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God and Mammon

by R. T. France

The following paper was originally read at one of the annual meetings of the Friends of Tyndale House, Cambridge. Dr. France, who has held theological lectureships in two Nigerian universities—the University of Ifé and Ahmadu Bello University—is now Warden of Tyndale House.

I. INTRODUCTON

IN a world which is becoming increasingly polarized between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, and in which the “have-nots” are becoming increasingly articulate, and are finding new political means of making their voice heard, it is not so easy as it once was for the affluent Western Christian to take refuge in a complacent acceptance of the *status quo*. The stark facts of world hunger and economic injustice are presented to us so insistently that even evangelical Christendom, which until recently has been largely content to leave such questions to non-Christian philanthropy and the World Council of Churches, has begun to ask whether it has been entirely faithful to the Jesus who told the uncomfortable story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and used such unconventional language as “Happy are you poor” and “Woe to you who are rich.”

My own reluctant attention to this subject was brought into sharper focus by the experience of living for four years in a Third World situation, and feeling at first hand the embarrassment of being a part of the rich expatriate minority in a subsistence society, and the helplessness of being caught up in an economic system which, for all its glaring inequalities, seems impregnable against the protests of an individual. Then came a return to life in a new commuter estate in one of the more affluent parts of Britain, and to newspapers full of prophecies of economic disaster which nevertheless would seem like utopia to the majority of the world’s population. Next followed a period of teaching in north-shore Chicago, reputedly the area with the highest *per capita* income in the world, and with a life-style appropriate to its reputation. After that, the prospect of a return to the Third World made it impossible to evade the problem of reconciling the affluence of modern Western Christianity with the teaching and example of Jesus.

Two books have further focused this concern. The Bishop of Winchester’s recent *cri de coeur*, *Enough is Enough*,¹ is not an

¹ J. V. Taylor, *Enough is Enough* (London: SCM Press, 1975).

academic study, still less a theological one, but its passionate exposure of the great confidence trick of Western materialism should be made required reading for all Christians who are satisfied with the economic *status quo*. Less well known in this country is a provocative book entitled *The Politics of Jesus*,² by the American Mennonite John Howard Yoder, and it is from this book that the present paper takes its cue.

Yoder's main concern is with the Christian's involvement in political action, and particularly with the pacifist option. These are not our concern here, and so I have no intention of dealing with Yoder's book in detail. But my interest here is in his sustained attack on the traditional Christian evasion of the socio-political implications of the teaching of Jesus, because what he says on this point is equally applicable, as indeed Yoder himself applies it strongly in passing, to the ethical questions relating to wealth and poverty.

Yoder's attack is levelled against "the observation that Jesus is simply not relevant in any immediate sense to the questions of social ethics." Six reasons for the ethical irrelevance of Jesus have, he suggests, been advanced. First, Jesus' ethic was tailored to an interim period before the Parousia, which was expected to be very brief; he was not therefore concerned with social structures or permanent institutions, and it is not legitimate to generalize from his temporary injunctions. Second, Jesus was a simple rural figure, and can have nothing to say about complex organizations and power structures. Third, Jesus and his followers had no say in the political or social decisions of their day, and so did not face the sort of questions which concern us in a democratic society. Fourth, Jesus' message was concerned with spiritual matters, not with social ethics. Fifth, Jesus was a "radical monotheist"; that is, he focused his teaching entirely on God, not on the "local and finite values" of human society, and thus effectively removed ethics from the sphere of God's concern. Sixth, Jesus came to give his life for men's sins, and it is faith in his death, not imitation of his life, which is the essence of Christianity.³

We may well feel that some of these points are caricatures of traditional Christian thinking, but some of them are not easily shrugged off. The sort of pietism Yoder portrays has had a significant place in evangelical life, if not often explicit in so extreme a form. The result, Yoder claims, is that Christian ethical thinking has largely ignored Jesus, regarding both his life and his teaching as scarcely relevant for any practical ethical decision. Instead, we have been content to derive from Jesus a minimal ethical guideline, "perhaps a concept of absolute love or humility or faith or freedom,"

² J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

³ Yoder, pp. 15-19.

and to do all the work of practical decision-making on grounds of "common sense and the nature of things". Thus all traditional Christian ethics, Yoder maintains, in both Protestant and Catholic traditions, has been based not on revelation but on "the theology of the natural", and this means that in effect there has been no *Christian* ethic at all, only various shades of natural human ethics.⁴ And so Christians, unlike their Master, have been staunch upholders of the *status quo*.

Over against this position, Yoder maintains that the life and teaching of Jesus *are* normative for Christian ethics in any age, and so he sets out his understanding of the socio-political stance of Jesus. We will not follow his argument in detail. With reference to our present concern with the ethics of wealth and property, Yoder argues, following André Trocmé,⁵ that Jesus demanded a radical redistribution of property, focused in the proclamation of a Jubilee Year in A.D. 26, with the full implementation of the Old Testament provisions for the Jubilee, including leaving the soil fallow, the remission of all debts, the liberation of slaves, and the redistribution of capital by restoring all property sold or forfeited to its original owners.⁶

The theory of a Jubilee proclamation as such has found little support, and its exegetical basis is very slender: there is no explicit reference to the Jubilee in the Gospels, and the passages about forgiving debts and giving away property which Yoder adduces do not appear, at least on the surface, to be linked to a specific national reform. But we must take more seriously the view that Jesus did not just preach generosity and self-sacrifice, but campaigned for a concrete reform involving the redistribution of capital, "a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God," and that the gathering of the disciple community was "the formal founding of a new social reality . . . a movement . . . presenting an alternative to the structures that were there before."⁷ This programme, Yoder maintains, must be normative for the Christian as he considers his stance on economic affairs in the world today, and it will forbid him to ally himself with the *status quo*.

The aim of this paper, then, is to explore how far we can in fact derive from the life and teaching of Jesus a programme for tackling social injustice, specifically the inequality of wealth to which I have referred. We all agree, I trust, that it needs to be tackled, and most of us would agree that Christians should be to the fore in tackling it. But is there a specifically Christian approach to the question, or

⁴ Yoder, pp. 19-20.

⁵ *Jésus-Christ et la Révolution Non-Violente* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1961).

⁶ Yoder, chapters 2-3.

⁷ Yoder, pp. 39-40.

must we, as Yoder believes Christianity has always done, base our approach on secular economic reasoning, reflecting our very different political inclinations, and regard Jesus as irrelevant to the practical concerns of the twentieth century?

As will no doubt soon be evident, I have found this a difficult subject to tie down. The more I have looked at it, the more suspicious I have become of anyone who can come to a clear conclusion on the question. I would dearly like to be able to come up with a definitive answer, and a clear programme for action. But I suspect that I am not alone in this wish, and that in some cases where clear answers have emerged the wish has been father to the thought. So I shall not conclude with a call to support any specific political cause, and I expect to leave the essential problem unsolved. But if this paper leads to an increased awareness that there *is* a problem here, and perhaps helps towards isolating the proper way to look for a solution, I shall be content.

We shall consider first, and quite briefly, Jesus' practice in relation to wealth and property; then, in more detail, his teaching on the subject; finally, we shall return to the question just posed, of the practical relevance of all this to present-day Christian ethics.

II. THE PRACTICE OF JESUS

The socio-economic situation of the time of Jesus is vividly illustrated by several of his parables. They reveal a sharply class-structured society, with land-owners, stewards, tenant-farmers, day labourers and slaves, a situation in which the few could dress in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously every day, while the beggars sat at the gates, where capital steadily accumulated in the hands of the rich, while the ordinary free man lived under the threat of slavery for debt. To the flagrant inequalities of this quasi-feudal society there was added the grievance of Roman economic policy, which added heavy taxes to the existing religious dues, resulting in a total taxation as high as forty per cent. of an average income,⁸ quite apart from the extra exactions of the local tax-collectors.

Within this social pattern, Jesus' family would probably best be described as "middle-class". The "carpenter" was a skilled craftsman, an important part of the village economy, self-employed and quite possibly employing labour. Those of Jesus' closest disciples of whom we have details fit roughly in the same social category, partners in a fishing business with hired workers, a tax-collector, the wife of Herod's steward, and other women who "provided for them out of

⁸ This estimate, frequently repeated, was apparently first made by F. C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 105.

their means".⁹ Jesus' family were certainly not affluent—the offering of two turtle-doves at his presentation in the Temple was a concession allowed to those who could not afford a lamb,¹⁰ and several of Jesus' parables reflect the circumstances of a very ordinary home.¹¹ But they were far from being at the bottom of the socio-economic scale.

Against this background, Jesus' own chosen style of life forms a striking contrast. From the time when his public ministry began he apparently renounced all financial security. He had no job, and no permanent home: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head."¹² From the fact that this was addressed to a potential follower we may assume that his disciples were expected to maintain the same lifestyle. They were to depend on their heavenly Father to provide their food and clothing, as he does for the birds and flowers. In practice this meant that Jesus and his closest disciples were dependent on the gifts and hospitality of well-wishers, such as the household of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, and others who invited them for meals. Jesus was always the guest, never the host. His disciples were sent out on their mission with no financial support, dependent on whatever hospitality they could find.

Such money as came to them they shared. Judas, as treasurer, looked after the common purse, from which he was expected to provide the necessities for the group.¹³ The contents of the purse were not large, enough to enable them to buy food as they travelled through Samaria,¹⁴ but not enough to feed the crowd of followers in the desert,¹⁵ nor even, apparently, to pay Jesus' Temple-tax of half a shekel.¹⁶

Yet even in this hand-to-mouth existence they still contrived, it seems, to carry out the traditional Jewish obligation of giving to the poor, if the protest against the "waste" of valuable ointment which could have been sold for charity was sincere.¹⁷ The two purposes for which it was thought Judas might have been sent out from the Last Supper were either to buy what the group needed for the festival, or to make a donation to the poor.¹⁸

⁹ Lk. 8: 3.

¹⁰ Lk. 2: 24; cf. Lev. 12: 6-8.

¹¹ E.g. Lk. 11: 5-7; 15: 8-10.

¹² Lk. 9: 58.

¹³ Jn. 12: 6; 13: 29.

¹⁴ Jn. 4: 8.

¹⁵ Mk. 6: 37; Jn. 6: 5-7. In view of the size of the sum (the best part of a year's wages for a day-labourer), we should probably take the disciples' retort in Mk. 6: 37 as ironical.

¹⁶ Mt. 17: 24-27.

¹⁷ Mk. 14: 5; Jn. 12: 5.

¹⁸ Jn. 13: 29.

It is easy to see, then, why Jesus is hailed as the champion of the alternative life-style in the twentieth century. The voluntary renunciation of bourgeois security, the deliberate detachment from material concerns, the communal living and the open generosity to others in need—all these strike an answering chord in many groups, Christian and non-Christian, who are determined to opt out of the rat-race.

And Jesus' life-style was a deliberate "opting out". With a few notable exceptions, it was not normal practice for a Jewish religious teacher to adopt an ascetic life-style. The few who did so, most notably the charismatic Hanina ben Dosa, were clearly regarded as out on a limb, and were looked down on by the rabbinic establishment, for whom prosperity was a token of God's favour.¹⁹ Great rabbis like Hillel and Akiba, both of whom came from very humble origins, rose to prosperity, and the fact is noted with approval in the traditions.²⁰

But Jesus was at many points at odds with convention. The company he kept and the values he preached were unorthodox to the point of scandal. He held in very light esteem the conventional barriers between those of different race, class, sex, or income bracket. Some of his harshest rebukes were reserved for those, whether of the Jewish establishment or of his own disciples, who uncritically accepted the prevailing notions of importance on grounds of wealth or influence. His slogan, "the last will be first and the first last," must have been as uncomfortable when it was first uttered as it is today in affluent suburban Christianity.

III. THE TEACHING OF JESUS

I have just mentioned Jesus' onslaught on privilege and self-importance. It is important for our present subject to bear in mind this strong element in his teaching, but we can deal here only with his teaching directly on the subject of wealth and property.

(a) *The Danger of Affluence*

One quite unmistakable note in the teaching of Jesus is the *danger* of being affluent, or at least of wanting to be affluent. It is "the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things" which choke the growth of the good seed.²¹ It is easier

¹⁹ For a full study of Hanina ben Dosa see G. Vermes, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23 (1972), pp. 28-50; 24 (1973), pp. 51-64; a briefer account is given in Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 72-78. For his frugal life-style see esp. *JJS* 24, pp. 51-53, and for rabbinic criticism of him, *ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

²⁰ For Hillel's original poverty see *Yoma* 35b, and for Akiba's shepherd origin and subsequent wealth, *Nedarim* 50a. See further *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* I, p. 309. For the rabbinic attitude to poverty, see *TDNT* VI, pp. 901-902, and references *ad loc.*

²¹ *Mk.* 4: 19 parr.

for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.²² "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness, for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions," and the man who forgets this is living in a fool's paradise, as the parable of the successful farmer, the "Rich Fool", goes on to show.²³

It was not a new perception that materialism is the great enemy of spiritual concern. A similar emphasis is found in the Old Testament, not only in the recurrent prophetic attack on the oppressive rich, but in the warnings of Deuteronomy that affluence could lead them to forget Yahweh their God,²⁴ and of some of the Psalms against trusting in wealth rather than in God.²⁵ But it is not only a biblical emphasis. Detachment from material concern was a major plank in the platform of both the Cynic and Stoic philosophies, and popular Greek and Roman moralism often returns to the theme of the impermanence of possessions, and the importance of sitting loose to them. The same theme is prominent in the Book of Enoch. The famous New Testament maxim that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil"²⁶ can be paralleled frequently in both Jewish and Greek literature.²⁷

Jesus focused this warning on the danger of affluence in his statement that "No one can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve God and mammon."²⁸ "Mammon" means "possessions". It was not the name of a pagan god or of a fallen angel, as it has become for Milton in *Paradise Lost*,²⁹ nor need it imply "wealth gained dishonestly". In the Aramaic Targums, it is true, *māmōnā* often carries the qualifier *dišeqar*, "of falsehood",^{29a} and the phrase is used particularly for bribes and other unjust gain.³⁰ But *māmōnā* is also used in the Targums without qualification in the neutral sense, as in Proverbs 3: 9, "Honour Yahweh with your mammon", and even in the Palestinian Targums of Deuteronomy 6: 5, "You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mammon"³¹ The word does not occur in the Hebrew Old

²² Mk. 10: 23-25 parr.

²³ Lk. 12: 15-21.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 8.

²⁵ E.g. Pss. 49: 5-9, 16-20; 52: 7; 62: 10.

²⁶ 1 Tim 6: 10.

²⁷ See M. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (ET London: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 9-10.

²⁸ Mt. 6: 24; Lk. 16: 13.

²⁹ *Paradise Lost* I, 678ff. The idea is found in medieval writing as early as *Piers Plowman*, but has no foundation in ancient sources.

^{29a} Cf. Jesus' phrase ὁ μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας (Lk. 16: 9). Cf. also 1 Enoch 63: 10.

³⁰ E.g. 1 Sam. 8: 3; 12: 3; Is. 33: 15; Amos 5: 12.

³¹ So both Pseudo-Jonathan and Neofiti 1.

Testament,³² but in the Hebrew of Qumran and of the Mishnah it carries the same neutral connotation.³³ So it is not only wrongly acquired wealth, but possessions as such that Jesus declares to be in competition with God for men's allegiance. The competition is such that Jesus elevates "Mammon" into a principle, almost personifies it, in a way that even the Targums, with their attack on the "mammon of falsehood", do not do. It is the principle of materialism, and it is diametrically opposed to the service of God, because "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."³⁴

(b) *The Recommendation of Poverty*

This negative attitude to wealth, or at least to the desire to be wealthy, is balanced by a strongly positive attitude to poverty and to the poor. Long familiarity with the Matthaean Beatitudes about poverty *in spirit* and hunger *for righteousness* has blunted our appreciation of the force of the Lucan Beatitudes:

Happy are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
 Happy are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. . .
 But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.
 Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger.³⁵

For all their awareness of the danger of wealth, the Old Testament writers had not recommended poverty as such, and had generally regarded wealth, properly acquired, as a blessing from God. Poverty, it was felt, could be as great a hindrance as wealth. "Give me neither poverty nor riches," prayed the sage, "lest I be full and deny thee, or lest I be poor, and steal."³⁶ The poor are protected and championed in both the law and the prophets, but this is on the assumption that their poverty is a misfortune, not an advantage. This attitude continues into rabbinic Judaism—the poor are to be pitied and helped, but not imitated. Giving to the poor is mandatory; self-impoverishment is not. As Martin Hengel concludes, "We shall look in vain for direct praise of the poor or of poverty in Jewish literature: it is first to be found in the gospel"³⁷—and he refers to the Lucan Beatitudes.

There is, however, an important stream of thought in the Old Testament which is closer to what Jesus says here. Particularly in the Psalms, though not only there, the "poor" or "meek" (the principal Hebrew terms are *'ānī* or *'ānāw* and *'ebyôn*, which are often, though

³² It does, however, occur in the Hebrew text of Ben Sira 31: 8, where it carries a negative sense, in explicit contrast with the wealth of a righteous man.

³³ See CD 14: 20; 1QS 6: 2; 1Q27 2: 5 (these are the only occurrences noted at Qumran so far). For the Mishnah see *e.g.* *Aboth* 2: 12; in *Sanhedrin* 1: 1 *dīnē māmônôt* is used to differentiate "property cases" from crimes against the person.

³⁴ Mt. 6: 21.

³⁵ Lk. 6: 20-21, 24-25.

³⁶ Prov. 30: 8-9.

³⁷ Hengel, p. 17.

by no means always, translated by *ptōchos* and *penēs* in the Septuagint) form a distinct class, usually in contrast with the "wicked". The dichotomy is not primarily an economic one, but a question of attitude, and particularly of relationship with God. The "poor" are those who humbly put their trust in God, and are oppressed by the godless. It is their piety and their suffering which are stressed rather than their literal poverty. The oppression of the "poor" is often hard to reconcile with the sovereignty of God, but increasingly the idea of an ultimate reversal of roles comes in as the answer: there is blessing in store for the "poor", but retribution for the "wicked". This last theme gains in prominence in the inter-testamental period, particularly in the apocalyptic stream of Jewish literature. It is strongly emphasized in the Psalms of Solomon and in the Enoch literature, and forms a clear strand in the thinking of the Qumran community, who referred to themselves as "the poor"; God's people oppressed by a godless world but destined for ultimate vindication.³⁸

The words of Jesus in the Lucan Beatitudes quoted above seem to fall into this category, as they depict the poor as those to whom the kingdom of God belongs, and look for an ultimate reversal of roles. Does this mean, then, that Jesus too is not concerned here with the literal poverty of the disciples, but only with their relationship with God? In the Matthaean Beatitudes this is clearly the case, but I cannot myself see any reason why the Lucan Beatitudes must be interpreted as a variation of the Matthaean. Their form is similar, but their content is different, and I see no reason why Jesus, or any other preacher, need be restricted to only one use of an effective teaching form. The Lucan Beatitudes must be interpreted in their own right, and it is immediately apparent that, while they undoubtedly reflect the Old Testament concept of the pious poor, they are not a mere reiteration of it. The opposite of the poor here are not the wicked, but the rich and well fed. Nor is this the only passage where Jesus commends the literal poverty of his disciples. The hard saying about the camel going through the eye of a needle is followed in all three Synoptic Gospels by comments on the disciples' renunciation of property and security, and the eternal rewards they could expect as a result, concluding in Matthew and Mark with the slogan, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first."³⁹ The same reversal of fortunes is seen again in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,⁴⁰ and in Jesus' commendation of the poor widow's minimum donation over against the painless offerings of the wealthy.⁴¹

³⁸ There is a convenient summary of the evidence for this strand of thought in *TDNT* VI, pp. 888-899.

³⁹ Mk. 10: 28-31 par.

⁴⁰ Lk. 16: 19-31.

⁴¹ Mk. 12: 41-44 par.

So when Jesus said "Happy are you poor," he said it to a group who had accepted literal poverty, not as a necessity, but as a chosen way of life, and one which would issue in the ultimate blessing of God. We shall see shortly that he called on his disciples literally to dispose of their property, not to store up possessions on earth, and to trust God to supply them even with the bare necessities of food and clothing.

Indebted as Jesus was, then, to the Old Testament concept of the "poor", he laid more stress on the literal poverty which the idea implied than did other Jewish teachers. Poverty was not to him just the by-product of a humble piety, but it could have a positive value in concentrating the disciple's mind on his spiritual goal, enabling him to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." If wealth is a hindrance to the service of God, the poor man is at an advantage.

(c) *Did Jesus Repudiate Private Property?*

Martin Hengel⁴² has shown that the view was widespread in the ancient world that private ownership of property was itself an evil, sometimes even regarded as the most important single factor in destroying man's original idyllic state, and that the world would not be right again until possessiveness was renounced, and all things were held in common for the benefit of all. This view was held not only in early Christianity, with its eventual development in the monastic movement, but in various strands of Greek and Latin literature, and it has of course claimed many adherents of very varied philosophical and political creeds up to the present day. Even when not applied at the level of national or international politics, the communal ideal has motivated many experiments, Christian and non-Christian, at the local level. The "commune" has a long history, and a very mixed one in terms of the various systems of thought to which it has appealed. The so-called "Christian communism" of the early Jerusalem church was not the radical innovation that is often suggested; the Qumran community had been practising a much more thorough-going and regulated community of goods for many years, and Josephus records that this was the rule in all Essene communities.⁴³

It would not, then, be very surprising if Jesus, with his view of the danger of affluence and the value of poverty, had forbidden his disciples to own private property or capital, and the "communism" of the early Jerusalem church suggests that he had laid down some such ideal. Several of his sayings support this conclusion. The command in Matthew 6: 19 ff. not to lay up treasure on earth but

⁴² Hengel, chapter 1.

⁴³ Josephus, *BJ* ii. 8. 3 (122-123).

to depend on God for the necessities of life, if it does not explicitly forbid all private property, gets close to it. The Lucan parallel is still more explicit: "Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail. . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."⁴⁴ And the passage on the cost of discipleship in Luke 14 concludes with the uncompromising and apparently universal demand, "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."⁴⁵ Such sayings, taken with the fact of Jesus' own complete renunciation of financial security and adoption of a communal life-style with his closest disciples, are not easily dismissed. They suggest that when Jesus challenged the rich enquirer to sell all his possessions and join the disciple group, as his way of "inheriting eternal life",⁴⁶ he was not, as most modern exegesis has gratefully concluded, prescribing a specific cure for this one individual whose malady he diagnosed as an excessive materialism, but was laying down a requirement of more general application. A private fortune was apparently incompatible with membership of the disciple group.

But there is another side to the picture. Some of Jesus' followers were, and remained, rich and influential men. Joseph of Arimathaea does not seem to have felt the need to sell his estate, despite sufficient commitment to Jesus' cause to impel him to defy the Sanhedrin and make a risky appeal to Pilate. Zacchaeus made drastic donations and restitution, but was not apparently required to renounce all his possessions.⁴⁷ Lazarus, Martha and Mary were well enough off to provide hospitality for a considerable group of disciples on more than one occasion.⁴⁸ Indeed, Jesus' very dependence on hospitality and on contributions from supporters demanded that a considerable number of his followers were not without private means.⁴⁹

Was there then a two-tier system of discipleship, under which the most fully committed, those who travelled around with Jesus, renounced private possessions, while a wider circle retained their possessions and so provided the means for the support of the inner circle? To a large extent this seems to be the case: there was a distinction between the commitment of those who joined Jesus on a full-time basis and those of his supporters who remained in their homes and jobs. But even the full-time companions of Jesus may not have made the total and permanent renunciation which the data above suggested. Peter, who "left everything and followed Jesus",

⁴⁴ Lk. 12: 33-34.

⁴⁵ Lk. 14:33.

⁴⁶ Mk. 10: 17-22 par.

⁴⁷ Lk. 19: 8-10.

⁴⁸ Lk. 10: 38-42; Jn. 12: 1-2. Cf. Mt. 21: 17 par.

⁴⁹ See especially Lk. 8: 3.

still apparently retained his house at Capernaum, which was for a time Jesus' base, and where Peter's mother-in-law, and presumably the rest of his family, continued to live.⁵⁰ And the epilogue to John's Gospel depicts Peter, when the period of mission is over, returning to his fishing, with his boat and fishing tackle apparently still available.⁵¹ He had "left everything" for a period of living on charity, but he had not apparently everything.

Moreover, any suggestion that Jesus was opposed in principle to the private ownership of property must face the fact that much of his teaching presupposes without comment a property-owning society. The parables are not, of course, intended to be literally applied, but is it conceivable that a doctrinaire opponent of private ownership could so casually refer to a man collecting pearls, buying an estate, owning a vineyard, employing a steward to manage his business affairs, or dividing the inheritance between his sons? More directly, Jesus expects children to support their parents out of their possessions,⁵² calls on his disciples to lend money and to give alms,⁵³ and gives directions about who should be invited to a dinner party.⁵⁴ These requirements, and the whole emphasis on *giving* which we shall notice shortly, are only applicable to those who have possessions of their own.

Thus there are two sides to Jesus' attitude to private property, and his modern interpreters naturally tend to emphasize one or the other, depending on their prior commitment. Emphatic black-and-white statements and commands suggest that no true disciple should own property, while incidental comments and inferences from both his teaching and his practice indicate that private ownership is normal, and indeed essential, not only for society at large, but for the majority of Jesus' followers. To this dilemma we shall return.

(d) *The Emphasis on Giving*

We have seen above that Jesus' own practice was apparently to give some of the contents of the common purse to the poor. Contemporary Judaism stressed the value of giving to the poor, and charitable giving over and above the mandatory "second tithe" or poor tax⁵⁵ reached such generous proportions that a law was passed in the second century to prevent a man giving away more than twenty per cent of his property and so impoverishing himself and his family.⁵⁶ Required and voluntary giving combined to finance quite

⁵⁰ Mk. 1: 29-31 parr.

⁵¹ Jn. 21: 3ff.

⁵² Mk. 7: 9-13 par.

⁵³ Mt. 5: 42; 6: 2-4; Lk. 6: 30, 35.

⁵⁴ Lk. 14: 12-14.

⁵⁵ Dt. 14: 12; 26: 12.

⁵⁶ *Ketuboth* 50a; *'Arakhin* 28a.

an effective "welfare state". But it was all well regulated so as to ensure that property remained in the proper hands, and rabbinic legislation does not seem to have envisaged the eradication of poverty, only its alleviation.

In comparison there is a prophetic recklessness about Jesus' call for giving to the poor. John the Baptist had already, as Luke records, laid down as a token of repentance the very radical yet realistic principle, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."⁵⁷ Jesus also called for an uncalculating generosity in his disciples, which gives without thought of return. They were to invite to their table the destitute who could never invite them back,⁵⁸ to lend without hope of repayment,⁵⁹ to give to everyone who begs and to accept without protest the expropriation of their possessions.⁶⁰ There is a note of fierce indignation in Jesus' description of the man who could "dress in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously every day" while ignoring the beggar who lay at his gate full of sores.⁶¹ Even the final division between the saved and the lost as pictured in the "sheep and goats" passage focuses on their response to hunger, loneliness and destitution⁶² (though it should be noted that some recent studies of this passage see the division not so much in the response to human need as such, but in the reaction to the suffering messengers of Christ).⁶³

The essential principle here, as in the practice of Jesus himself, seems to be one of compassion, of a warm-blooded response which puts the perceived need of others before the calculation of one's own requirements or of socio-economic priorities. Not for Jesus, apparently, the careful assessment of the economic consequences of giving aid, the arguments so familiar to us that indiscriminate giving creates dependence and encourages sponging. We look in vain for economic theory in this aspect of Jesus' teaching, but what we do find is a principle of practical love which is impatient with rules and regulations, a facet of that same compassion which led Jesus to associate with the undesirables of Jewish society, and to sit very

⁵⁷ Lk. 3: 11.

⁵⁸ Lk. 14: 12-14.

⁵⁹ Lk. 6: 35.

⁶⁰ Mt. 5: 40-42; Lk. 6: 29-30.

⁶¹ Lk. 16: 19-21.

⁶² Mt. 25: 31-46.

⁶³ E.g. J. Mánek, "Mit wem identifiziert sich Jesus?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 15-25; G. E. Ladd, "The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Recent Interpretation" in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 191-199.

loose to social and legal conventions, making him the *bête noire* of the Jewish establishment.

(e) *The Heart of the Matter*

What then is the focus of Jesus' teaching on wealth and poverty? Was his aim to launch a programme for socio-economic reform, or to inculcate an attitude of detachment from material concerns?

If we must choose between these crudely drawn alternatives, it seems clear that we must opt for the latter. The recorded teaching of Jesus contains no explicit attack on, or even reference to, the current socio-political system as such, still less a concrete proposal for its reform. The arguments advanced by Yoder for Jesus' proclamation of a Jubilee Year depend entirely on passages which deal with the individual's attitude and relationships, passages which may or may not have socio-political implications, but which certainly are given no concrete application to the reform of society in contemporary Palestine, let alone providing a universally applicable socio-political ideal. Jesus' answer when asked for his views on the tax system, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,"⁶⁴ would make a very slippery foundation for economic reform. When he was asked to adjudicate a family quarrel about a will, he refused to accept the casuistic role which a rabbi would normally play: "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?"⁶⁵ The Jesus of the Gospels does not strike most readers as an economist or a social reformer.

His response to the request just mentioned is instructive. Having refused to adjudicate the dispute, he went on to add, in Luke's narrative, "Take heed, and beware of all greed; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."⁶⁶ His concern is with the basic orientation of a man's life, and the message is immediately reinforced with the parable of the successful farmer, whose chief failing was not his commercial success, but his utterly selfish materialism.

Jesus' comments on wealth and poverty focus throughout on the right *attitude* to possessions rather than on the mere fact of having or not having them. And the right attitude to them is to value them very lightly, because a disciple's first allegiance must be to God. It was the proclamation of the kingdom of God, and the call to men to welcome and accept his sovereignty, which formed the core of Jesus' message, and in the light of that proclamation material considerations are relatively insignificant. He had a good deal to say about possessions, but it was said from the perspective of the kingdom. Affluence

⁶⁴ Mk. 12: 17 parr.

⁶⁵ Lk. 12: 13.

⁶⁶ Lk. 12: 15.

is dangerous *because* it threatens a man's prior allegiance to God. Poverty is recommended because it reduces the danger of a rival loyalty. Possessions should be discarded to allow an unencumbered devotion to the service of God. Jesus does not address his calls for the renunciation of wealth to society at large, but to those who are seeking the kingdom of God. It is only they who can be expected to depend on a heavenly Father to supply their material needs, and who can set against earthly loss an imperishable treasure in heaven. In other words, Jesus' concern is essentially religious, not political or economic, and his remarks about property can only fairly be interpreted in that light.

Thus to the question whether Jesus was aiming at socio-economic reform or at spiritual reorientation, we must reply that the latter was his primary intention. And having so decided, it is easy and tempting to take the further step of concluding that Jesus is irrelevant for practical socio-ethical decisions in our situation, as Yoder not unfairly charges traditional Christianity with having concluded. But is this a necessary conclusion? I believe that it is not, because I believe that the original alternative was too sharply drawn. To say that Jesus' aim was not socio-economic reform is not to say that his teaching has no relevance at this level. The radical reorientation of values for which he called cannot, if it is taken seriously, remain at a theoretical level alone. If it was necessary for those who accepted his call to full-time discipleship then to sell their possessions and give to the poor, it can hardly be that an acceptance of the same values today will leave our bank balances or our life-style unaffected.

We turn then, finally, to a consideration of the implications of Jesus' teaching and example for modern Christian ethics in the sphere of wealth and property.

IV. THE ETHICAL RELEVANCE OF JESUS

I mentioned earlier Yoder's charge that traditional Christian thought has maintained the ethical irrelevance of Jesus on six grounds. Without returning to those six points in detail, it seems to me that this brief study has shown that they contained a good deal of truth. Jesus *was* primarily concerned with spiritual matters, and *did* "point men away from the local and finite values to which they had been giving their attention" to God. He *was* primarily concerned with the situation of his own immediate hearers, in the necessarily abnormal conditions of his brief earthly ministry, and he did not lay down any programme for the running or reform of complex political or even ecclesiastical institutions. His answers to questions even with a decided political slant do not, at least on the surface, advocate any particular socio-political stance.

But what must be questioned is Yoder's insistence that such an understanding of the nature of Jesus' message necessarily involves

his ethical irrelevance, and commits us to make our ethical decisions on purely secular grounds. We may not have a revealed blueprint for political action to set right the inequalities of society, but we do have in the teaching of Jesus a clear presentation of an attitude to wealth and property which can provide the strongest motivation for such action, and which may well have more radical implications than many Christians have been prepared to admit.

This attitude has, I hope, been spelled out sufficiently already. It consists of a paramount loyalty to God and commitment to his cause, which results in a free attitude to material possessions. To this end, wealth is a potential danger, and poverty an advantage in that it reduces the risk of a rival loyalty. This free attitude to possessions may be expressed in a disposal of private property, though this is not mandatory. It will certainly find expression in an almost reckless generosity, motivated not by a dour sense of obligation, but by a warm and unselfish compassion. Such an attitude, we may well feel, is all too rare in society as we know it, Christian as well as non-Christian. Materialism has made deep inroads into practical Christian commitment.

The practical application of this radical reorientation of values cannot be laid down in the form of rules, and will vary from one situation to another, and even from one personality to another. But a few general comments may be made.

(a) The Christian Individual

The completely dependent and unsettled life-style of Jesus himself and his closest disciples during the period of the ministry can hardly be a pattern for literal imitation. It does not seem to have been required of the majority of disciples during the New Testament period, or even during the period of Jesus' ministry. What does seem to be required is a life-style appropriate to those whose treasure is in heaven, and this may well call for a simplicity in living which has long been forgotten in Western society at large. The Christian need not be a drop-out, but he *is* obliged to question prevailing standards of luxury and excess, and not to accept the necessity of the standard of living foisted on him by the combined pressure of the advertising media and of keeping up with the Joneses. He may not be a drop-out, but neither must he be a conformist. "We must try to live," says John Taylor, "by the divine contrariness of Jesus";⁶⁷ which will include, he believes, learning to laugh at the wasteful conventions of secular society, the luxuries which it parades as necessities. Rules of abstinence can quickly become as tyrannous as the conventions of affluence which they replace; but a cheerful nonconformity and a loose hold on material possessions seem closer to the spirit Jesus

⁶⁷ Taylor, p. 69.

inculcated, and will inevitably produce a distinctively Christian life-style. And an essential part of this life-style will be its generous giving, not regimented by strict rules of tithing, but inspired by a spontaneous compassion which takes little account of percentages or returns.

(b) The Christian Community

Did Jesus intend his disciple-community to be a sort of "alternative society" in the setting of Roman Palestine, a prototype of the perfect social structure? Yoder regards them as "a movement . . . presenting an alternative to the structures that were there before", and thus challenging the system.⁶⁸ On this view the communism of the early Jerusalem church was a self-conscious social experiment, which was intended to be imitated in all future Christian communities. Such an interpretation is at variance with the lack of a socio-political programme as such in Jesus' teaching as we have seen it above, nor does it take account of the fact that the Christian communism of Jerusalem was apparently an isolated and relatively short-lived experiment. We do not hear of Paul or any other early Christian missionary proposing this social system to their converts, or of any church other than that of Jerusalem which practised it. It is probably not fair to attribute the later destitution of the Jerusalem church solely to this early communist idealism; many other special factors may have applied to Jerusalem, such as the large number of Christian visitors expecting hospitality, an unusually large proportion of teachers to support, significant persecution, and the high taxation of Judaea. But the attempt to apply the pattern of communal living of Jesus' own entourage to the Christian community as a whole does not appear to have been either successful or necessary.

But if slavish imitation of the Jerusalem church pattern, or of any other specific paradigm, is not the right way for twentieth-century churches, this does not rule out the possibility that Jesus' teaching on possessions may for some Christians best be applied not in splendid isolation but in the supportive environment of a communal way of life. The practical variations possible here are legion, and many different styles of communal living are being attempted by groups of Christians. They should be regarded not as models to be reproduced by all Christians, but as experiments, and their success should be judged not by their conformity to some pre-existent blueprint, for there is none, but by how far they foster that attitude to material possessions which Jesus taught. But whether by communal living or simply by mutual encouragement and help the church as a community should be actively exploring how best it can

⁶⁸ Yoder, p. 40; cf. pp. 46-47.

stand for God and not for Mammon, in a society whose allegiance is all too obvious.

(c) *Christian Social Action*

If Jesus did not engage in direct socio-political action, or even make any verbal attack on the system as such, should the Christian do so? While he must never forget that the essence of Christianity does not consist in material relief and social reform, the Christian *is* still bound by that call for an unselfish compassion towards those in need which Jesus issued. We dare not forget the Rich Man and Lazarus. And it is a poor compassion which is content with alleviating distress without a thought for the system which is the cause of that distress. It was not the mission of Jesus to reform the system, nor was he in a position to do so in the political situation of his day. But his disciple is not thereby obliged to applaud the *status quo*, and to restrict his compassion to acts of charity. He knows that a full stomach is not salvation, but that knowledge does not hallow an empty stomach. Jesus said "Happy are you poor", but there is a difference between poverty and destitution, between the lack of luxuries and starvation.

But Jesus' practice and teaching cannot, in the nature of the case, provide a blueprint for socio-political action. We have seen that the attempt to show that he called for a literal Jubilee is not successful. Nor will any more success follow the attempt to find in the Gospels a justification of socialism or capitalism or any other -ism. He provides us with an attitude towards wealth and property which offers powerful motivation for the Christian to attack economic injustice, and which indicates the broad aims of that attack. But for his concrete plan of action the Christian is necessarily dependent not on direct revelation but, like other men, on political and economic theory. That is why it is no cause for surprise, or for embarrassment, that committed Christians are found belonging to different and even opposing political parties, and actively championing irreconcilable economic theories. Here we must be dependent, as Yoder puts it, on "common sense and the nature of things". But this is not, as he alleges, to say that there is no such thing as a Christian ethic. If the means to the end are not laid down by Jesus, the end is. The Christian's attitude and his motivation are necessarily distinctive, because they focus on a loyalty higher than his own, or anyone else's, material advantage, and are founded on the generous love of God.

These few inadequate remarks do not add up to any sort of practical programme either for the Christian's own life-style or for his involvement in social action. But that was not their intention, because I believe there *is* no universally applicable programme or set of rules for the Christian. What I hope they have done is to remind

us, if we needed reminding, that there *are* practical implications to Jesus' teaching about wealth, implications which Christian thinking has been too ready to ignore, with the result that for many in the less favoured parts of the world Christianity has become synonymous with a comfortable and sanctimonious indifference to the economic inequalities of the modern world.

Such a situation is not put right overnight, and I have not produced the answers in this paper. But at least we must be aware that answers are needed, and that in the search for them the Gospels are far from irrelevant. It is good to see an increasing attention to this subject in recent biblical scholarship, but it is important that the results of this study should not be locked up in academic libraries, but should be made available to guide constructive Christian thinking and action. The practical decisions on these matters are for the individual Christian or Christian group to make in the light of their particular circumstances, but the controlling principle must be that radical reorientation of values which marked the teaching of Jesus.

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