Both speak of redemption, saving, security, profit, and so on...the modern science of economics...has taken on a messianic aura because it is assumed that if the economic system, whether capitalist or communist, should crumble, so too would everything else worth saving. Claims for the value of whole civilizations have now been attached to the peculiarly economic and thus people are willing to risk the future on this or that economics. (31)

People who are not alert to these aspects of the current economic system are susceptible to miss elements of idolatry involved therein. For example, when changes to the system are proposed, as discussed above, proponents sometimes react with as much fervor as if their religion had been violated. Perhaps if we can discern what the tenets are of this "religion," we can have a better sense of how to respond in these situations.

First of all, there is a sort of "mystique" about the system which is considered to be above questioning—almost "transcendent," as Meeks describes:

Neoclassical economists speak of these forces as religious people speak of the numinous, for these mostly unexamined premises entail...[something] "transcendent"...Though they must be held on faith, economists are sure of the allegiances of thought and action required by these God concepts (65)

In other words, this religion demands unquestioning obedience and has aspects of divinity. This explains the outcry and outrage that accompany requests for change in the market system (just picture the last time you requested change at a church meeting and the hue and cry that were raised in response!). We soon get the impression that it is not OK to question the system.

[P]roperty seems to be sacrosanct, beyond all questioning. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, enormous discrepancy in wealth, war, depletion of natural resources, and destruction of the ecosphere all seem insuperable problems because their solutions seem to contradict or undermine the most sacred assumptions about property. (Meeks, 102)

Additionally, this religion has aspects of Fortuna worship. Fortuna was the Roman goddess of chance, deities related to whom are still worshiped today when people wish each other good fortune, good luck, or hope that "random chance" will bring them benefits such as winning the lottery or making money at gambling. But some people believe that outcomes in the market *must* be left to chance (or a similar god, the "Invisible Hand" of the market), or the whole system will fall apart. By attempting to institute human planning into this system, we are thwarting this god and risking its ire.

"The most dire and fatal hubris for any leader is to cut off his people from **providence**, from the miraculous prodigality of chance, by substituting a closed system of human planning. Success is always unpredictable and thus an effort of faith and freedom." (Owensby, 174, quoting George Gilder, emphasis mine)

By using spiritual terminology and equating the "prodigality of chance" to a providential miracle, Gilder portrays its opposite—planning—as satanic.

David Korten, in his book, *When Corporations Rule the World*, has done a great deal to characterize this economic, capitalistic religion. This is a religion in that it has a priesthood, near-fanatical adherents, doctrines, and heresies:

In the quest for economic growth, free market ideology has been embraced...with the fervor of a fundamentalist religious faith. Money is its sole measure of value...The economics profession serves as its priesthood. It champions values that demean the human spirit, it assumes an imaginary world divorced from reality...Yet to question its doctrine has become virtual heresy, invoking risk of...one's career in most institutions of business, government, and academia...it has...infused the study of economics in most universities with a strong element of ideological indoctrination. (Korten, 69-70a)

Korten goes on to describe the doctrines of this faith:

these ideological doctrines assume that:

- People are by nature motivated primarily by greed.
- The drive to acquire is the highest expression of what it means to be human.
- The relentless pursuit of greed and acquisition leads to socially optimal outcomes.
- It is in the best interest of human societies to encourage, honor, and reward the above values. (Korten,

71a)

Most of the writings I encountered in researching this paper relied heavily in their theology in the concept of humans being made in the image of God. I developed a better understanding of why this was so when I realized that one of the main problems with corporate idolatry is the resulting dehumanization of people—treating them as objects instead of image-bearers of God (see, for example, Rauschenbusch, 371-2 and 413).

First of all, corporate idolatry treats people as consumers—as if the be-all-end-all, *raison d'être* of our existence were to consume.

[T]o spiritualize both money and commodities. We have to convince people that if they do not possess certain products, they are not fully human. And thus a deep sense of scarcity is instilled in the minds and hearts of people...To want more is a sign that we are alive and more deserving than those with fewer needs. The level of satisfaction connected with a product is determined by its ability to satisfy imagined needs...consumption is the messianic message of salvation. Since none of these deepest human hopes can be fulfilled in any product, the mere consumption of them is never enough...Consumption becomes more important than life itself, for its motivation is the dread of lifelessness. (Meeks, 172)

"More important than life itself"—wow! Now we can see why people would stake their lives on being able to participate in this system. As Christians, we really have to question the basic premise of a system that would be this important to people.⁶²

3. Corporate idolatry and the development of autonomous corporate power

Have you ever noticed how many spectacularly successful movies have come out of Hollywood based on variations of the "machines run amok" story? The recent "Terminator" and "Matrix" series of movies are just two of the many examples. The basic plot line goes like this: people invent machines to help them out with some task or tasks; then the machines develop autonomous power and decide to get rid of (or somehow take control over) the people. Part of the basis for the success of these movies lies in deep-seated cultural fears, shared by most people in our society, that something has gone dreadfully wrong with the market economy, originally designed to help people in the process of exchange and trade of products that were helpful for life. Corporations, which were once controlled by people, now seem to be in control over the lives and futures of millions—perhaps of all of us.

Most people don't attach this much fervor to religious or spiritual issues. We have to recognize that the kind of powerful, pervasive world view which commands people's allegiances this strongly *is not compatible with a supposedly all-embracing faith such as Christianity*. If theology does not address this ideology and world view we are abdicating our responsibility.

⁶²Not only that, but we are told that all our fundamental needs will be fulfilled by the products that are being sold:

marketing experts...don't sell laundry soap, they sell acceptance, achievement, and personal worth. They don't sell automobiles, they sell power, freedom, and success—the opportunity to feel alive, connected, and free—that which we really want. (Korten, 238b)

Who doesn't want opportunity, power, connection, and freedom? But who wants to get them in the form of soap or a car? This reminds me of a statement made in the book, *Inequality & Christian Ethics*, by Douglas Hicks (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000), about dehumanization and consumerization of humans by reducing them to "input to the production process" (p. 37). He goes on to quote Paul Streeten as follows:

"A well-nourished, healthy, educated, skilled, alert labor force is the most important productive asset...it is odd that Hondas, beer, and television sets are often accepted without questioning as consumption goods, while nutrition, education, and health services have to be justified on grounds of productivity."

I don't find this very odd; this is rampant in our society. I think by "odd" he means this doesn't make any sense.

In my research I have come across almost literally countless examples of this near-demonic⁶³ phenomenon, most of which I am not going to be able to include due to length limitations; however, I have chosen a few which highlight what a fit subject this is for horror movies:⁶⁴

the body of a corporation is its corporate charter...and money is its blood. It is...an alien entity with one goal: to reproduce money to nourish and replicate itself. Individuals are dispensable. It owes only one true allegiance: to the financial markets, which are more totally creatures of money than even the corporation itself. (Korten, 67a)

As corporations gain in autonomous institutional power...the human interest and the corporate interest increasingly diverge. It is almost as though we were being invaded by alien beings intent on colonizing our planet, reducing us to serfs, and then excluding as many of us as possible. (Korten, 74a)

Since many people have been "reduced to serfs" and excluded as much as possible, are we to feel reassured by his insertion of the phrase "almost as though"?

corporations are not people. They are alien to the ways of life, blind to the complex nonmaterial needs of human societies, and have no proper role in the political processes by which real people define the public interest and set standards for corporate conduct...Eventually, that power [of the corporation] *evolves beyond the ability of any mere human to control*, and the corporation becomes *an autonomous entity unto itself*, using its power to "create its own culture, using the lens of career to focus corporate culture on profit, size, and power."(Korten, 105b, quoting William Dugger, emphasis mine)

The above quote is what got me thinking of the Terminator movies. Later he says, "The global financial system has become a parasitic predator that lives off the flesh of its host—the productive economy...transmogrified into a predatory, risk-creating, speculation-driven, global financial system

⁶³I need to add here the caveat that I am not the type of witch-hunt preacher that sees demons behind every bush. Spiritual warfare is "not my bag, baby" (to quote Mike Myers in "Austin Powers"), since my background is scientific and skeptical. I have a hard enough time believing in abstracts such as God, the Holy Spirit, and miracles, let alone invisible powers that do combat against each other, God, and people. Yet after reading this material about corporate power, I believe if the demonic manifests in anything, it is this system. Mott (p. 96) goes so far as to label it out-and-out "demonic."

⁶⁴The examples in the main text are some of the more colorful; however, just to show that there are some more sober, less melodramatic examples, I have included a few here:

Human societies have long faced the question whether the power to rule will reside with the rich or the poor. We now face a different and even more ominous question, which...should unite rich and poor alike in a common cause. Will the power to rule reside with the people, no matter what their financial circumstances, or will it reside with the artificial persona of the corporation? (Korten, 67-8a)

impersonal forces...deeply embedded in our institutional systems—a tale of money and how its evolution as an institution is transforming human societies *in ways that no one intended* toward ends that are *inimical to the human interest*. (Korten, 178b, emphasis mine)

Having gained control of the institutions that once served our needs and intent on eliminating inefficiency to increase profits, the system has found that people are the primary source of inefficiency. (219b)

The above quote reminds me of an episode of the Simpsons where Homer is laughing at something that reminds him of himself and says, "It's funny...because it's so *true!*" This is *scary* because it's so true.

Corporations...are "a circumstance of large, impersonal forces over which no one seems to have much control." Who is responsible for the evil in such a bureaucracy? (Mott, 12, quoting Gordon Sherman, former president of Midas Muffler Corporation)

Clearly, the CEOs and presidents—the people who are supposed to be "in charge," don't feel that they are "responsible for the evil" in this system. Who is in charge? Who is in control? Who is at the helm? This sort of analysis is helpful, because it helps us to see who is the enemy—not the people who work for the corporations—no matter what exalted positions of supposed power they might hold—but the system. Mott cites Rauschenbusch, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, saying:

Rauschenbusch...attacked capitalism, not the capitalist..."[it is important] to discriminate between the evils of a social system and situation and the individuals who are involved in it. Individuals are never as immoral as the social situations in which they are involved and which they symbolize." (Mott, 55-6)

engaged in the unproductive extraction of wealth from taxpayers and the productive economy."⁶⁵ As I have said, Korten has a polemic purpose for using horror-movie imagery; but it does fit.

III. Towards a Biblical Theology of the Economy

"The continued quest for economic growth as the organizing principle of public policy is accelerating the breakdown of the ecosystem's regenerative capacities and the social fabric that sustains human community; at the same time, it is intensifying the competition for resources between rich and poor—a competition that the poor invariably lose." (Korten, 11a)

What does all of this have to do with theology? The answer is that this is a prophetic theology. Biblical prophets were responsible for denouncing the evils in their society, usually to the powerful, often to society as a whole. So far in this study we have defined the economic crisis in our society and called it evil. A Christian church that is oriented, because it follows its Lord, towards the poor and those who suffer from the above arrangements, is obligated not only to vocally denounce this evil, but to do something about it.⁶⁶ Rauschenbusch, in his exhortation to Christians to take up the cause of the working people, is really talking about the poor.⁶⁷ His thesis seems to be that if the church will not take up the cause of the "laborer," it condemns itself "out of its own mouth," as it were.⁶⁸ The church, according to Rauschenbusch, must publicly establish itself to be on the side of the poor, and must confront the "powers that be" that maintain the present system, so that "what politicians and social exploiters have to deal with the stubborn courage of...[those] who pray about their politics, they will have a new factor to reckon with."⁶⁹

Several modern-day theologians have realized that, since economics involves values, Christians should involve ourselves in these discussions.⁷⁰ Because the arena of social policy involves values, Christians need to contribute to the discussion.⁷¹ If we do not, as Rauschenbusch says, the church ends up by its silence supporting the status quo.⁷² If we do, as Owensby and Wallis teach us, we need

⁶⁵Korten, 185b and 195b. Now we are into the "Alien" movies, "Dracula," or "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

⁶⁶McGuire says it well:

like babies dashed upon the rock, the world dashes our most precious hopes for an end to the destruction that human beings visit upon one another. Oppression, exploitation of people and the earth, poverty and violence appear to be an endless reality. And in this environment the question remains as relevant as ever: dare we be Christians? (McGuire, 7, citing first Ps 137:9 and then the title of a work by Rauschenbusch)

⁶⁷Rauschenbusch, 404—he uses the phrase "narrowness of the economic existence of the working people"—in other words, he is referring to the working poor, the most unfair of the victims of capitalism. For of course the success myth of capitalism is that if you work hard, you will succeed economically.

⁶⁸See, for example, p. xvii, xxii, 91, 109, 304, 330-1.

⁶⁹Rauschenbusch, 355.

⁷⁰Examples include Owensby (p. xvi) and Wallis (p. 18).

⁷¹NCCB, for example, on p. 13: "No one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world...we want to add our voice to the public debate about the directions in which the U.S. economy should be moving."

⁷²And, as Wallis notes, when the status quo involves values like "selfishness, greed, divisiveness, fear, and [the abuse of raw] power," what will Christians choose? If by remaining silent we align ourselves with moral values such as the following, is there really any moral choice?

The self-proclaimed "value-free objectivity" of economic rationalism aligns easily with the elitist moral philosophy of market liberalism...chief economist of the World Bank Summers argued that it is economically most efficient for the rich countries to dispose of their toxic wastes in poor countries, because poor people have both shorter life spans and less earning potential than wealthy people. In a subsequent commentary on the Summers memo, *The Economist* argued that it is a moral duty of the rich countries to export their pollution to poor countries because this provides poor people with economic opportunities of which they would otherwise be deprived. (Korten, 85a)

So-called "value-free objectivity" turns out in practice to be a moral vacuum into which whoever has the most money can come and proclaim that whatever they are doing is moral because it is profitable (the corporations discussed above in my sermon, "Do the Right Thing," were not breaking any laws by seeking profit as their

to let our public life reflect "the structuring of a just human society" and "our best values," putting forth a "prophetic politics" in order to change the system.

A. Why doesn't prevailing evangelical theology support social action?

I have wondered for years why there is so little discussion of social action in Christian academic, biblical, or systematic theology. Most theologians (such as my Fuller professors) refer to the Social Gospel as post-millennialist, overrealized in its eschatology, or worse yet, "liberal"—coopted by its socialist agenda into an ideology that is at its base not Christian nor biblical⁷³ (implying that any ideology that has any agenda or motivation at all cannot be biblical⁷⁴). Jim Wallis has noticed that

a prejudice against the influence of religious commitment upon political issues now characterizes many sectors of American society, including the media, academia, the law, and the corridors of political power. Religious conviction is...suspect when it seems to be affecting matters political. (Wallis, 38)

In other words, within academia (and the pews, for that matter, since these segments of society inevitably influence the beliefs of the members of our congregations), many people seem to feel that religion should not influence politics or society. In researching this paper I wanted to discover the causes of why this is so, and have come up with several issues which seem to influence the direction of modern biblical theology.^{75, 76} Conservative theologians such as those who participated in the

bottom line. In our society it is up to those who care about values to prophetically declare that they are doing something wrong—no one else will). Christian ethics, even for those who have restricted ethics to talk about good versus evil and not justice versus injustice, should have something to say about this.

⁷³An example of this attitude on the part of a respected evangelical theologian is the writing of Paul Marshall (who has cowritten books with the President of my seminary, Richard Mouw):

These three [Barth, Ellul, and Yoder] have...become some of the major influences (apart from several biblical and ancient ones) on much of the Anabaptist revival associated with magazines such as *Sojourners*, and with many current stresses on Christian nonviolent action and antimilitarism. (Marshall, 101)

Regarding the sources of the theology of social action, he does state in parenthesis, "several biblical and ancient ones," but emphasizes more the three theologians, thus managing to imply that this camp is more theological than "biblical." He neglects to mention that Ronald Sider (*Cry Justice: The Bible on Hunger and Poverty*—New York: Paulist Press, 1980), Jim Wallis (*Call to Conversion: Recovering the Gospel for These Times*—New York: Harper & Row, 1981) and John C. Haughey (ed., *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*—New York: Paulist Press, 1977) have examined the biblical and ancient sources, and by his neglect somewhat undercuts this movement (Marshall, *God and the Constitution*, hereinafter "Marshall")

⁷⁴I have done a significant amount of research and written several papers which explore the issue of "agendaed" biblical interpretation and the legitimacy of a hermeneutic that is biased—as God is—on behalf of the oppressed. Although they are not yet published, they are available upon request, including "Oppressor or Oppressed? An Analysis of Reversal Passages in Jeremiah" (March 2003, scheduled for revision September 2003) and "Yahweh's Choice: Liberation Examination of God's Favor in the Matriarchal Rivalry Story of Hagar and Sarai" (Genesis, Chapter 16 and 21:1-21, Paper Presented at the Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting, AAR/SBL/ASOR, April 26, 2003). Suffice it to say that all biblical interpretation—actually all interpretation of anything—has agenda. I have noticed that people who are involved in debates often accuse the other party of being an ideologue and/or having an agenda. I have learned to mentally translate this to "you are my opponent." It has no further meaningful content.

⁷⁵Not all of these issues are going to be able to be addressed separately here due to space considerations. One, for example, which I had to cut out was entitled "Charity vs. Justice," and discussed whether we feel that the poor are entitled to justice or are deserving only of our charity. The next footnote gives a capsule summary of what this section had been about.

⁷⁶My pastor, in his Christmas sermon this past year, gave an excellent discussion of the distinction between charity and justice and why the latter needs to be applied to the poor and not just the former ("The Long Dark Night," Leslie D. Braxton, Pastor, Mount Zion Baptist Church, December 22, 2002):

There is a difference between charity and justice; one of the big sins of the church in our society is, we confuse charity with justice. Charity is when you help the wounded beggar on life's highway...Charity is when you throw somebody

Oxford conference tend to reiterate several themes which, when closely examined, explain the sources of their position. One which bears closely on this paper, since Rauschenbusch addressed it, is the secular cooption of the conservative church. This topic has to be approached very delicately, because it risks name calling which can be just as unproductive as the frequent name calling of the poor by the rich; however, it is important to point out the aspects of prevailing conservative theology which are more secularly based than biblically based. This is such a pervasive phenomenon that it is difficult to sort the wheat from the chaff of much modern theology; yet it is worth the effort to examine some seemingly unexamined ideas, because if we don't, we risk promulgating a false gospel.⁷⁷

This, like most issues discussed in this paper, is not a new phenomenon and was pointed out by Rauschenbusch in his day. He felt that the church of his day was against social action, was too involved in religiosity (so-called "churchianity"), and was anti-union.⁷⁸ He felt that the source of these problems was "the influence of non-Christian customs and conceptions."⁷⁹ Here are some examples of this phenomenon in our time:

a bucket of slop when they have been swept over the fall by the current of the stream; justice is when you go upstream and you dam up the river that keeps sweeping through people's village! Charity is when you feed folk who don't have a job; justice is when you deal with the lack of jobs because of international trade policy that causes unemployment here and slave labor abroad! Charity is when you give food stamps to teachers who don't have enough food for their children; justice is when you pay them a living wage to take care of your bad children! Don't confuse charity with justice! Charity is what affluent people do with their spare change to try and exonerate themselves from the sins of society; justice is when people realize there's got to be a redistribution of the power and the wealth so you don't create poor people in the first place! Charity is the money that Bill Gates gives for AIDS in Africa and for education for African-Americans here. That's good, but justice is dealing with the economic systems that allow him and the others who make up the 3 richest men in the world, to have a net worth that exceeds the GNP of the 40 poorest nations in the world, and when 3 men can get that rich, it's a given that somebody else is going to be the subject of abject poverty. The Bible says, What does the Lord require of thee? Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. Luke wants you to see some details about what's on God's mind as God comes into the world to save the world. He not only wants you to go to heaven when you die; he wants us to deal with this living Hell that people are faced with every day! Because any time there is true spiritual transformation, there is also social transformation. The sin of Western society is that we allege spiritual revival without ever dealing with social transformation. How can you say you love God, whom you've never seen, and hate your brother whom you see every day? How can we call this a Christian country? How can we say, "God bless America", and have more people in prison than China and Russia combined, and we consider them oppressive societies? Luke wants you to know that even though the world has forgotten about you, even though the world would put you in the crucible between poverty and powerlessness, we serve a God that does sit high and looks low, and he sees the oppressed, he sees the disenfranchised, he sees the poor, he sees the homeless, he sees those who have no health care. He is a God that takes pity on the last and the least, and said that as much as you've done it unto the least of my brethren, you've done it unto me. Church, what have you done for me lately? That's the question George Bush must answer! It's not in if you've got any few handful of black friends here or there; it's in the voting record, which is a decision about how power and resources will be distributed in this country! Luke wants you to know! He wants you to see the sociopolitical picture, because then we begin to see ourselves in the picture.

⁷⁷I don't deny that a significant amount of socially progressive theology has problems of cooption as well; however, the latter trends tend to be more in the direction of syncretism and biblical liberalism and seem to me to form more in reaction to the conservative cooption; thus, a discussion of conservative cooption combined with a more serious approach to the Bible (see below) should address this. This does not, however, excuse evangelicals from becoming coopted into the secular status quo; nor does it mean that the Bible, when strictly literally interpreted with serious scholarship, does not support social justice. In fact, these problems of both "right-wing" and "left-wing" theology are related to the fact that neither takes the Bible and God seriously enough. Progressives, as Wallis writes in *The Soul of Politics*, need to look down their noses at the "superstition" of religion less (p. 42, quoting Charley Earp in *Z*, a progressive magazine). Conversely, conservatives need to live out what they say they believe about God and the Bible: "for a fundamentalist, Falwell was markedly reluctant to make any consistent reference to or study of the Bible on economic matters." (Marshall, 102)

⁷⁸Rauschenbusch, ix-x, 7, and 328-9.

⁷⁹ibid., p. 7.

[the goal to] "make it to the top without losing your soul." The elites of all ages have wanted the assurance that there is no spiritual danger in having vastly more than most others in society. And...religion has accommodated...[one minister] regularly assured her affluent congregation that "you can have it all *now*" and that prosperity is a "divine right." Those for whom...buying defines being are undoubtedly in need of such constant assurance. Religion without sacrifice, without challenge, and without commitment is the perfect companion of life without responsibility except to oneself. But the baptism of well-groomed hedonism is not a Christian ministry. (Owensby, 172)

I love that phrase, "the baptism of well-groomed hedonism." That could be a capsule summary of the entire industry of televangelism! Meeks notices this same phenomenon in Pentecostalism as well:

a large number of contemporary charismatics reject the criticism of society in the older Pentecostalism and are becoming *accommodated* to the spirit and values of the prevailing economic system...many leaders on the spiritualist circuit...are flagrantly avowing the worst aspects of our economic life...Some spiritualist conservatives who keep a strict private morality when it comes to sexuality, family, and personal relationships, nevertheless let themselves be caught up in an utter animism when it comes to economics...their definitions of the gifts of the Spirit turn out to be the *idols* of action, growth, and progress. The ecstasy of many spiritualists is not much more than euphoria at being able to believe again religiously in the old-time values of American capitalism. (Meeks, 221, emphasis mine)

So when your theology is torn loose from the solid moorings of orthodoxy and biblical base, your religion can turn into something other than Christianity. Instead of "you are what you eat," what occurs is more like "your religion becomes what you worship." If we are not careful with our theology, we are likely to become worshipers of the almighty dollar, especially since there is nothing perceived to be amiss with this worship in surrounding society and culture. Jim Wallis draws a perceptive picture of what some adherents of this pseudo-Christian religion are like:

Conservative religion has become preoccupied with words and dogma. Correct religious language and doctrine have replaced an emphasis upon faithful living and action. A certain lifestyle is associated with conservative religion, but it reveals more about the cultural and political biases of its adherents than about the meaning of authentic faith. Personal piety has become an end in itself instead of the energy for social justice...In a bargain for power, some conservative religious leaders have aligned themselves with reactionary political elements (Wallis, 43-4)

There is nothing wrong with doctrine or the insistence on "correct religious language;" we just have to be more discerning about what we consider correct religious language to be. Right doctrine (in Greek: ortho-doxy) certainly is important, since it keeps us away from the theological faux-pas enumerated above. This leads into a discussion of biblical basis of social activism below.

B. Biblical basis of social action⁸⁰

*"God's true prophets often stand outside the mainstream, professing a message not often well received because they confront godless behavior with a call for change, rather than making it easy for persons to manipulate God."*⁸¹

⁸⁰As stated in the introduction above, this is a very abbreviated treatment. A full discussion of the biblical teachings on social justice would be longer than the Bible itself, as every section of the Bible has passages on social justice (see, for example, my Jeremiah paper cited above for a sampling of justice texts from different sections of the Bible—especially portions such as the Wisdom literature and the latter New Testament which are widely perceived as being less about justice than, say, the Prophets or the Gospel according to Luke). I intend to say only enough about the biblical foundations for social action to counteract prevailing misconceptions about sociopolitical economic activism.

⁸¹Hamill, p. 75. For someone who is not a theologian by career, but has only within the past couple of years attended seminary, Hamill herself is more prophetic than many professional academic theologians today. Christians, in other words, are called to be counterculture—or what CPI refers to as "counterintuitive" (on p. 263, they state that "it is counterintuitive—indeed, almost heretical—to yearn for better enforcement of the tax

My basic point here is a simple one: God is on behalf of the poor, and the Bible says so! This seems such a basic and obvious point to belabor with a lengthy paper such as this one. The problem is that many people seem not to get this simple point. Much of academic and theological biblical interpretation today seems to avoid this issue altogether or worse, to try to explain it away.⁸² An example of the diversity of biblical interpretation on this seemingly straightforward topic is the Oxford declaration we have been discussing already. The document itself declares about social justice and the poor as follows:

Biblical passages which deal with the distribution of...justice is...what is due to groups such as the poor, widows, orphans, resident aliens, wage earners and slaves. The common link among these groups is powerlessness by virtue of economic and social needs. The justice called forth is to restore these groups to the provision God intends for them. God's law expresses this justice and indicates its demands. (Schlossberg, 22)

Yet, one of the papers that comments on this document (all of the papers in the Schlossberg compilation were written by participants in the Oxford conference, all of whom signed the declaration) expresses confusion about what the Bible means by justice, oppression, and poverty:

when the Bible speaks of doing *justice* for or to the poor, it speaks in light of their having suffered *injustice*. When, in contrast, it speaks of helping the poor simply because they are poor, not because they are oppressed, it speaks in terms of charity or grace. (Beisner, writing in Schlossberg, 73, emphasis his)

One cannot biblically make the distinction between "poor" and "oppressed." Both are marginalized, vulnerable groups who are protected in the Bible. The poor, "simply because they are poor," are indeed the subject of multiple biblical injunctions about justice, as in the oft-repeated phrase, "widows, orphans, and poor." Both "poor" and "oppressed" are included in semantic range of the Hebrew root "anah," usually translated "oppressed."⁸³ Stephen Mott, whose textbook on biblical ethics is quoted so extensively in this paper, has written a rebuttal to Beisner which follows the latter's essay in Schlossberg. He corrects Beisner's perspective on justice by saying: "Justice removes oppression; it does not merely help the victims of oppression to cope with oppression."⁸⁴

1. Old Testament

Rauschenbusch, as I stated at the outset, was emphatically biblical in his theology. *Christianity and the Social Crisis* is thoroughly biblically researched and solidly exegetically grounded. Even though (understandably so, recalling that he wrote 96 years ago) he cites biblical scholars who are no longer in vogue today, anyone who believes that *Christianity and the Social Crisis* is the work of a "liberal" (in the sense of departure from the strict meaning of the biblical text) scholar just has not read it recently. He begins in Chapter I with a discussion of the Old Testament prophets (hereinafter OT to save space), citing famous passages from Isaiah and Amos about accrual of wealth and land

laws"). I am thinking of marketing a bumper sticker that reads, "TAX ME, PLEASE, and those who can afford it—not the poor."

⁸²This is all I am going to say about a topic that has inspired many books in and of itself, that is, the issue of exegetical method and the problem in dominant theology (that is, the theology that is espoused in most evangelical seminaries and academic circles such as the Society for Biblical Literature) of bias against the poor. Again, the papers I have begun writing about exegetical method and liberation theology referred to above are my attempts to wrestle with this issue.

⁸³See lexicon entry, "anah," meaning III, pages 776-777, in Brown-Driver-Briggs (*The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*—Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, 3rd printing)

⁸⁴In Schlossberg, p. 88. We discussed the distinction between justice and charity above with extensive reference to Dr. Leslie Braxton's sermon on this topic. The importance of this distinction now becomes clear: if one believes that the poor deserve justice, one will develop a biblical social ethic; this will not be the case if, on the other hand, one believes that the poor deserve only charity (although I don't see where this would come from in the Bible).

and quoting OT scholar G.A. Smith to show that the religion of the prophets was a religion of political and social issues, not "limited" to personal issues.⁸⁵ Apparently this was a problem in his day as well.

Others have also noted these themes from the OT prophets, for example Wallis:⁸⁶

the biblical prophets encourage us to be suspicious of concentrations of wealth and power; to mistrust ideological rationales that justify subordinating persons to causes [such as jobs, economic stability, or the comfort and advancement of the powerful]; and especially to become sensitive to the poor, the disenfranchised, the stranger, and the outsider...Had we been listening to the prophetic biblical traditions, we would have known that you can't have an economic system that leaves masses of people behind without engendering endless conflict...we cannot deny human dignity to our neighbors because of their race, class, or gender without endangering our own souls...a society can't place its ultimate security in weapons and technology, rather than in justice and integrity, without falling victim to the social theft of arms races and the perils of escalating violence. (Wallis, 47-8)

These words of Stephen Mott remind me of the definition of prophecy, "speaking the truth in love to power":

In the prophetic confrontation with the state in the Old Testament, social and economic matters were a point of contention between God and human governments. Elijah, Amos, Jeremiah, and others resisted the will of kings in their quest for justice and suffered the consequences. (Mott, 152)

This is exemplified in the words of the prophet Jeremiah to the King of Judah: "Did not your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord.⁸⁷

The prophet Isaiah was most frequently quoted by Jesus of all the OT prophets. Even the New Testament quotes from Isaiah that do not directly relate to social justice are in close proximity to verses that do so—usually quite strongly.⁸⁸ The Isaiah verse in the Rauschenbusch quote cited above (Isaiah 5:8) is also mentioned by Mott in his analysis of social justice in the OT prophets:

The biblical sins of economic exploitation or oppression or hoarding of wealth from the poor have vanished. But the prophets spoke out...against...broad economic patterns, such as the consolidation of the holdings of peasants into vast estates of the rich (Isa. 5.7-8). In Scripture, sin includes participation in social injustices or failure to correct them. (Mott, 17)

This quote comes from a section of Mott's book where he lists passages of Scripture that have become spiritualized and coopted due to having been taken out of context. We have gotten so used to thinking of the Bible as "the Good Book" (mistaking "good" for "nice" or "pleasant") that we tend to sugarcoat biblical passages that are *not* nice or pleasant. A modern application of this passage comes to mind in Gates' quote about farm families and the estate tax:

⁸⁵Rauschenbusch, pages 11-12 and 26-27.

⁸⁶I "interact" with the following quotes in my comments inserted within them in brackets. On the topic of Wallis and the prophets, I find his anecdote in his recent book, *Faith Works* (New York: Random House, 2000, p. 79), about the prophets and economic inequality to be quite telling:

When the biblical archeologists dig down into the ruins of ancient Israel, they find there were periods when the houses were more or less the same size, and the artifacts of life...show...relative equality among the people. During those periods...the Hebrew prophets were quite silent...But the archeologists' diggings also uncover remnants of huge houses and little tiny hovels at other periods in the life of Israel, and other objects that show great economic disparities among the people. Not surprisingly, it's during those times when the prophets were most outspoken, denouncing the great gaps in wealth, and the neglect of the poor. The Bible doesn't mind prosperity; it just insists that it be shared. Where are the prophets today?

⁸⁷22:15b-16, NASB: this seems to me to capture what the Bible has to say about justice, equating "knowing the Lord" with siding with the oppressed. This verse is going to be on my tombstone.

⁸⁸I have written a paper analyzing the Isaiah quotations from the gospel of Mark that comes to this conclusion.

"Estate taxes help level the playing field between typical family farmers who must compete for land based on what they can earn from it, and wealthy heirs of large farms who compete mainly on the basis of their inheritance." (Gates, 71, quoting Chuck Hassebrook)

The OT prophets are quoted extensively in the New Testament (NT) and therefore influence our Christian concept of justice. A brief examination of the usage of this concept in the OT may shed some light on the confusing situation about the meaning of justice touched on above. First of all, justice in the OT, when used in discussing Yahweh, "deals with God's *positive action in creating and preserving community*, particularly on behalf of marginal members thereof."⁸⁹ Yahweh's justice is therefore practically equivalent to Yahweh's bias on behalf of the oppressed. Mott further underscores this by saying:

Since God has a special regard for the weak and helpless, a corresponding quality is to be found in the lives of God's people (Deut. 10.18-19)...Justice is a chief attribute of God. God is the one who vindicates the oppressed and defends the weak...Psalm 146...The Lord "executes justice for the oppressed" (v. 7)...For the poor and powerless—those for whom, unless God did something, nothing would be done—God remained the sure defender...Those who understand God know that God is on the side of the poor, and this knowledge determines their own position in the social struggles of their day...grace is closely related to God's distributive justice. (Mott, 60-1, 63)

This is a good definition of the oppressed: "those for whom, unless God did something, nothing would be done." Notice he is equating this with being "poor and powerless." In other words, yes, Calvin Beisner, the poor *are* the oppressed (see discussion above).

This brings up the question of *why* God chooses to side with the oppressed. I believe part of the reason is because the oppressed—having no one else with whom to side—themselves are on God's side. They are not tempted to put their trust in other things, because they do not have other things. This is why God warned the Hebrews whom he had just brought out of slavery in Egypt, "Beware lest you forget the Lord your God...otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who is giving you power to make wealth".⁹⁰ When they entered into the land of milk and honey, the people, being human like all of us, would be tempted to forget God and think that they had "earned" the wealth of the promised land. In other words, "money separates the possessor of wealth from God by giving the illusion of a life where God is superfluous."⁹¹ Sound similar today? How about this:

Our society is particularly enamored with the "great man" theory of wealth creation. Its folklore fills the pages of our business magazines...the chief of a global corporation...to justify his enormous compensation package[:] "I created about \$37 billion in shareholder value." The operative word here is "I." There was no mention of the share of wealth created by the company's other 180,000 employees...Turn on any libertarian talk radio show and discuss taxes and you will hear such modern bootstrap sagas. These testimonials evoke the image of a cowboy, riding alone out on the range, with money raining down upon him...this individualistic way of assessing one's own contribution...is inaccurate and dishonest...If one really believes that "I did it all myself," then ipso facto any form of taxation is a form of larceny. (Gates, 113)

Gates is here discussing myths that the wealthy use to attempt to convince people they should not have to pay an estate tax. He calls this rationalization "individualistic, inaccurate and dishonest." As we can now see, it is more, it is unbiblical. On page 134 Gates quotes a study that interviewed wealthy heirs who had even more of this attitude:

⁸⁹Mott, 63, emphasis his.

⁹⁰Deut. 8:11a, 17-18, NASB. Deuteronomy is basically one long sermon warning the Israelites who are about to cross over the Jordan into the promised land not to forget about God who brought them out of Egypt.

⁹¹Owensby, 168.

two of every three adults who receive significant cash gifts periodically from their parents view themselves as members of the "I did it on my own" club. We are amazed when these people tell us in interviews, "We earned every dollar we have."

All I can say to this is, "huh?!?"

Gates' point is we owe a debt to society for having supported us in myriad ways we don't realize, even when we think we have self-made our wealth. How much more so should Christians, having read passages like the above, realize that we are not self-made, but God has helped us to get where we are. We are to appreciate God as creator and Father, author of wealth and owner of "the world and those who dwell therein;" how much more then should we appreciate Jesus Christ, author of our salvation?

2. New Testament

There is a significant amount of continuity between Rauschenbusch's theology of the OT and NT (or anyone's, for that matter)⁹². Just as for the OT, Rauschenbusch's theology of NT interpretation is very simple. Basically, he was in line with modern liberation theologians who teach that the poor are an exegetical "key" to unlock the meaning of Scripture—the experience of the poor is a lens which when looked through, makes meaning clearer.⁹³ Any theology of the NT has to be an outgrowth of the basic understanding that Jesus followed in the line of the OT prophets, siding with the poor, as God did. Whatever we say about society, policy, or the economy must come from and be consistent with this basic truth.⁹⁴ This is truly "what it means to know the Lord," as we mentioned above.

In all of the gospel accounts, not only Jesus is portrayed as living a life of inclusion of the poor and outcast of society, but more than that, Mary, when she learns she is pregnant with the Christ child, exemplifies the Christian response in her prayer. As Gutiérrez says:

Christian joy comes from knowing God and from trying to follow God's will...we can see from the Magnificat that, when Mary rejoices in God, she is also celebrating the liberating action of God in history. Mary rejoices in a God who is faithful to the poor. (Hartnett, 16)

Meeks says this about the gospel reports of Jesus' teaching of radical inclusivity:

Jesus' intrusion into the dominant religious ethos of his people created a new household in which there was equality of discipleship. The invitation of the gospel is not simply to receive access to the livelihood of God's righteousness but to *extend that access* to those people of Israel who had been *shut out of God's household*. (Meeks, 95, emphasis mine)

Mott uses the parables of Jesus to discuss this teaching. Many of the characters in the parables are people who would not ordinarily have received any attention in the society of that day.

[Jesus always sides with] one who does not expect anything and has no right to expect anything according to everyday logic: those who were hired at the eleventh hour, the uninvited street people at

⁹²Rauschenbusch, p. 82-3.

⁹³Especially their sufferings—see, for example, Gutiérrez' *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, 8th printing).

⁹⁴Rauschenbusch, p. 48-9, 66, 77-8, 81. This is truly an applicable, non-optional theological starting point.

Mott introduces his entire study on biblical ethics thus:

an approach to the social application of the Bible which has been particularly fruitful for...ethical understanding...the biblical message of justice creates a basic loyalty to the poor and weak and a commitment to their defense. Scripture is then *interpreted* in the light of this biblically formed understanding. The Bible is read with the expectation of answers to questions of social justice and human oppression...the starting point of any theological interpretation must coincide "with the bias of the Christian gospel itself...There is *no option*; theology must be done from out of a commitment to a living God who defends the cause of 'the hungry' and who sends 'the rich empty away' (Luke 1.53)." Mott, viii, quoting Andrew Kirk, emphasis mine—in other words, this is the method upon which the entire book is based.

the banquet, the younger son, the victim on the road to Jericho... "Jesus announces a fundamental reversal of the destinies of men." (Mott, 56-7, quoting R. W. Funk)

Many people interpret the words of Jesus about the "reversal of the destinies of men" to be a comment about the positions of people in the afterlife (like the rich man and Lazarus). But it is more, because Jesus treated the poor with respect in their present existence here on earth. He did not wait until after they had died and gone to heaven to heal the sick, feed the hungry, or forgive sins. Why would he want us to wait and not help people now?

Probably the paradigmatic NT passage used to illustrate this concept in liberation theology writing is the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Jim Wallis captures this essence:

Jesus is here asking, "How much do you love me? I'll know how much you love me by how you love those who are the most vulnerable." He is putting himself in their place...taking the place of the poor, forgotten, and lonely of the earth...In the cries and prayers of the poor, we will hear the spirit and call of our time. (Wallis, 83)

It becomes somewhat in the line of a test. If we love Jesus, how will we behave when confronted by encounters with the poor, vulnerable, weak, and outcast, in whom Jesus has told us he is present?⁹⁵ If we believe what the Bible says, how could it be any clearer than this?

Many people state that the teachings of Jesus were about peace and justice, but when we get to the institutional church and the latter NT, then we get to the teachings of Paul, which were not as socially active in thrust. I don't necessarily follow how that would mean that *we* are not to work for social justice today, but it is not the case anyway, as shown by John Howard Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus*.⁹⁶ He points out the fallacy in the "development" theory of social justice in the NT: the letters of Paul were actually written *previous* to the redaction of the gospels, so that if the teachings of Jesus had fallen out of practice in the church by the time of Paul, then the gospel writers, writing after the time of Paul, would not have been motivated to include them in their books.

Not only was Paul intensely interested in human societal relations, money, and contributions for the support of the poor,⁹⁷ but one of his major theological thrusts was grace. Now, we have discussed the conservative theological distinction between grace and justice, and their implication that relegating efforts to improve the lot of the poor to the arena of "grace" instead of "justice" meant that

⁹⁵One of the most beautiful expressions of this phenomenon of seeing Jesus in the poor and oppressed is Gustavo Gutiérrez' biography of Spanish theologian Bartolomeo de las Casas (*Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, 2nd printing). Las Casas was archbishop of what is now Peru, and the concept of Jesus' presence in the poor was what led him to take up the cause of the indigenous people in what is now known as "Latin America". He spent most of his career traveling to Europe and writing from the "New World" to people in power in Europe arguing for better treatment and more rights for his poor constituents.

⁹⁶Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, no specific page cited; ideas are summarized.

⁹⁷The frequently-cited Pauline text from 2 Thessalonians about work, did not say that Paul told people not to contribute towards the upkeep of the poor. Paul in fact repeatedly exhorts saints to help the poor (predictably, I have written a paper on this concept as well, combating the myth that the latter NT is not as concerned about social justice as are the gospels). No, what the 2 Thessalonians text is about is that if one thinks that the Lord is imminently about to return, that is not an excuse to stop working in the calling that God has for you. Paradoxically, depending on what that calling is, Paul may be exhorting us *to* help the poor. And anyway, since we have learned from the description of the modern economic crisis earlier in the paper that it is far more common for the *rich* to fail to contribute to the productive economy than for the working class, perhaps "if anyone does not work, let them not eat" is addressed to them? This could be one interpretation of words like those of Korten:

each time a major corporation announces a cut back of thousands of jobs...It is part of an ongoing process of shifting wealth and economic power from *those who are engaged in the production of real value [i.e. workers]* to those who already have large amounts of money and believe it is their right to see those amounts grow without limit, regardless of their own needs or *productive contributions*. (113b, emphasis mine)

the poor were not entitled to recourse to law, government or policy on their behalf, and that voluntary charity towards them is all they are due. But this is a false distinction, because grace is just as obligating on us in our actions towards the poor as is justice.

The reception of God's grace will affect our attitudes toward the weak and oppressed and needy...If we look upon those who are on welfare the way God looked upon us, we can no longer subscribe to the bigoted notion that the needy are deserving of their lot. (Mott, 37)

So a full-orbed theology of grace will *include* justice towards the poor. As God has looked upon us with grace in our sinful state, so should we look with compassion on the poor—no matter what they "deserve."

3. Theology of activism and its development

The great theologians of the early church—even those with a more conservative reputation like erudite, philosopher-trained Augustine—all wrote on the topic of social justice.⁹⁸ The early church came to its position on social action for policy change in an almost trial-and-error, pragmatic fashion.⁹⁹ Early Christians did not set out to "confront the state," but found themselves having to do so—and when they found themselves in this position, did not hesitate to act.

In his exploration of social justice attitudes of the church fathers, Owensby traces these tenets to the early theologians' reading of the Bible:

There is simply nothing in biblical tradition that even remotely accepts the concept of the right of the individual to acquire any quantity of goods or wealth in blind indifference to the condition and needs of others. Nor does the biblical tradition exhibit any inclination to trust in the good will of individuals or in supposedly automatic mechanisms (e.g., invisible hands or trickle-down theories) to achieve a God-envisioned economy of justice where the needs of all are met. The voice of the prophets and of the early church fathers is *avowedly interventionist* in economic affairs. (Owensby, 40, emphasis mine)

Perhaps it is just my bias in research and reading, but I have not yet found a "noninterventionist" treatment which is so solidly biblically and theologically based. Owensby goes on to cite individual ancient theologians:

Basil the Great (fourth century) took a harder line by regarding the accumulation of goods as robbery from the poor: "Who is a robber? One who takes the goods of another...That bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in the wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession, to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground, to the needy" (Owensby, 37)

John Chrysostom was the first of the church fathers to address the matter of inheritance as a moral issue...Chrysostom held that Paul's injunction that "Anyone who does not work should not eat" applies to the rich as well as to the poor. (Owensby, 38, quoting 2 Thess 3:10)

We have seen this 2 Thessalonians quote from Paul before. Apparently "interventionists" and "noninterventionists" have been debating this verse for centuries.

⁹⁸Walsh and Langan's paper in the Haughey book cited above, "Patristic Social Consciousness—The Church and the Poor (113-151) give this subject a thorough treatment. Hopefully this section will not needlessly reduplicate what they have written there.

⁹⁹To wit:

love brings Christians into social involvement...if we see a person in dire poverty or one who has been hurt by prejudice, and we love that person, there comes a time when that love must consider the *causes* of the misery of the loved one...[and] not only binds the wounds but turns to *stop the attack*...into a concern for the formal structure of society...this explains what happened in the ancient church. It was primarily concerned with social problems affecting its own life; but the problems all had to do with institutions which were part of the state: its legal system, its ordering of property, its social structure. The church was thus forced to confront the state. (Mott, 57-8)

In summary, we have examined the OT, NT, and early church bases for a theology of social action on behalf of the economically oppressed with the goal of systemic policy change. Meeks calls his book a "political economic theology"¹⁰⁰ and bases his theology on the premise that God is the great economist, and since all economy belongs to God, we should strive to have our economic life reflect this as much as possible by doing as God would desire—kind of a sociopolitical "WWJD." Again, as we have so often stressed, it is all about the excluded, oppressed, dominated, and harmed by the status quo:

a theological correlation of the God of Jesus Christ and economy should take place in the midst of and for the sake of those who have been denied access...to the global household. This context and starting point is indicated by God's own economy and God's own character...God's own economic work begins with those who have been excluded from the household. God suffers because of the way human beings have defined the household and have structured it so as to prevent access to some people. Theology should find its context among...those whose lives are distorted by the modes of consumption in our consumer society, which puts consumption of luxuries ahead of the needs of others and defines certain people culturally as losers. (Meeks, 42-3)

How do we know "what Jesus would do"? We know who God is, who Jesus is, and from the Bible we know about "God's own character." If we really believe what the Bible says, we will apply these principles to our lives and to our society—because God wants us to do so.

4. "Take back" the Bible from conservative evangelicalism!

The reason why I have harped so extensively in this paper on the group of Christians known as "evangelicals" is this: it is they who have made the most strident claims to be "taking the Bible seriously." The alternatives in the exegetical world today seem to be to liberalize one's interpretation—in other words, notch back on one's truth claims to Scripture in order to ascribe to a belief system that practices more justice—or to stop espousing social justice. For example, Lawrence Adams and Frederick Jones, writing in Schlossberg (which is, by the way, the product of the Oxford conference, self-proclaimed to be an evangelical gathering), examine the WCC document, "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" ("Stewardship in the Nineties: Two Views") and critique it for being too liberal, stating that this theology "allowed the drafters to undertake a radical critique of human economic activity."¹⁰¹ The implication is that a more orthodox theology would not undertake such radical critique; my point is that this is exactly the problem with dominant evangelical exegesis: *the Bible itself* undertakes this radical critique, and if evangelicals are not willing to follow suit, they lose the right to the title of "biblically serious" Christians.

The reason I have put so much effort into the writing and researching of this paper is that this is the choice that I have sometimes felt faced with recently—either give up my "conservative" biblical theology, or give up my "liberal" social justice stance, neither of which I am willing to do, because for me they go together. Garry Wills, in his Foreword to *The Soul of Politics*, says something similar about Jim Wallis:

he did not need to give up his faith just because he felt there were injustices in society. Quite the opposite: it was the Bible that made him sensitive to injustice...he knew that evangelicals had not always been submissive to patriotic authority. He saw that there is something radical in their approach to the Bible, and that the really unnatural aspect of modern evangelicalism is its marriage to the materialistic gospel of middle America...[Sojourners is] reclaiming a lapsed but authentic heritage...the religious right wanted to take the Bible away from religious dissidents, though it is the Bible that inspires dissent from worldly values. It is a popular mistake to think all evangelicals are cast in the Pat Robertson mold. Most African Americans are evangelical Christians, as were many abolitionists. (Wallis, ix-x)

¹⁰⁰Meeks, 8, 56-58, 110, 130.

¹⁰¹Schlossberg, p. 164.

In other words, it is *our* Bible, as a Christian movement for social justice. It belongs to us because we are the adherents of the Way of Yahweh and Jesus Christ of compassion and work for social change on behalf of the oppressed. If we leave evangelicalism behind because too few evangelicals are for social change, we essentially abdicate the Bible to those who are not adherents of this Way, and to me that doesn't make any sense. Martin Luther King, jr. was an evangelical; so was Walter Rauschenbusch; so are Samuel Berry McKinney and Leslie David Braxton. We have come "over a way that with tears has been watered."¹⁰² We can but continue to be faithful to this Way.

IV. The Solution¹⁰³

Gandhi said that when you begin a new project, "Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless [people] whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate will be of any use to [them]." (Wallis, xxii)

A. My personal story: what does all this have to do with medicine?

I originally began seminary as a personal exploration, in order to examine in more depth what theology had to do with medicine. I wanted to be able to "Christianize" my practice of psychiatry. However, after 9 years (very, very part-time) in seminary and nearly 12 years practicing psychiatry among the oppressed, I have now realized that most of the issues that plague the lives of my patients and make my job more difficult are systemic issues, and that the one-on-one practice of psychiatry—prescribing medications, evaluating people's situations, and making decisions influencing individual patients' lives—although it does help people—is not the whole answer. I need to put my education as a theologian, my position of societal influence as a physician, and my moral clout as an ordained minister, to use in the service of changing the way that society is *structured* in terms of relationships between the rich and the poor, the rich and the government, and the poor and the government. Rauschenbusch apparently also knew of physicians who had had similar experiences:

A number of our public health¹⁰⁴ officers have thrown themselves into the crusade against tuberculosis and infant mortality with a zeal more far-sighted and chivalrous than is usually called out in the ordinary doctor who cures patients on the individualistic plan. (Rauschenbusch, 399)

Mott has a way of synthesizing theology, biblical interpretation, and politics which captures how I think Christians should behave in the world. He applies it to healing in a way that is very relevant to my life:

To us healing would seem distinct from the more political acts of liberating prisoners and ending oppression. But to the Hebrews, physical healing and economic or political deliverance do not belong to separate spheres...Since the Reign is present in healing of the body, it cannot logically be excluded from dealing with other material factors which make people suffer. Augustine defined medicine as everything that either preserves or restores bodily health and included "food and drink, clothing and shelter..." (Mott, 93)

¹⁰²James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

¹⁰³I have opted, as this has turned more into an ethics paper than anything else, to end with a section on application instead of a "conclusion" section per se. Perhaps the future book which will be an expansion of this paper will have a more satisfactory conclusion.

¹⁰⁴I consider my work in public health psychiatry to be a gift that allows me to focus more clearly on public health implications of inequality. Consider this quote from Collins:

Communities that have less inequality have lower infant mortality, longer life expectancy, and less violent trauma. A country or region with a high poverty rate but less inequality is a healthier place to live...people who live in states with greater inequality have more health problems...The results were similar after factoring out differences in poverty, race, income levels, and smoking. Even the rich were healthier in states with more relative equality. (32)

Note that income inequality is a *more important public health indicator than smoking*. We have so many public laws and policies about smoking; surely we could legislate a little bit about inequality!

Perhaps, in ancient Israel, someone with my education, training, background, walk with God, and sense of calling, would have been a physical healer also involved in "economic or political deliverance"—and not have seen any separation between the two. I certainly feel called to participate in both.

B. What then should we do?

The thrust of the book *The Soul of Politics* seems to be that a political activism with soul—in other words, a combination of the caring and agitation for social change usually associated with the "secular left" with the solid commitment to biblical values espoused by the "religious right" (Wallis' terms from the subtitle)—is what is called for in our economic crisis. Activism with values is really the solution. Rev. Dr. King, as described in Taylor Branch's book *Parting the Waters*, had the ear of several presidents and used his access (in part) to try to convince them that racism could be eliminated with "the stroke of a pen," referring to Civil Rights legislation.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, those in political power nowadays, if influenced by people with biblical commitment to activism, can go a long way towards alleviating poverty and inequality in this country by enacting a few sweeping "stroke of a pen" changes in our nation's policy. In the next few paragraphs we will try to begin to sketch out just what these sweeping changes should be. In embarking on this project, the words of Jim Wallis help to summarize what we have just learned about biblical values:

[we should subject] all projects, initiatives, decisions, and politics to new criteria: whether they make justice more possible for all of us and *especially for those on the bottom*, whether they allow us to live in more harmony with the earth, and whether they increase the participation of all people in decision making...we must learn to judge our social and economic choices by *whether they empower the powerless*, protect the earth, and foster true democracy. (Wallis, xxi, emphasis mine)

These values should guide us on our journey. The current economic crisis, discussed above—especially as reflected in the widening gap between rich and poor—is what the journey is about.

1. The estate tax

As an example of the application of the principles of Christian social and political economic theology outlined above, the contemporary issue of the estate tax is currently being debated in political and activist circles. This issue accurately captures several aspects we have been discussing, including the fact that—similar to the biblical principle of care for the oppressed outlined above—it seems on the surface (especially to me) to be such a no-brainer, yet has engendered so much conservative-versus-liberal polarized conflict. I would think that all Christians, even usually "noninterventionist" ones, could easily get on board with this issue—even my economically conservative, middle-class professional attorney brother (who is usually a party-line Adam Smith noninterventionist) supports the estate tax (although he thinks it should be 100% or close to it, because he thinks the heirs should make their money the old-fashioned capitalist way, earning it in the market!).

Yet the estate tax (all the hoopla and conservative media manipulation aside, even though this is probably about 80% of the issue) captures many of the controversies and reasons for liberal-conservative debate discussed above. The whole concept of infinite ability for the "haves" to accumulate endless additional wealth because "it is mine and I earned it and it would be taking away my incentive for the government to charge a transfer tax to my heirs upon my death" is exactly what we have been talking about. Rauschenbusch quotes Roosevelt (the Roosevelt who was instrumental in the original establishment of the estate tax, not his more famous nephew) in saying that the Christian should teach people that "he who has not wealth owes his first duty to his family, but *he*

¹⁰⁵Branch, Taylor: *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*. New York/London (and others): Simon and Schuster, 1988.

who has means owes his to the State. It is ignoble to go on heaping up money."¹⁰⁶ Modern up the language by 96 years, and Bill Gates (again, not the more famous one but his relative from the previous generation) could have said this.¹⁰⁷

The role of Christians would seem to be clear here. Yet, as we have seen above, Christians often seem to become coopted into what the secular right is saying, due to a lack of discernment in what kind of ideologies they are swallowing whole. Christians seem to be unnecessarily susceptible to conservative excuses for accumulation and acquisitiveness such as "but it is coercion, our freedoms are being taken away..." But this is not a Christian claim. The license to accumulate wealth and material possessions without limit (especially if it is not you who has done the work of the accumulation, but your parents) is not freedom at all, but sinful avarice. Who, as Mott says, is being coercive here—the government, in "forcing" heirs to pay a transfer tax, or the rich and powerful, in coercing us to live in a society where those who can afford it are not willing to support the state?

in American political thought...the power of the state figures primarily as a threat to freedom. Accordingly, some would restrict the activities of the state to maintaining security of the borders and...the enforcement of contracts and protection against physical violence, theft, and fraud...Objections to civil rights legislation on grounds of "states' rights," or objections to taxation for support of basic social programs, bring to mind Bishop Francis McConnell's observation about "the absurdity of raising small problems of coercion when the necessity of providing against a more general coercion is upon us." (Mott, 193-4)

Christians, especially conservative ones, are well represented among the ranks of the wealthy in this country. What is needed is a sort of Christian version of Chuck Collins' organization, Responsible Wealth (the United for a Fair Economy website, www.faireconomy.org, has a link to their webpage)—for those Christians who are members of the richest 5% of the population in this country to use the power that that wealth confers to stand up for justice for the poor.

Harvard philosopher Christopher Jencks perhaps expressed it best: "A successful campaign for reducing economic inequality probably requires...some of those with high incomes, and especially the children of those with high incomes, must begin to feel ashamed of economic inequality." There will be no voluntary relinquishment of power and privilege by most of those at the top. The impetus for change must come mainly from below, from those who suffer the most. However, they must be joined by what Jürgen Moltmann calls "class betrayers," those who sense a higher loyalty than the shared interests of the privileged. The church has such people in its midst. Let our call be to a commitment that is beyond class in the search for a more just distribution of economic resources both in our own country and in a global setting. (Owensby, 125)

In other words, if a significant number of conservative Christians who would have to pay the estate tax would stand up in favor of doing so, this would put a significant amount of moral clout behind the movement to retain the tax, as well as go a long way to correct the reputation that the Christian "right" has of being reactionary conservatives.

2. Controlling corporations: the role of government

¹⁰⁶Rauschenbusch, 419, emphasis mine. I have tried to avoid the excessive use of the masculine pronoun which is endemic in his writing, but this was almost exclusively the case 96 years ago. In any case these are not his words but Roosevelt's.

¹⁰⁷Indeed, Gates' coauthor, Chuck Collins, does say something quite similar in *Economic Apartheid in America*: As we drift towards becoming more of a plutocracy, with big money interests writing the rules in our democracy, we should defend and expand the estate tax and institute wealth taxation. The establishment of the estate tax was a moral issue for President Theodore Roosevelt who, in 1906, viewed it as strengthening the national community through greater political and economic equality. He viewed the transfer of substantial wealth from one generation to the next as not doing any "real service" for inheritors and posing "a great and genuine detriment to the community at large." (Collins, 199)

There is a solution to the crisis of corporations described above: corporate control. The solution to the situation of "no one at the helm" is to take over control of the helm—and, despite the demonization in conservative circles of "big government," there is really no other suitable body equipped to do this in our society. Corporations right now are in the enviable position of being able to have their cake and eat it too—the government is there for them to bail them out when they need help, but they are not accountable nor responsible to the government and do not support the government in return. The moral alternative to this would be to call corporations to account, especially when they are caught (as is happening more and more lately) committing crimes or doing irresponsible or immoral things.

Florida put Unisys under criminal investigation after evidence surfaced that the company was automatically denying employee health insurance claims and shifting benefit start dates to avoid late fees. Unisys bungled Medicaid claims processing contracts in a number of states, prompting cancellations and lawsuits in Iowa, Kentucky, and Wisconsin. (Collins, 112)

This example, and the example of Medicare fraud cited above, reflect egregious violations of laws and policies on the part of corporations—and my readings cited numerous other examples of indictments and fines levied for corporations found guilty of wrongdoings (not to mention the corporations that commit wrongs and are not prosecuted). I propose increasing the rate (currently at zero, as far as I am aware) at which the state uses its power to revoke the charters of corporations who are either not living up to the provisions of those charters or have been convicted of crimes.

A corporate charter represents a privilege—not a right—that is granted by a government subject to the will of its people in return for the acceptance of corresponding obligations. It is up to the people who comprise the electorate—not the fictitious persona of the corporation—to define these privileges and obligations. (Korten, 105b)

The assets of these "dead" corporations would be preferentially sold to stakeholders with the goal of creating and expanding employee ownership.

"When a corporation is convicted of repeated felonies that harm or endanger the lives of human beings or destroy our environment, the corporation should be put to death, its corporate existence ended, and its assets taken and sold at public auction." (Collins, 169, quoting NY Attorney General Eliot Spitzer)

In addition, the book cited above, *The Cheating of America*, proposes closing of corporate tax shelters and loopholes so that wealthy corporations would incur more of their fair share of taxes (and would be more strongly enforced to pay those that they do incur). Recently, bipartisan legislation to this effect has indeed been proposed and has been added on to other legislation packages at both the federal and state level. The bottom line, though, is that as long as there is strong motivation for the wealthy to avoid paying their taxes, they will continue to find ways to succeed at doing so—in this, CPI, Gates, and UFE all agree. What then is the solution? I propose that it will take a small but significant number of wealthy people (such as those gathered by Chuck Collins in UFE's offshoot program, Responsible Wealth) to stand up and say, "I am convicted that tax cheating is wrong and that I and other wealthy individuals and corporations should voluntarily pay their fair share of taxes, both legally and morally (the latter is usually much more) incurred." This would be similar, in kind of a paradoxical way, to Zaccheus' decision in the Gospel of Luke, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." (Luke 19:8, NASB) This is not just another one of my controversial pipe dreams. If Jesus' reply is any indicator, our very souls could depend on this: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham." (Luke 19:9, NASB, referring to Genesis 15:6, where Abraham's declaration of faith in God is reckoned to him as righteousness or *justice*). In other words, our very faith in God is on the line here. If we truly believe in God, we will do as he says to do. It's right there in his word.

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VII. Appendix: Rauschenbusch quotations (in order cited in text above)

[T]he wider social outlook is almost invariably the condition for the prophetic gift. The men of our own age who have had something of the prophet's vision and power of language and inspiration have nearly all had the social enthusiasm and faith in the reconstructive power of Christianity. (338)

If production could be organized on a basis of cooperative fraternity; if distribution could at least approximately be determined by justice; if all men could be conscious that their labor contributed to the welfare of all and that their personal well-being was dependent on the prosperity of the Commonwealth; if predatory business and parasitic wealth ceased and all men lived only by their labor; if the luxury of unearned wealth no longer made us all feverish with covetousness and a simpler life became the fashion; if our time and strength were not used up either in getting a bare living or in amassing unusable wealth and we had more leisure for the higher pursuits of the mind and the soul—then there might be a chance to live such a life of gentleness and brotherly kindness and tranquillity [sic] of heart as Jesus desired for men. (341)

Before slavery was abolished in our country, there were millions of genuine Christians, honestly willing to see and do the right in other matters, to whom it seemed a preposterous proposition that slavery is incompatible with Christianity. To them it was a necessary and fundamental human institution, like the family or the school. To-day there are very few Christians who realize that it is a crying wrong to hold land idle for speculation in cities where men's lungs are rotting away, overgrown with tuberculosis bacilli for lack of air; few who realize that it is a flat denial of Christianity to take advantage of the needs of your fellow-man to buy his labor cheaply or sell him

your goods dearly. These things seem to us a necessary and inevitable part of the structure of society. (158)

For the ordinary man the social order as he finds it has all the sanctity and immutability of natural and divine law. Under feudalism both noble and peasant assumed that God himself had divided humanity into barons and serfs, and any contradiction of that seemed a sacrilege . . . In monarchical countries the institution of kingship is regarded as the natural and divine order. In European thought it is treated as an axiom that there must be well-defined social classes. In our own country intelligent men assume that land has always been freely bought and sold by individuals as to-day; that a man has always had the power to dispose about his property even after he was dead; that business men have always bought in the cheapest market and sold in the dearest at whatever prices they could make; that workingmen have always competed with one another for wages; and that any attempt to change these social adjustments is an attempt to meddle with a natural law as universal as the law of gravitation. Yet our capitalistic organization is of comparatively recent origin, and would have been thought intolerable and immoral in times past. (194-5)

[T]he incredible paradox of modern life. The instrument by which all humanity could rise from want and the fear of want actually submerged a large part of the people in perpetual want and fear. When wealth was multiplying beyond all human precedent, an immense body of pauperism with all its allied misery was growing up and becoming chronic. England was foremost in the introduction of machine industry, and the first half of the nineteenth century was one of the darkest times in the economic history of England. While the nation was attaining unparalleled wealth and power, many of its people were horribly destitute and degraded. It is hardly likely that any social revolution, by which hereafter capitalism may be overthrown, will cause more injustice, more physical suffering, and more heartache than the industrial revolution by which capitalism rose to power. (217-8)

Capitalism is no respecter of governments; it will flourish in a republic as well as in a monarchy—perhaps better. The people cannot eat the ballot. (219)

Successful land speculation has formed the nucleus of very many of our large fortunes. Our cities are poor, unclean, always pressing against the limits of indebtedness, and laying heavy burdens of taxation on the producing classes. At the same time these enormous values pass to individuals who have only contributed a fractional part to their creation. (228)

[T]he element of labor is the mean thing in . . . work . . . that makes the process wholesome. In the measure in which productive labor is eliminated and the risk taken becomes the sole title to the profit gained, the transaction approximates gambling. Above the entrance of an Eastern penal institution the motto has been inscribed, "The worst day in the life of a young man is when he gets the idea that he can make a dollar without doing a dollar's worth of work for it." That is good sense, but how would that motto look on the walls of the New York Stock Exchange...? If a man buys stock or wheat on a margin and clears a hundred dollars, what labor or service has he given for which this is the reward?...the processes of competitive industry have poured vast wealth into the lap of a limited number and have created an unparalleled lavishness of expenditure which has nothing ennobling about it. Those who have to work hard for their money will . . . be careful how they spend it. Those who get it without effort, will spend it without thought. Thus parasitic wealth is sure to create a vicious luxury, which then acts as a center of infection for all other classes. (266-7)

[H]ow few wars have ever been fought for the sake of justice or the people; how personal spite, the ambition of military professionals, and the protection of capitalistic ventures are the real moving powers; how the governing classes pour out the blood and wealth of nations for private ends and exude patriotic enthusiasm like a squid secreting ink to hide its retreat . . . the fictions of capitalism. We are assured that the poor are poor through their own fault; that rent and profits are the just dues of foresight and ability; that the immigrants are the cause of corruption in our city politics; that we cannot compete with foreign countries unless our working class will descend to the wages paid

abroad . . . In the early part of the nineteenth century, when tiny children in England were driven to the looms with whips, and women lost even the physical appearance of womanhood in the coal mines, the owners insisted that 'English industry would be ruined by the proposed reform laws, and doubtless they thought so . . . [the President of the Reading Railroad] in the midst of the coal strike assured a minister that "God in his infinite wisdom had given control of the property interests of the country" to him and his associates and they would do all things well . . . the doctrine of gravitation would not yet be accepted if it had interfered with vested interests. The greatest contribution which any man can make to the social movement is the contribution of a regenerated personality, of a will which sets justice above policy and profit, and of an intellect emancipated from falsehood. (350-1)

[S]ocialism...proposes to abolish the division of industrial society into two classes and to close the fatal chasm which has separated the employing class from the working class since the introduction of power machinery. It proposes to restore the independence of the workingman by making him once more the owner of his tools and to give him the full proceeds of his production instead of a wage determined by his poverty. (407)

The class struggle is bound to be transferred to the field of politics in our country...It would be folly if the working class failed to use the leverage which their political power gives them. The business class certainly never failed to use political means to further its interests. This is a war of conflicting interests which is not likely to be fought out in love and tenderness. The possessing class will make concessions not in brotherly love but...because it has to. (410-11).

the social inequality will find increasing outward expression and will tend to make itself permanent. Where there are actual class differences, there will be a dawning class consciousness, a clear class interest, and there may be a class struggle...As wealth becomes hereditary, there will be more who have never known any life except that of luxury, and have never had any associates except the children of the rich or their servants . . . As the chasm widens, the rich withdraw to their own section of the city (251)

If therefore we have a class which owns a large part of the national wealth and controls nearly all the mobile part of it, it is idle to suppose that this class will not see to it that the vast power exerted by the machinery of government serves its interests. And if we have another class which is economically dependent and helpless, it is idle to suppose that it will be allowed an equal voice in swaying political power. In short, we cannot join economic inequality and political equality. As Oliver Cromwell wrote to Parliament, "If there be any one that makes many poor to make a few rich, that suits not a Commonwealth." The words of Lincoln find a new application here, that the republic cannot be half slave and half free. (254)

Nations do not die by wealth, but by injustice. The forward impetus comes through some great historical opportunity which stimulates the production of wealth ...Progress slackens when a single class appropriates the social results of the common labor, fortifies its evil rights by unfair laws, throttles the masses by political centralization and suppression, and consumes in luxury what it has taken in covetousness. Then there is a gradual loss of productive energy, an increasing bitterness and distrust, a waning sense of duty and devotion to country, a paralysis of the moral springs of noble action. Men no longer love the Commonwealth, because it does not stand for the common wealth. Force has to supply the cohesive power which love fails to furnish. Exploitation creates poverty (284)

The present movement for federal and state interference and control over corporations, of which President Roosevelt is the most eminent exponent and leader, is an effort to reassert the ownership and mastership of the people and to force these stewards of public powers back into the position of public servants. The next decade will probably show whether they are willing to take the position of well-paid servants and cease from ousting the owner. If not, the people will have to say, "Render the account of thy stewardship, for thou canst no longer be steward." (386)

23 in building a perfectly just society . . . The Church would always be needed. But, instead of belonging to a decadent ruling class, speaking only to largely female congregations, preoccupied with questions of personal and family morality, it would enjoy universal respect because of its forthright, prophetic preaching on the most important public issues of the day. Its social awareness would vindicate its right to call men unto God; its social awareness would make possible a society in which all men could turn to God. If the Church adopted the proper attitude towards the social crisis . . . the final good would be a "deeper repentance and a new experience of God's salvation." (from the foreword by the editor, xvii)

The Church . . . is one of the most potent institutions and forces in Western civilization. Its favor and moral influence are wooed by all parties. It cannot help throwing its immense weight on one side or the other. If it tries not to act, it thereby acts; and in any case its choice will be decisive for its own failure. (from the Introduction by Rauschenbusch, xxii)

Ascetic Christianity called the world evil and left it. Humanity is waiting for a revolutionary Christianity which will call the world evil and change it. (91)

This attitude toward the dominant political power was readily imported into Christian thought with the apocalyptic literature which embodied it. Jews who became Christians could hardly help retaining that philosophy of contemporary history. Was not Rome built up by the aid of its gods? And what were its gods but the demons whom Christ was to overthrow and strip of their power? (109)

Other organizations may conceivably be indifferent when confronted with the chronic or acute poverty of our cities. The Christian Church cannot. The very name of "Christian" would turn into an indictment if it did not concern itself in the situation in some way. (304)

in nearly every city there are a few ministers who are known as the outspoken friends of labor. Their fellow-ministers may regard them as radicals, lacking in balance, and very likely they are; but in the present situation they are among the most valuable servants of the Church. The workingmen see that there is at least a minority in the Church that champions their cause, and that fact helps to keep their judgment in hopeful suspense about the Church at large. Men who are just as one-sided in favor of capitalism pass as sane and conservative men. If the capitalist class have their court-chaplains, it is only fair that the army of labor should have its army-chaplains who administer the consolations of religion to militant labor. Thus the Church has a tremendous stake in the social crisis. It may try to maintain an attitude of neutrality, but neither side will permit it. If it is quiescent, it thereby throws its influence on the side of things as they are, and the class which aspires to a fitter place in the organization of society will feel the great spiritual force of the Church as a dead weight against it. If it loses the loyalty and trust of the working class, it loses the very class in which it originated, to which its founders belonged, and which has lifted it to power. If it becomes a religion of the upper classes, it condemns itself to a slow and comfortable death. (330-1)

When Rauschenbusch late in life tried to explain the origins of his "social passion," he concluded that it had not come to him "through the church. Indeed, I have to say, frankly," he went on, "the influence was rather against it from the church . . . The church held down the social interest in me. It contradicted it; it opposed it as far as it could . . ." (ix-x, from the introduction by Robert Cross)

Under the influence of *non-Christian customs and conceptions* Christianity early developed its own ceremonial system . . . a very large part of the fervor of willing devotion which religion always generates in human hearts has spent itself on these religious acts. The force that would have been competent to "seek justice and relieve the oppressed" has been consumed in *weaving the tinsel fringes for the garment of religion*. (7, emphasis mine)

In its struggle the working class . . . demands not . . . impartiality, but the kind of sympathy which will . . . discern the justice of its cause . . . The working class likes to get that kind of sympathy which

will take a favorable view of its efforts and its mistakes, and a comprehension of the wrongs under which it suffers. Instead of that the pulpit of late . . . has been more concerned with the fact that some individuals were barred from a job by the unions, than with the fact that the entire wage working class is debarred from the land, from the tools of production, and from their fair share in the proceeds of production. (328-9)

[T]he sympathy of the prophets, even of the most aristocratic among them, was entirely on the side of the poorer classes. Professor Kautzsch says: "Since Amos it was the alpha and omega of prophetic preaching to insist on right and justice, to warn against the oppression of the poor and helpless." The edge of their invectives was turned against the land hunger of the landed aristocracy who "joined house to house and laid field to field," till a country of sturdy peasants was turned into a series of great estates; against the capitalistic ruthlessness that "sold the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes," thrusting the poor free-man into slavery to collect a trifling debt . . . This dominant trait of their moral feeling reacted on their theology, so that it became one of the fundamental attributes of their God that he was the husband of the widow, the father of the orphan, and the protector of the stranger. The widows and the fatherless were those who had no . . . "influence," no "financial interest," no "pull" . . . The "stranger" was the immigrant who had . . . no share in the land and no voice in the common affairs of the village. His modern brother is the proletarian immigrant of our cities, who also has no share in the modern means of production and no political power to protect his interests. When the prophets conceived Jehovah as the special vindicator of these voiceless classes, it was another way of saying that it is the chief duty in religious morality to stand for the rights of the helpless. (11-12, quotes are from Isaiah 5:8 and Amos 2:6; see also Jeremiah 22:16)

We are often told that ministers who concern themselves in political and social questions are likely to lose their spiritual power and faith . . . on the contrary: "Confine religion to the personal, it grows rancid, morbid. Wed it to patriotism, it lives in the open air, and its blood is pure" . . . those who hold that the flower of religion can be raised only in flower-pots will have to make their reckoning with the prophets of Israel. The very book on which they feed their private devotion and that entire religion out of which Christianity grew, took shape through a divine inspiration which found its fittest and highest organs in a series of political and social preachers . . . the "ethical monotheism" which has been Israel's invaluable contribution to the religious life of humanity, would never have developed and survived if the prophets had from the outset limited their religion in the way in which we are nowadays advised to limit it. (26-27, quoting OT scholar G.A. Smith)

As with the Old Testament prophets, the fundamental sympathies of Jesus were with the poor and oppressed . . . The Church has used the miracles of Jesus for theological purposes as evidences of his divine mission. According to the Synoptic gospels, Jesus himself flatly refused to furnish them for such a purpose to the contemporary theologians. His healing power was for social help, for the alleviation of human suffering. It was at the service of any wretched leper, but not of the doubting scribes. (82-83, citing Matthew 12:38-39, 16:1-4 and parallels)

No comprehension of Jesus is even approximately true which fails to understand that the heart of his heart was religion. No man is a follower of Jesus in the full sense who has not through him entered into the same life with God. But on the other hand no man shares his life with God whose religion does not flow out, naturally and without effort, into all relations of his life and reconstructs everything that it touches. Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master. (48-49)

No one will understand the life of Jesus truly unless he has asked himself this question, What would have happened if the people as a whole had accepted the spiritual leadership of Jesus? The rejection of his reign involved the political doom of the Galilean cities and of Jerusalem; would the acceptance of his reign have involved no political consequences? (66)

It gives a touch of cheerful enjoyment to exegetical studies to watch the athletic exercises of interpreters when they confront these sayings of Jesus about wealth. They find it almost as hard to get around the needle's eye as the camel would find it to get through. The resources of philology have been ransacked to turn the "camel" into an anchor-rope, and Oriental antiquarian lore has been summoned to prove that the "needle's eye" was a little rear-gate of the Oriental house through which the camel, by judiciously going down on its knees, could work its way. There is a manifest solicitude to help the rich man through. (77-8)

Many critics doubt that Jesus taught as Luke reports him. They think that Luke drew this class of material from a Jewish-Christian source which was tainted with Ebionitic tendencies . . . The critical suspicions seem to rest on a moral dislike for the radical attitude toward wealth taken by Jesus according to Luke, rather than on sound critical principles. But if it is a question of moral insight, we may fairly doubt who saw more truly, Jesus or the modern middle-class critics. (81)