

THE RICH AND POOR IN JAMES: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONALIZED PARTIALITY

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After a hiatus in the early part of the twentieth century, evangelicals have rediscovered that living in a democratic society calls on believers to contribute a constructive, informed, and Christian voice to public social, economic, and political policies.¹ The interrelating of public policy with religious faith is an unsavory, uncomfortable task for some believers. By its nature, religious faith rests on uncompromising pronouncements that are founded on God's being and the necessary order of the world he has created; by its nature, public policy rests on compromise. Thus politics and religion tend to sully one another when they meet.

While faith must tread cautiously into the political arena, it is unthinkable for Christian reflection on public policy and Christian reflection on faith to be drawn into airtight compartments. As Bauckham observes, “. . . fundamental New Testament principles for life in the Christian community extend in principle to life in human community as such, and therefore have political relevance.”² Uneasiness arises from the suspicion that Christian viewpoints tend to be informed by a mixture of sources drawn from inherited traditions, economic status, and fear of change rather than Biblical revelation.³ That suspicion is the driving force behind this paper. Its purpose is to appeal to a voice from Scripture, namely, the book of James, for help in the construction of a Biblically informed, Christian perspective on matters of public policy relating to labor, poverty, wealth, and the power that flows from wealth.

The study will proceed as follows: (1) It will offer a brief analysis of the book of James with attention to passages that deal with the rich and the poor. (2) It will explore the message of James for its consistency with teaching found elsewhere in the Bible. (3) It will examine the implications of these statements for the way Christians ought to speak and act when confronted with wealth, status, and power on the one hand, or poverty, ignorance, and helplessness on the other.

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¹ For a summary of fundamentalism/evangelicalism in the twentieth century, see M. A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 149–175, 221–228.

² R. Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 9.

³ Writing of the social implications of the gospel, P. H. Davids, “The Poor Man's Gospel,” *The-melios* 1 (1976) 37, comments on “the sense of unease at the extent to which this atmosphere lacks a serious concern for the Biblical data.”

I. THE RICH AND THE POOR IN JAMES

An assessment of the literary character of James has a bearing on the conclusions one draws from the author's allusions to the rich and poor. The genre of James has been the subject of a great deal of discussion. Dibelius has maintained that the document lacks continuity. He explains, "There is not only a lack of continuity in thought between individual sayings and other small units, but also between larger treatises."⁴ For Dibelius, James is no letter at all. There was no particular social setting it addressed and no acquaintance with a social need that called forth the document. He concludes that James is *paraenesis*, i.e. "a text that strings together admonitions of general ethical content."⁵

If Dibelius is correct, the form of James, *vis-à-vis* other documents from antiquity, suggests that it merely transmits the popular, contemporary culture. It reflects neither the viewpoints of a particular individual nor community of readers. This and other considerations advanced by Dibelius argue that the words "rich" and "poor" in James have religious, not socio-economic implications. The poor were the pious. To be a Christian is to be among the poor, hence among those who are favored when God brings the world to its apocalyptic conclusion.⁶

Sophie Laws, Peter Davids, and James Adamson, among others, have taken exception to Dibelius's analysis of the document. Adamson, following Forbes, finds a finely developed unity of structure and style in James.⁷ Laws argues that the author's selection of material from the Jewish and Hellenistic world reflects his own interests and the character of the community he addressed.⁸ While Davids concedes that the *Sitz im Leben* of James is that of its author and not its hypothetical first readers, he nevertheless maintains that the letter reflects a real socio-historical setting. Further, he maintains that James is a carefully constructed work, not a collection of random exhortations. "Scholarship," Davids says, "must move beyond Dibelius's form-critical view of James, valuable as that is, and discover the redactional level."⁹

The genre of James is particularly important when one draws on the document for its contribution to socio-historical questions. If the author is primarily a collector of moral maxims and ethical truisms drawn from his contemporary world, the document lacks the urgency that springs from the suffering and conflict of real people. The corrections to the analysis of Dibelius offered by Davids, Laws, and others are important.¹⁰ Granted that the

⁴ M. Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Hermania; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 2.

⁵ *Ibid.* 3.

⁶ *Ibid.* 44.

⁷ J. B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 20; P. B. R. Forbes, "The Structure of the Epistle of James," *EvQ* 44/3 (1972) 147-153.

⁸ S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 7.

⁹ P. H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 24.

¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse the evidence suggesting that James is more than a collection of ethical truisms. Laws, *James* 6-26, does a particularly thorough job of setting forth the case that the author had some idea as to who the first readers of his letter would be.

community reflected in James has more to do with its place of origin than with its first readers, still the document deserves to be called a letter. It reflects a world known to the author where believers are coming to terms with the impact of the Christian message on behavior.¹¹

The recognition of a needed correction hardly means that we should abandon the analysis of Dibelius altogether. He is correct when he observes that the document has little continuity. The movement from subject to subject often seems random, held together by mere catch-words. The lack of a sustained theme, however, does not require the conclusion that the author shows no concern for a specific social situation. The social and ethical struggles of James and his Christian community are reflected in themes that recur in the document. Prominent among them are (1) the wisdom motif, particularly as it is developed around the use of the tongue; (2) the relationship of faith to behavior; and (3) the oppression of the poor by the great men of the world. It is in the latter theme that James offers some of his most useful instruction for the believer who wants to raise an informed Christian voice in the public arena.

In the course of his letter there are three times when James broaches the subject of the rich and the poor (1:9–11; 2:1–12; 4:13–5:6). Each reference raises the pitch of the rhetoric. In the first passage, there is a possibility that the author thinks of the rich as a part of the community of believers. When James writes, “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation,” Adamson maintains that the reader ought to add the word “brother,” i.e. “let the rich brother boast in his humiliation.”¹² The Revised English Bible goes so far as to translate, “The wealthy member must find his pride in being brought low.”

If 1:9–11 means that James believed there was a component of wealthy members among his initial readers, some of the author’s later statements become incomprehensible. In 2:6–7, the rich are those who drag believers into court and oppress them. It is they who blaspheme the holy name by which believers are called. Laws concludes that the rich man in the passage is “almost by definition *not* (emphasis hers) a brother.”¹³ In 5:1, the rich are to weep and howl for the miseries coming on them. Even in 1:11, where Adamson and others want us to add the word “brother,” James says, “The rich will fade away like the flower of the grass.”

It is clear that James expected none of his readers to be among those who controlled the power inherent in wealth. The rich are set over against the poor. They blaspheme the holy name. They drag the believers before judges.

¹¹ Perhaps the strongest support for Dibelius’s viewpoint comes from James 5:6, κατεδικάσατε, ἐφρονεύσατε τὸν δίκαιον, where τὸν δίκαιον refers to the laborers who seem to equal the ταπεινός of 1:9 and 2:6. Dibelius also finds support in the author’s use of the word family ταπεινός/ταπεινός/ταπεινός, all used in James. The significance of the movement from poor to humble to righteous is not to be lightly dismissed. Still, the fierceness of James’s words, especially in 2:6–7 and 5:1–6, suggests the author has witnessed conditions he considers abhorrent. It is entirely possible that the author draws on inherited traditions to give voice to his outrage.

¹² Adamson, *James* 61.

¹³ Laws, *James* 64; cf. J. Michl, *Die Katholischen Briefe* (RNT 8; Regensburg: Pustet, 1968) 29.

The force of James's words grows from his understanding that he and the people he addresses are the poor. They lack the resources, the influence, the power to challenge the great men who control lands and market places. With apparent satisfaction, with certain indignation, James finds it ironic that the only boast the rich have is the certainty of their failure.¹⁴ Like the flower of the grass, they will perish.

We cannot fail to notice that James is on the side of the poor people whom he addresses. His sympathy lies with them. Who are these poor? They are the hard-working people of the land. His readers are not beggars. They know about the waves of the sea (1:6), the farmer waiting for his fruits (5:7), the value of a spring of water (3:11), the mowing of fields (5:4), and the produce of the fruit trees (4:12).¹⁵ James's letter is not about charity for the destitute poor; it is about justice and equity for the working poor. James reassures his readers in words that working people understand. He appeals to no theoretical constructs. Faith means deeds; wisdom means mercy and good fruits. Doing what God says is important. Tamez is correct to see hope as a major theme in James, but the hope of James is not like that of 1 Peter.¹⁶ It is a strident, confrontational hope that looks to God for his judgment on the oppressors. The author of James wants to fill his readers with a sense of triumph in the face of humiliation. God is no respecter of persons. The gold and pedigree of great men mean nothing to God. God favors the poor workers who plow the fields and reap the crops.

In 4:13, poor believers are reminded that the plans, the self-confident buying and selling of rich merchants, stand under the judgment of God. As in 1:8–9, where the rich man is told to boast (καυχάσθω), the rich in 4:13–17 are reminded that they boast (καυξᾶσθε) in their arrogance and all such boasting (καύχησις) is vain. The message to the poor about their rich neighbors is the same in 1:8–9 and 4:13–17, namely, they will leave all their wealth behind them. Further, God will judge them for their oppression of the poor.

Judge, Theissen, Malherbe, Meeks, and others have successfully argued that the church in the Greek-speaking world had a component of members who had some measure of financial affluence.¹⁷ However, James seems to

¹⁴ C. L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 150, doubts that James resorts to irony in 1:10 because there are no other imperatives in the letter that are to be taken as the "direct opposite of their face value." James is hardly required to duplicate his figures of speech, but when he writes, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials" (1:2), he approaches the irony, though not the bitterness, of 1:10. In addition, "You desire and do not have; so you kill" (4:2) demonstrate his penchant for hyperbole. When James writes of the rich man's gold and silver, "It will eat your flesh like fire," and, "You have laid up treasure for the last days," the irony of 1:10 seems to be in character.

¹⁵ One is reminded of the way Hegesippus describes the relatives of Jesus as they stand before the emperor, "They then showed him their hands, adducing as testimony of their labor the hardness of their bodies, and the tough skin which had been embossed on their hands from their incessant work." Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.20.3.

¹⁶ E. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 34.

¹⁷ See W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 51–55 and the references listed there.

arise from a Syro-Palestinian milieu,¹⁸ a setting where there seems to be a large number of poor Christians.¹⁹ That is evidenced, among other things, by Paul's concern to remember the poor of Judea (Gal 2:10). The message of James suggests that in the part of the world he knows, there are no wealthy Christians.²⁰ As far as James is concerned, the rich are those who not only turn their backs on Christians, but who oppress them. He doesn't deal with the possibility that any of those who control land and property are believers.

Injustice and oppression of helpless people whose only economic asset was their labor was widespread in Syro-Palestine in the period immediately preceding the Roman War of AD 66–70, as Maynard-Reid has documented.²¹ Large landowners who managed estates *in absentia* manipulated the judicial system, forced smaller land owners to borrow at exorbitant interest rates, foreclosed on land, and added estate to estate. Those who controlled the machinery of government also controlled religion. It is well-known that Hillel, toward the end of the first century BC, allowed the wealthy the legal means for dismissing the requirements of the sabbatical year. The concluding part of the formula read, ". . . touching any debt due to me, I will collect it whensoever I will."²² Those who worked the land were slaves, hired laborers, tenants, or small land owners living in poverty, never more than a step from financial ruin.²³ It is hardly unexpected that such oppression resulted in actual financial ruin for some. To a considerable degree, desperation accounts for the brigandage and outbreaks of violence that characterized the period.²⁴

The setting of the book of James reflects life among the working poor in greater Roman Syria. It is against this background that we are to read, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (James 5:1–5).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the evidence see Adamson, *James* 51.

¹⁹ G. Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 56 describes and documents the anger generated in rural Palestine where absentee land owners exploited the labor of the poor.

²⁰ The relationship, if there is any, between the Ebionites of later record and Jewish Christians who look to the leadership of James is uncertain. The word itself is from the Hebrew, meaning "the poor." See S. Goranson, "Ebionites," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2:261.

²¹ P. U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) 87–90.

²² *M. Šeb.* 10:4.

²³ F. W. Heichelheim, "Roman Syria," *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1933–40) 4:146.

²⁴ R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 36–37. E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992) 158–159 believes that Horsley exaggerates the plight of the poor, but he concedes "the situation was bad enough."

II. THE RICH AND THE WORKING POOR ELSEWHERE IN THE BIBLE

Among Biblical documents, James is hardly alone in the message that God is the God of the working poor. Moses wrote, "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down" (Deut 24:14–15). James stands in the tradition of Israel's great prophets from Elijah who condemned Ahab for taking the family vineyard of Naboth to Micah, Isaiah, and Amos. Micah's words are strong, "Is it not for you to know justice?— you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones" (3:1b–2); "They covet fields, and seize them; and houses and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance" (2:2).

Commendable as giving alms to the destitute is, the Law of Moses has considerably more to say about God's insistence that justice be extended to the working poor. Those with the resources were to open wide their hand to lend to the poor who worked the land (Deut 15:7–11). Israel's judges were to refuse the bribes rich men could pay. Poor people, ignorant as they might be of the law, were to receive impartial justice (Deut 16:19–20). No one was to take his tools from a poor working man (Deut 24:6). Further, if one exacted security, he had no right to invade the privacy of the poor man's home or to keep what he had over night (Deut 24:10–14). Moses, like James, insisted that the poor man be paid his fair wages (Deut 24:14–15; James 5:4; cf. Lev 19:13). Never was an Israelite to defraud his poor neighbor by taking advantage of his ignorance. Just weights and measures offered protection for the working poor (Lev 19:36; Prov 11:1; Amos 8:5).

Though written into the law, protection for the working poor had meaning only when supported by political power. Nathan's story to David is instructive (2 Sam 12:1–6). When a rich man set upon a poor one and took his property, the appeal was to the king. When the king was just, the balance to economic power was political power. The justice system of Israel provided the setting for Nathan's complaint.²⁵ When justice is the issue, if there is an answer to economic power, it is the power of government.

God's stance on the side of the working poor extends into the NT. Mary's song proclaims, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1:52–53). Neither Mary nor her family were indigent beggars. It was for the poor folks who tilled the soil that she sang. The parable of Dives and Lazarus is of particular interest. Jesus said not a word of the wickedness of the rich man,²⁶ nor of the goodness of Lazarus.

²⁵ See U. Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," *Bib* 48 (1967) 207–242.

²⁶ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 632 says, ". . . the rich man may possibly be intended as an example of the misuse of wealth . . ." This is possible, but Jesus was free to describe the rich man however he chose. Jesus chose to say of him only that he was rich.

When we allow the parable to speak for itself, the rich man is merely rich and Lazarus is merely poor. The picture is of an old, used-up farmer whose family or neighbors brought to the door of the man who owned the lands he farmed. It is clear that Jesus, like James, is on the side of the poor.²⁷

III. IMPLICATIONS OF JAMES'S MESSAGE FOR A CHRISTIAN STANCE ON PUBLIC POLICY

There are policies of national debate where the moral choices have been clear. On them, evangelicals have spoken with a reasonably unified voice. To take the life of an unborn child is wrong. Further, it is wrong to take the life of an old man or woman because that life is inconvenient for someone. Euthanasia as normally understood cannot be tolerated. Unfortunately, all moral choices are not so clearly defined. Virtually every political or economic choice soon demonstrates itself to be laden with moral and ethical implications of enormous complexity.

Believers have discovered the difficult questions that arise when they wish to allow their voices in public policy to be Biblically informed. Welfare assistance, institutionalized favoritism, labor/management relationships, national defense, environmental deterioration, gun control, and many other questions are attended with frustrating ambiguities. Considering the complexities of the questions and the difficulty of assessing them in the light of Biblical teaching, it is noteworthy that Christians having a conservative religious stance have tended to gravitate toward a fixed set of political and economic postures. There are exceptions (especially among believers within minority groups), but evangelical Christians in the last quarter of the twentieth century have come increasingly to favor management over labor, strong national defense over pacifism, the NRA over gun control, and environmental expediency over conservation.²⁸

Because most political issues have economic implications, the message of James concerning the rich and the poor can be helpful for Christians who want their political choices to be Biblically informed. The message of James is at least this: Christians are to be a people whose sympathies and influence are to be for economic and social justice for the working poor, for the uneducated, for the disenfranchised of the societies where they live. Christians ought to favor public policy that allows people who labor to have some reasonable share in the goods and services their labor produces. James is on the side of the poor. He is more concerned that the laborers in the field receive their wage than in defending an abstract principle of free enterprise economics.²⁹

²⁷ W. Stegemann, *The Gospel of the Poor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 23–24 is correct when he writes of the movement associated with Jesus that it was one “of the poor for the poor.” Jesus and his disciples were poor people, sharing in “the desperate situation of many of their fellow country folk—particularly in Galilee—barely avoiding utter poverty.”

²⁸ See the enlightening discussion of A. Cerillo, Jr. and D. M. Dempster, *Salt and Light: Evangelical Political Thought in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 111–112.

²⁹ Free market economic policy has demonstrated its superiority. However, it is not to be overlooked that governments in western democracies have regulated the market with laws promoting

There is a tendency to confuse Christian responsibility toward the indigent poor and responsibility toward working poor. The indigent poor benefit from individual charitable acts. They need the necessities of life to be given to them. The working poor have other needs. Rather than charity, they need empowerment.³⁰ Christians can feed the hungry, but improvement in the lot of the working poor often requires changes at the structural level of society. Let us grant that, at the personal level, and at the level of congregational priorities, evangelical Christians have a fairly good record for supplying necessities for the indigent poor. They have manned food and clothing banks, contributed laborers for soup kitchens, and offered martyrs in violent neighborhoods.³¹

Where evangelical Christians have shown less courage is in supporting the working poor at the structural level. Evangelicals have contributed to the poor with one hand, and with the other they have raised their economic and political voice in favor of systems that often lock the poor into subsistence wages. What is worse, they have excused their lack of interest in institutionalized injustice by reasoning that the working poor are somehow responsible for their poverty.³²

There are large numbers in our society who scrape by, working in fast food stores, picking fruits and vegetables, and cleaning the filth of other people. They work hard, but they enjoy disproportionately few benefits from their labor.³³ When these people, millions strong, stand on one side of a political or economic question and those who control large blocks of capital stand on the other side, it is to be said to the chagrin of evangelical Christians that more often than not they have stood on the side of those who possess the capital. The religious conservative has become the bedfellow of the political right.³⁴ Evangelicals in large numbers have bought into a broad-based polit-

the common good. Environmental laws, laws guaranteeing the right of labor to bargain collectively, and minimum wage laws are examples. Whatever better lives people enjoy is to be credited not only to the free market but also to the laws that bring the free market under reasonable restraint.

³⁰ See S. C. Mott, "Poverty as Powerlessness," *Christian Social Action* 10 (April 1997) 37.

³¹ J. Wilson, "Mr. Wallis Goes to Washington: The Transformation of an Evangelical Activist," *Christianity Today* (June 14, 1999) 42 remarks on the social activism of early evangelicals and asks, "How can we recover the Spirit-directed activism of our ancestors?"

³² In his monumental work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932) 118, R. Niebuhr speaks to such reasoning. ". . . it has always been the habit of privileged groups," he writes, "to deny the oppressed classes every opportunity for the cultivation of innate capacities and then to accuse them of lacking what they have been denied the right to acquire."

³³ See, for example, P. Ryscavage, "A Surge in Growing Income Inequality," *Monthly Review of Labor* (1999) 52-62.

³⁴ The "Ninety-Five Theses," of Jerry Falwell, reproduced by A. Cerillo, Jr. and D. M. Dempster in *Salt and Light* 160-65, are a case in point. Propositions number 16, 19, and 22 include these lines: "That the free enterprise system of profit be encouraged to grow, being unhampered by socialistic laws or red tape." "That all other unproductive governmental financial programs be terminated, harmful programs which in themselves perpetuate poverty and laziness." "That less authority be vested in federal government." Whatever motives drive the affirmation of these propositions, they support properties interest, wealth, and power. One needs no more evidence than the fact that wealthy, propertied interests speak by using the same kind of language.

ical agenda authored by those who benefit from cheap labor, an agenda for which Biblical support is dubious at best. On the whole, evangelicals' sense of institutionalized social injustice has been somewhere between mediocre and non-existent.

The prophets not only found fault with injustice as practiced by individuals, but they raised voices against systems that oppressed the poor. When Elijah confronted Ahab over his taking Naboth's vineyard, it was an evil act on the part of Ahab, but equally important was the political structure that allowed a king to oppress a poor man. The kingship itself and its abuses were the object of Elijah's anger. Micah understood Jerusalem and Samaria to be the sources of injustice to the poor people of Moresheth. The system allowed for exploitation.

When Christians stand against the exercise of political power by government, by default they leave power in the hands of those who control wealth. Rather than imposing a sense of guilt on Christians by appealing for charity or calling for a self-denying life style,³⁵ a better approach is to teach believers that a Biblically informed political stance favors policy which gives the working poor resources to claim a more equitable share of the products and services a society produces. Rather than bringing used clothing or a Christmas dinner to the poor family who trim the grass at the golf course, rather than degrading the family further by reminding them of their dependence on charitable handouts, a better course is to favor a higher minimum wage so that no golf course will be at a competitive disadvantage when it pays its employees more fairly. Patrons will pay more for golf and the poor family will have earned its bread. Charity is not the answer any more than are governmental handouts. The answer is to revise the structure of the economy so that the poor share more equitably in its resources.

The masses of people, having little economic power, are able to fend off those who control capital principally through the exercise of government. Nathan's story to David illustrates this to be true even when a nation is ruled by a monarch. In Israel, the king was the protector of the poor. Psalm 72 reads, "Give the king thy justice, O God, . . ." It continues, "May he judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with justice! . . . May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor." The Psalmist goes on, "For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy, from oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight."

When tensions arise between those who own property and those who work the land and the fast food stores, when tensions arise between the rich and powerful on the one hand and the poor and vulnerable on the other, it is strange when Christians stand on the side of wealth and power. Many

³⁵ This is the weakness on the solution side of R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977). More recently, see C. L. Blomberg, "Give Me neither Poverty nor Riches: A New Testament Theology of Material Possessions," *Stone Campbell Journal* 2 (Fall 1999) 210.

years ago Abraham Kuyper made the point, "You do not honor God's Word if . . . you ever forget how Christ (just as his prophets before him and his apostles after him) invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and oppressed."³⁶ The Christian whose sympathy and delight rests with those who possess wealth and the power that derives from it is out of touch with James.

The best interests of the working poor ought to be defined by the working poor themselves. It is patronizing at best to claim to be on the side of the working poor while claiming to know their needs better than they do. People who work at low-paying and wearisome jobs know what their best interests are. There are clear voting patterns when people who work in shops, on production lines, farms and orchards, and fast food stores voice political choices. Those patterns are frequently at variance with those with large investments in factories and real estate. It is strange when the heirs of Moses, Micah, and James lift their voice and cast their vote in the same pattern with those in positions of privilege and power. It is strange to hear them denounce labor unions, the political voice of working masses, and to demand that government favor policy which effectively increases the portion of the nation's paycheck that goes into the hands of those who invest money, and less of it into the hands of those who have only their labor to invest.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to analyze why evangelical Christians have tended to cast their political lot with a conservative political agenda. In some measure, I suspect it is because there are certain issues, such as abortion on demand, that Christians feel strongly about. Those with a political agenda favoring wealth have tended to be attentive, though it is questionable how much they have delivered. In addition, evangelical Christians have, in many cases, crossed the railroad tracks. They have become the wealthy, the privileged establishment. In an interesting essay, Jim Wallis describes a Plymouth Brethren church in Detroit where he grew up. He describes changes he had seen over the years, as prosperity brought materialism, and with it an attentive ear to the agenda of the political right.³⁷ To some degree, evangelicals have come to have a more vested interest in conserving the status quo. They have become part of a social group protecting what it has, and as Niebuhr points out, social groups are not guided by the same moral standards one may expect from individuals.³⁸

³⁶ A. Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 62. Kuyper's speech was delivered before the First Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands, November 9, 1891.

³⁷ J. Wallis, "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: The Political Right Invades the Evangelical Fold," *Sojourners* 15 (May 1986) 20–23.

³⁸ *Moral Man* xxii: "Teachers of morals who do not see the difference between the problem of charity within the limits of accepted social system and the problem of justice between economic groups, holding uneven power within modern industrial society, have simply not faced the most obvious differences between the morals of groups and those of individuals."

The possession of things is bewitching. It is little wonder that Jesus warned, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Jesus dared to call on his followers to recognize their own propensity to move from oppressed to oppressors. Camara offers an insightful comment when he writes, "I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when he warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips, and hearts."³⁹

The message of James ought to challenge evangelical Christians to reconsider the uncritical manner in which many have adopted a political and economic stance frequently at odds with those whose principal asset is their labor. They may want to consider the benefits for the working poor that could result from public investment in job training, education, and housing. They may want to consider whether increases in the minimum wage for the humble folk who trim golf courses and sweep hallways is such a terrible thing. They may want to question whether the *summum bonum* of legislative acts is the reduction of taxes where the primary beneficiaries are those who already control the great share of wealth.⁴⁰ They may want to look more closely at a culture where the gap between the rich and the poor grows yearly. They might want to look again at the role constructive, representational government might play in maintaining a reasonable share of the goods and services society produces for people whose only asset is their labor. They may want to temper their criticisms of a democratically elected government, recognizing that government is the only recourse of people who have only their labor to sell. There are institutionalized structures so woven into society that they cannot be addressed by individual acts of charity. Sometimes only a just government can address deeply entrenched social problems. Evangelicals may want to reconsider whether the agenda of the political right and the agenda of Christians are compatible at all points.

³⁹ Quoted by Sider, *Rich Christians* 39.

⁴⁰ When tax cuts are aimed at the graduated income tax and capital gains taxes, the beneficiaries are apparent. *Business Week* (April 20, 1998) 84 points out that the average boss makes 326 times what the average worker in his factory makes. This is a statistic in which the U.S. leads the world.