The Ellul Studies Forum

A Forum For Scholarship on Theology in a Technological Civilization

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Faith and Wealth in a Technological Civilization

In his recent book *Circus of Ambition* (Warner, 1989) John Taylor documents "the culture of wealth and power in the eighties." If accurate, his findings are discouraging indeed. Coupled with unabashed greed and power-mongering we might also think of the latest trends in the human misery index: five-hundred million people starving, one billion persons living in absolute poverty, and two billion people with no regular, dependable water supply. By the end of this calendar year the United States will spend $6 billion to keep its peace-keeping troops in Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries. How should a Christian think, and take action, in light of such realities?

The present issue of the ***Ellul Studies Forum*** is devoted to Christian perspectives on wealth. It is my pleasure to thank our contributors and to introduce them to you. Our ***Forum*** authors are Thomas Schmidt and Justo Gonzalez.Thomas Schmidt completed Ph.D. studies at Cambridge University on the theme of hostility toward wealth in the Synoptic Gospels. He currently teaches New Testament studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA. Justo Gonzalez of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA, is perhaps best known for his two widely read works *The Story of Christianity* (2 vols., Harper, 1984) and *A History of Christian Thought* (3 vols., Abingdon, 1988, 13th printing). His most recent work, *Faith and Wealth* (Harper & Row, 1990), explores Christian attitudes toward wealth in the first four centuries of the church.

Concerning our reviewers, Don Thorsen is Professor of Theology at Azusa Pacific University, Graduate School of Theology, in Los Angeles. Michael Novak holds the George Fredrick Jewett Chair in Religion and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., and is the author of over twenty books. Our final contributor also hails from within he Beltway. After completing a Ph.D. in Religion and Society at Drew University, Dan Heimbach served as a Legislative Assistant for Indiana Senator Richard Lugar. He now serves on the White House staff at the Domestic Policy Council.

Daniel B. Clendenin
Guest Editor

Ellul Forum Conference at AAR, Nov. 17th

If you were confused by the announcement of the annual AAR conference in the last issue it was for good reason. The announcement indicated that the meeting would be held on Friday, November 17th. THAT WAS AN ERROR. The Ellul Forum will meet on **Saturday (not Friday) November 17th**, from 10 a.m. to 12 noon in the Lafayette room of the New Orleans Marriott. Thomas Hanks, author of *God So Loved the Third World* will present a "Critical Appraisal of Ellul's Sexual Ethics." Hanks is pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He will be responded to by Nancy A. Hardesty, Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, and by Catherine Kroeger, who holds a Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Minnesota and specializes in women in the ancient world. This forum is open to anyone who is interested.

In This Issue

Book Reviews

Money and Power by Jacques Ellul.
Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1984.
Reviewed by Daniel Clendenin, William Tyndale College.

(Reprinted with permission from the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* 27:2, June 1984.)

Readers interested in the steady stream of books form the pen of Jacques Ellul will be happy to learn of the recent translation of one of his older works. *Money and Power*, first published in 1954, with a second edition in 1979, is a theological study that examines the most practical of subjects -- money-- in light of the Biblical revelation. This translation of *L'Homme et l'argent* by LaVonne Neff comes with a foreword by David Gill and an "afterword" by Ellul from the 1979 edition. Readers need not fear that the work is thirty years behind the times for, in Ellul's works, since 1950 "much has changed in appearance, little in reality." Besides, those familiar with the prophet from Bordeaux know that his creative insights and provocative analyses always make for valuable reading.

Our problem with money, writes Ellul, is that it has become abstract and impersonal. As a result we tend to subordinate the individual to the collective and look for answers in a better economic system. This search for a systemic solution is not only wrongheaded, for it overlooks the subjective element of fallen human nature; it is also hypocritical and cowardly, for it constitutes a cop-out. We blame the system and deny the importance of our personal responsibility and individual actions. Collective action is not unimportant. Far from it. But it must always be rooted in a deep sense of individual responsibility.

In the OT, wealth represents God's blessing and reward. The stories of Abraham, Job and Solomon remind us of this. Wealth was even a "sacrament," Ellul suggests, a material sign of a greater spiritual reality. Wealth was bestowed freely, it represented God's superabundant grace, and it had both prophetic and eschatological characteristics. The sacramental sign, however, was always subordinated to the spiritual reality it signified, and our mistake today is to directly identify wealth with blessing.

Jesus Christ abolished the sacramental nature of wealth, for he himself is the ultimate blessing: "What would the gift of wealth mean now that God has given His Son?" He is now our only wealth." Jesus also shows us the true nature of money. It is not only a material reality that raises moral issues but also a spiritual power that is both active and personal. It is a god that we are tempted to worship. The problems it raises are not only external (oppression, for example) but internal (temptation), and Jesus forces us to choose between it and the true God.

Of special interest in *Money and Power* is Ellul's fourth chapter ("Children and Money"), a discussion that is as unusual as it is needed and helpful. How can we teach our children about money? First, we must adopt a "strict realism" that rejects all idealism and abstraction. Then by attitudes and actions, examples and opportunities, parents must assume a "dialectical" position. We must show our children, for example, that money is useful and necessary, but not for that reason "good," that it is not contemptible, but not respectable either, or something that we worship. Finally, we must avoid moralism and negativism and must realize that a spiritual power can only be fought with the spiritual weapon of prayer.

Ellul addresses these and a host of other practical questions. Who are the poor, and how can the Christian respond to them with meaning and integrity? What are we to make of the many Biblical passages that seem to automatically condemn the rich and bless the poor? What about savings accounts, insurance, asceticism and giving? After reading Ellul's theological study, one is impressed with the sheer number and extent of passages in the Bible that bear on the topic of money. Readers will certainly not agree with all of his conclusions or with his exegesis, but that is no matter. As Gill writes in the foreword, Ellul never writes merely to enlighten a theoretical problem or to elicit intellectual assent. His purpose is to incite action, provoke our thinking and affect our lives. Those open to such a spiritual challenge will by no means be disappointed by Ellul's creative analysis of this sensitive and vital issue.

Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society
by Max L. Stackhouse. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, xiv + 177 pp.
Reviewed by Daniel Heimbach, the White House, Washington D.C.

In this book Max Stackhouse seeks no less than to reconstruct the public relevance of Christian theology for the modern world. What he has written is partly an apology for the social legitimacy and public relevance of Christian witness, partly identification of resources for the practice of Christian sociology, and partly demonstration that theological perspectives are still needed to understand the deeper dynamics of life in community. Without question, Stackhouse issues a timely reminder that Christians not only can but must "responsibly link our theology to the structures and dynamics of the emerging political economy in a way that guides, refines, and selectively transforms that which is destructive and selectively sustains that which is creative and redemptive" (p. 174).

The work revolves around the conviction that theological ideas play a decisive role in social life and cannot be dismissed as idiosyncratic rationalizations of private faith. "Any transcendent reality worth attending to has implications for what we think and do on earth" having a "direct bearing on how we conduct worldly affairs" (p. x). It is motivated by the author's view that the resources of Christian insight have seldom and adequately come to grips with key features of modern institutional life such as corporations, modern technology, and the multiplication of professions.

Stackhouse begins by laying out four touch stones of authority that enable us to speak in the public domain about ultimate moral reality and to discuss norms regarding why and how human life in community should be directed, sustained and corrected. These touchstones are: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. He goes on to outline several "motifs" or "themes" that together constitute a matrix of foci for the liberation, vocation, covenant, moral law, sin, human freedom, ecclesiology, Trinity, and Christology. Stackhouse equates these with "ultimate principles of meaning" (p. 17) able to provide normative moral guidance. Each is described and discussed, but only as it pertains to the author's immediate purpose. "Trinity" is thus the idea that unity can be achieved without destroying diversity, that diversity need not be a threat to ultimate truth. "Christology" is the theme of cultural transformation in the name of Christ, which Stackhouse identifies with the formation of a Christian sociology (p. 36).

After "re-" constructing the framework of a public theology in the early chapters, Stackhouse spends the remainder of the book articulating a renewed metaphysical-moral (viz. theological) vision of political (viz. public) economy. In other words, he gets down to the business of demonstrating the practical relevance of Christian theology for politics and economics. Here he addresses four topics: (1) the exercise of political power, (2) the rise of the corporation as the decisive center of production, (3) modern technology, and (4) pluralism as marked by the proliferation of professions.

In my view, Stackhouse makes his most worthy contributions in the practical sections of his work. For example, he warns against the politicization of religion. Politicization results from a confusion of piety with political power and a failure to adequately respect the importance of separating the institutional arrangements of church and state. He goes on, however, to stress that the value of institutional separation does not exhaust the meaning of piety and power. In fact, political power needs the sanction of religious authority to establish its moral legitimacy. Piety shapes political possibility, and "the shape of the dominant piety will shape the future of power" (p. 102).

Students of Jacques Ellul will be interested in how Stackhouse treats modern technology and the dramatic way it has increased our ability to intervene in nature. He observes that theological assessments of technology have gone to opposite extremes. Ellul is treated as a paragon of the pessimistic extreme which views technology as evil -- a danger that offers the illusion of mastery of the universe alienating us from God. Ellul's approach is contrasted to others, like Arend van Leeuwen, who have praised technology as so much a product of the Judeo-Christian belief system that it qualifies as a form of evangelism. Stackhouse settles on a middle-of-the-road approach that appreciates the moral ambiguities of technology but does not exclude recognition of its promise.

Because the book goes to the heart of a heated controversy over the legitimate place of theological witness in a pluralistic society, it will attract criticism and I have some of my own. First, is the rather unusual use of terms beginning with"public" as a modifier for theology. If the word has any meaning, it suggests something to be distinguished from a "private" theology that is idiosyncratic and without relevance to others. By accepting the distinction, Stackhouse sanctions an idea which although it is not novel among the detractors of theology is rarely associated with theologians themselves. "Democratization" is another term employed in a problematic manner. For Stackhouse it means the application of theological resources to the public domain. This usage is wholly unique and unsuspecting readers are warned not to be led astray by the seemingly familiar.

Second, is the almost comic way that Stackhouse undermines his own efforts to buck the intellectual forces of privatization that would exclude theological insight with its call to transcendent moral accountability from the arenas of public life. Although all the motives upon which he relies for normative comment are taken from Scripture (covenant, vocation, Trinity, etc.), Stackhouse so diminishes the authority of Scripture that one is left wondering how he can analyze the dimensions of public life with such confidence. For example, Stackhouse does not believe one can really go to Scripture to read the thoughts of God. Scriptural truth is relative and can change over time. No scripture passage can stand alone to settle what is true. Essentially, Stackhouse denies the normative standing of Scripture text. Thus he actually reinforces the idea that, perhaps more than any other, is responsible for moving people to conclude that theological insight is irrelevant to the public domain.

Stackhouse has written a book to define and defend the public relevance of Christian theology, and has made a fairly stimulating contribution worth consideration by the discriminating specialist. but while the book contains flashes of insight that will reinvigorate believers who may have begun to doubt the legitimacy of applying theological resources to the public domain, Stackhouse has not made a case to convince those who do not already accept the presuppositions of Christian faith, those upon whom it is hoped a public witness by Christians may have an effect.

Faith and Wealth by Justo L. Gonzalez. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1990.

Reviewed by Michael Novak. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

The author of the three-volume *A History of Christian Thought* and professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, Justo L. Gonzalez, has been so moved by liberation theology, he confesses, that he began "asking different questions of the same texts and paying more attention to texts dealing specifically with the economic and social order." Such texts, he found, were central to the life of the early church, even though they have usually been treated as tangential to it. One central question preoccupies him: "What Christians thought and taught regarding the rights and responsibilities of both rich and poor," a study of the history of *ideas,* not of economic history. The ancients, he notes, "had no word for our modern concept of economics: and for good reason -- "they also lacked the concept." They understood

> The connections between the availability of commodities and price fluctuations. They speculated on why money is valuable and the connections between monetary value and societal conventions. What they did not do is link all this together into a coherent view of economic phenomena and their behavior. Much less did they see any connections but the most obvious between government policy and economic order. Not until the time of Diocletian did the Roman Empire have anything that even remotely resembled a budget. Even then, they apparently had little understanding between inflation and the money supply. Thus, while rulers were often concerned about the plight of the poor -- for the threat they posed, if for no other reason -- their only remedies were stopgap measures such as doles. (p. xiv)

For this reason Gonzalez prefers to speak of "faith and wealth" rather than of "faith and economics," since "strictly speaking, the ancient Christians, like all ancient Romans, had no economics."

The book is divided into three parts: the background of the ancient world; the pre-Constantinian writers on faith and wealth (from the New Testament to Origen, Tertullian and Lactantius); and the period after Constantine, from Athanasius and the Cappadocians to Augustine. A brief concluding summary rounds off the book.

There are wonderful nuggets throughout, from the aristocratic Ambrose, who thought that working the land was the only noble occupation, whereas commerce is robbery, to the Cappadocian who taught that international commerce is one of the most dazzling metaphors for the interdependence of the Mystical Body of Christ. The variety in this testimony, the singularity and brilliance of individual views, and the differences in level of insight (both into wealth creating and to Christian truth) are a most interesting feature of this compendium.

Nonetheless, Professor Gonzalez is able to show convincingly that there was considerable consensus on certain limited matters. First, what a person does with his wealth (or with his poverty) is never considered irrelevant to Christian faith. Second, given the role of money and economic knowledge at the time, usury (practically any loan on interest) was universally condemned, even though a moderate amount of interest was legal according to civil law. Again, the early writers stress, as some pagan writers also did, that the seeker after wealth exhibits an unappeased appetite and a disposition to worry, i.e., a sad kind of poverty. (A seeker after wealth is different from a creator of wealth, but the latter concept had not yet appeared in history.)

Other common beliefs: In giving to the poor, one lends to God, and so almsgiving is a very important religious activity. The rich are at a disadvantage when it comes to entering the Kingdom, partly because their wealth gives them both greater responsibilities and partly because it occasions distraction and seduction. Again, "in spite of the unanimously negative attitude toward accumulating wealth, writers share an equally unanimous positive attitude toward the things themselves that constitute wealth" (p. 226). So one must carefully distinguish between meanings of the world "wealth" -- it can mean both things and their accumulation. Against gnostic notions about the evil of material creation, the church fathers were careful to insist that all things, including those that are usually counted as wealth, are good. But they also warn against the passion for accumulation and an inordinate love for things.

Great emphasis was also placed upon the voluntary nature of the sharing of goods in common, as was practiced in the first generations. This was later softened to almsgiving, but even here the early Church fathers commanded that one should keep for oneself only what is necessary and give the superfluous to the needy, because "What is superfluous to some is necessary to the poor" (St. Augustine). On these matters, "the teachers and pastors we have been studying are flexible enough not to set stringent rules but to let believers determine what in their own case is necessary and what is superfluous, although some advise that believers should not make this decision strictly on their own, but rather guided by a spiritual mentor. Augustine also suggests the tithe as a minimum measure" (p. 227).

All the early writers take private property for granted, and Clement of Alexandria argues that without private property, no one could obey the commandment of Jesus to give to the poor. Some authors argue that private property exists only because of our fallen condition. In contrast with Roman law, which considered property rights absolute, Christian authors stressed that property ultimately belongs to God; that human beings can claim no more than a temporary ownership of it, a kind of stewardship; and, third, that Christians will be judged on their use of their own property, and specifically how they have shared it with those in need.

As Gonzalez points out, Ambrose stands practically alone in condemning trade, as when he declared that God made the sea for fishing an not for sailing; whereas Chrysostom praises God for creating the sea so that people can travel long distances and meet each other's material needs through trade. And Lactantius declares that just as God gave antlers to the deer to defend itself, humankind has been given each other, so that through social life, mutual support, and trade, we may defend ourselves.

Gonzalez also notes certain development in Christian thought, as time went on. More and more stress comes to be placed upon enjoying the things of this world as a way of pleasing God, and learning to raise one's heart in gratitude and in detachment. The proof of such detachment is the serenity one maintains when eveything is taken away -- as quite often happened under conquest, plague, and famine in the ancient world. "Things are to be used, not enjoyed," in the sense that preoccupation with things must be avoided. Ironically, this later teaching suggests that the affluent who do not have to worry about material things may be less spiritually threatened than the very poor whose preoccupation with them is necessary.

Gonzalez closes on this note; "The doctrine of creation remains one of the pillars on which most of the authors we have studied build their arguments on the proper use of wealth" (p. 232). This is exactly the conclusion reached by Pope John Paul II, the reason for his stress on creation theology. By contrast, liberation theology has very little to say about the creation of new wealth, which is badly needed in order to feed and to clothe growing populations, whereas creation theology shares in two important modern insights into the nature of wealth. First, wealth does not consist primarily in land, gold, or precious objects, but in creative ideas. Second, as the main cause of wealth is human capital, or mind, so the main condition for its creation is a social structure favorable to invention, the free exchange of ideas, and free intellectual interaction: in short, "the system of natural liberty."

Not until Adam Smith, alas, was there clarity about the nature and cause of wealth of nations sufficient to constitute the new science of economics. Nonetheless, both Gonzalez and contemporary liberation theologians neglect this new knowledge; they think of wealth in a pre-modern, pre-economic way. In the modern view, the main cause of wealth is not conquest or plunder, as the ancients thought, living in their walled cities against just such eventualities; rather, the cause of wealth is invention, discovery, innovation. Under these new circumstances, new wealth can be created without taking anything from anybody else. The early Christian writers lacked such sophistication; basic concepts of economics (including wealth and its creation) had not yet been formulated, and many modern theologians still entertain premodern conceptions of wealth. Gonzalez does not help us to overcome this deficiency.

Just the same, in commending intense concern for the poor, and both detachment from material things and respect for them as gifts of God, the early Christian writers taught some moral lessons of enduring value. Yet on the urgent questions that concern us today -- how to design systems of political economy that will raise the poor out of poverty, and how to nourish Christian prayer and virtue in a prosperous society (whose economic system works) the early Church writers have very little to say. How could they? Systematic reasoning about economic matters would require many more centuries of trial and error -- some thirteen more centuries after Augustine -- before it would come to fruition. Indeed, there is still more to do on this front today; the development of economics and of Christian reflection upon it is not at an end. This book is a useful text in such reflection, but it is marred by its lack of sophistication about modern economics. One wishes that the same texts would be read in a more sophisticated light; one suspects that they might have much to say about creation theology, human capital, and the inventive power of mind.

Reviews Continued on pages 6.

Forum

Some Reflections on Faith and Wealth

Justo L. González
Columbia Theological Seminary

I have been asked to write a reflection on the ethical ramifications of my recent book, *Faith and Wealth*. In some ways, I am more inclined to reflect on its theological ramifications. The reason for this is that, partly as a result of my research, I have begun to see the value of a different approach to issues of theology and ethics. As a theologian, what I find most significant in my research is the central role that issues of faith and wealth play in the theology of most early Christian writers. Many of us have been formed in an academic tradition in which there is a separate field of "social ethics," whose principles of action are largely drawn as corollaries from theology and doctrine. From this perspective, issues of wealth are an appendix to issues of faith. Theology has to do with the doctrine of the Trinity, of creation, etc. Money, on the other hand, is an ethical issue. First we must clarify the faith, and then we may discuss matters of wealth.

That is not what I find in most Christian writers of the first four centuries. On the contrary, to them issues of wealth are integral to issues of faith, to the point that a test of orthodoxy is how one deals with the widow, the orphan and the poor. If one were to take as an example Ambrose's doctrine of creation, one would soon see that this doctrine is also an understanding of property rights and their limits. Thus, one does not do theology first, and then reflect on its ethical implications. Rather, one lives out a faith, one practices an ethic, and in the very process of that living out, one begins to reflect on the theological dimensions of the faith.

Thus, what has most intrigued me as my research has progressed is not the number of passages dealing with faith and wealth (literally, hundreds of them), nor the surprisingly radical statements contained in many of them, but the scant attention that such passages have received in later centuries -- and certainly among North-Atlantic Protestant scholars. Why is it that we have been so interested in discovering what Ambrose had to say about creation, or about baptism, but not in what he had to say about money and about property?

One may take as an example the emphasis in the early church on the commonality of property. It is clear that when we speak of such commonality our statements need to be nuanced, for what was meant by such commonality is different from much that is meant today by the same phrase. But even so, the notion of the commonality of property persisted as an ideal, and often as a practice, for much longer than we usually imagine. Even words that we today use in a different sense, such as *koinonía* --and especially the verb, *koinonéin*-- have meanings and overtones relating to such commonality. Much could be said about this. In the limited space available here it should suffice to indicate that, when two people are *koinonói*, this does not mean that they have "fellowship" with each other, but rather that they are partners in a business venture, or that they own something in common. And *koinonéin* does not mean to have nice feelings towards each other, but to share with each other -- which is also true of the Latin counterpart, *communicare*. In any case, what I find surprising is not all of this, but rather that, in spite of so much talk about *koinonía* --and perhaps because of it -- we have somehow managed to take the teeth out of what was a very radical understanding of the Christian community and of stewardship within it. Thus, the primary question is not whether we should practice the *koinonía* of the early church. That certainly is open to debate, since there are many differences between the social and economic order of late antiquity and ours. The primary question is why we have done so much to obscure what the early church said and did about its own *koinonía*.

As I reflect on these matters, it is clear to me that the reason for such historical neglect and misrepresentation is not primarily historical, but ethical. It is not that we have not had the texts available to us. It is rather that we have had reason to fear what the texts say. Indeed, when late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth there were a few scholars --mostly Roman Catholic monastics living under vows of poverty-- who began unearthing some of the more radical economic views of the "Fathers," there soon was a strong reaction seeking to suppress and to ridicule their findings. As one now reads the texts from those debates, it is evident that what was at stake was not so much the historical question of what the ancients said, but the fear that this could be used to bolster modern socialist ideas. Those who attacked the so-called socialist interpretation of the "Fathers" did so under the guise of historians and theologians; but in truth they were defenders of the status quo. In the final analysis, the question was not historical, but ethical.

The same is true today. Ultimately, the question for us is not what the ancients said, but what we are to say and to do. The ancients may serve us as an example; but we have no right to shift unto their shoulders the responsibility for whatever decisions we make. Indeed, what we can see and read in their texts will greatly depend on the degree to which we are actively seeking God's will for us today, and certainly upon the particular calling which we have received from God.

Then, as I reflect on these matters, I can only do so as the person I am, one who has been called and ordained as a teacher and pastor to God's flock. Economists may be led by my book and by the writings of the ancients to a different series of reflections. But I am not an economist, and do not pretend to be. I am a pastor and a preacher, and it is as such that I read the ancients and seek to draw implications for my present task.

As a pastor in a North-American denomination most of whose members are far wealthier than the vast majority of humankind, I do have much to learn from the ancients and their preaching. When reading their writings, and especially their sermons, I am immediately led to ask, why were these early Christian preachers ready and able to preach in such a way? Clearly, the first requisite for such preaching is conviction. We must not think that such preaching was easy or did not involve a cost. It was precisely because of his preaching on matters such as this that Chrysostom died in exile. And for the same reasons Basil, Ambrose and others clashed with bureaucrats, landowners, and emperors.

This conviction included a genuine pastoral concern for the rich in their congregations. Chrysostom's words to that effect were no mere rhetorical device. He was indeed convinced that, were he not to speak the truth to those among his flock who were rich, and show them the radical demands of the Gospel, he would be leading them towards damnation. Furthermore, some who had the harshest words against the greed of the rich had themselves come from the richer classes: Ambrose, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa. They were not thundering against "the rich" in general.

Many of "the rich" were their relatives and friends with whom they had grown up. It was out of concern for them that Basil said that those who withhold food from the hungry, or clothing from the naked, are nothing but "thieves." And for the same reason his brother Gregory of Nyssa bewails the fate of households whose wealth could relieve the misery of many, without themselves suffering from it.

Then, such preaching was possible because the preachers themselves had embraced a different way of life. Belonging themselves to a class where success in life was counted on the basis of the accumulation of wealth, they had refused to follow that path. All of them had given all or most of their own possessions to the poor, and lived very modestly. Indeed, this is a common theme in ancient Christian biography, to the point that it becomes the *sine qua non* of holiness. Preachers such as Ambrose and Basil could show the folly of a societal system in which people were valued according to their possessions, precisely because they themselves had given up their possessions. They could speak of giving money to the poor rather than to the church and its treasury, because they saw themselves as pastors of an entire city, rich and poor, and not as managers and builders of the assets of an institution.

What does all of this mean for us? I do not really know. Or rather, I think I know . . . but I am afraid to find out! Perhaps one of the reasons why we do not hear much of this sort of preaching today is that we preachers have ourselves embraced a way of life in which our value and success are measured by our own income, which in turn is largely determined by the size of our churches and the class to which our membership belongs. Perhaps one of the reasons is that we are more concerned for the wellbeing of the church as an institution than we are for the wellbeing of the poor. Perhaps, over the years, we have grown accustomed to an interpretation of the gospel that is more amiable and less demanding. Perhaps we no longer consider the poor part of the flock whom we must defend. Perhaps we no longer really consider ourselves shepherds of the rich, for whose souls we must answer. Perhaps . . . .

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Editor: Darrell J. Fasching
Book Review Editor: Dan Clendenin

Book Reviews Continued

The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death. Douglas John Hall. Rev. Ed., Eerdmans for the Commission on Stewardship, National Council of Churches, 1988, 144 pages.

Reviewed by Don Thorsen, Azusa Pacific University

In *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death,* Douglas John Hall refers to the ancient concept of stewardship as an all-encompassing symbol for the meaning of the Christian life. Hall contends that Christians should live as stewards of life in a world that can legitimately be called a "kingdom of death" -- a world in which people experience suffering, injustice, oppression, war, and the threat of nuclear holocaust. Hall conceives of "life" in terms of the present world, and the Christian mission is to act, confront, resist, and protest in ways that improve the quality of our world. He rejects the"spiritualization" of the gospel characteristic of most contemporary churches(100). Hall wants to reverse the process of presenting eternal life as something that comes in the future. Instead, the abundant and eternal life of God's kingdom should be conceived "concretely as a quality that belongs to the here-and-now" (115).

The structure of Hall's book consists of five meditations upon passages in scripture, drawing upon the central motif they present. In these meditations, Hall discusses the current confusion in Christian mission, the deathlike orientation of the world, God's covenant with life here-and-now, the Christian mandate to become involved in God's plan for the world, and the hope of effecting qualitative changes in all dimensions of life. Hall provides dialogues for discussion at the end of each chapter and a brief synopsis of the five meditations at the end of the book.

Hall exudes passion for Christians to recognize their responsibility to live as Christians **in the world.** He realizes the depth of problems facing people today, and strives to persuade Christians to "participate in God's mission to preserve and enhance the world's life in the midst of civilizational decay and death" (124). Hall considers the stewardship of life a mandate to act in accordance with the covenant of life God has made with the whole creation (and not just people). This mission implies a strong polemic against war and a quest for justice that is hard for peoples of affluent nations to grasp.

The use of meditations is a provocative approach to the subject of he book, but Hall's exegesis is not. Hall is as guilty of ignoring the contest of scriptural passages and of offering a truncated gospel as those he criticizes of spiritualizing the Christian message. For example, Hall romanticizes the older Testament tradition of Judaism as if it represents a pristine source of divine truth without influence from other cultures, and repudiates much of the newer Testament due to Hellenistic influences. As a result, Hall considers Christians to be stewards of a "political gospel" (54), which sacrifices the holistic nature of the Christian message -- found in the older as well as newer Testament -- for the sake of rectifying centuries of social irresponsibility. A more compelling scriptural argument could be made on behalf of his concern for stewardship of life in a kingdom of death.

The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death represents the revised edition of an earlier book by the same name. Hall did not make extensive changes in his revised edition, but tried to clarify points which readers found ambiguous in the original. In particular, Hall responds to confusion over his criticism of Christian "evangelicalism" as too diffuse. So in several places he distinguishes between traditional forms of Christian conservativism and popular contemporary expressions of Christian triumphalism. However, Hall continues to generalize and sometimes caricature what he refers to as sectarian (fundamental, evangelical, and spiritualistic) Christianity.

Luke 14:33 and the Normativity of Dispossession

Thomas E. Schmidt
Westmont College

Ellul and Voluntary Poverty

Ellul's *Money and Power* offers many insights which fly in the face of current politicized discussions of the subject and which are, in my opinion, supported by close scrutiny of the Gospels. Key among these are the link between personal wealth and independence from God, the expansion of the definition of the poor (and Jesus as the Poor One) beyond economic and political categories, and the suggestion that the appropriate response is personal and non-programmatic. My purpose in this essay is to extend the last area of discussion from a biblical theological perspective.

Ellul concludes the book by making the Rich Young Ruler story a paradigm of the Christian response (161):

> We see in this story everything we have described up to this point: material emptying ("see what you possess"), spiritual emptying ("follow me"), joining the ranks of the poor without there being any social solution, without any amelioration of their fate ("give to the poor").

Rightly pointing out that all are rich who "know the impassable distance that still remains between them and the Poor One" (156), Ellul appears to confirm the normativity of the passage. But while he is not specific, he seems to understand this *essentially and not literally.* Commenting earlier on the same passage (113-114), he remarks:

> But could we not ask if, as a result of our personal consecration, we should not give all of our goods? We think of the case of the rich young man to whom Jesus said, "Sell *all* that you have and distribute to the poor...and come, follow me" (Lk 18:22). We absolutely must not try to sidestep this order, for example by separating the scriptural commandments given to perfected Christians from the others. We must, on the contrary, accept the order with all its vigor and its absolute character. Yet even so, this order is rather unusual; we do not find it frequently in either Old or New Testament. We must take it then as a possibility that is always present, a demand that we cannot avoid but that is given only in exceptional cases to people especially called to follow it.

Many interpreters make similar comments in order to dismiss the passage, but Ellul attempts to retain its force. While I do not think that he goes as far as the Gospels warrant, Ellul is consistent with his conclusion when he goes on to suggest that, while "total giving...is not a *sine qua non* of the Christian life," and while it will be "always the exception," nevertheless, "each Christian is called to consider this vocation as a possibility"; it is in fact "a sign and a prophetic act" (114-115). It is refreshing to see a self-described evangelical dare to take the Gospel demands so seriously. My purpose is to affirm this daring by considering carefully a single text which appears to call for complete dispossession of material goods as a condition of discipleship.

The Importance of Luke 14:33

Why a single text? Certainly the avoidance of the "vocation" of voluntary poverty has been served historically by those who can counter any one text by providing an example of a rich saint, or by noting that Jesus did not always demand total renunciation, or by claiming that such texts are aimed at a bad attitude which not everyone shares. Thus individual passages are rendered powerless by qualifications. Although I have argued elsewhere that such responses are exegetically unsound (not to mention self-serving)[1], it is not merely the limitation of space which leads here to a narrow focus. Rather, I wish to extend Ellul's advocacy of each Christian's consideration of the "call" by *amplifying the voice.* What I mean is that a recognition of the centrality of Jesus should mean that we focus on him for our ethics. If he has a lot to say on a given subject--and on this one he does--we should pay close attention. If he says approximately the same thing in several different ways at several different times--which in this area he does--any one of those sayings is worthy of our attention. Thus *unless Jesus is ethically peripheral or inconsistent, any one command of his will merit the designation "normative."* This implies, first, that no command of Jesus should be neglected or cursorily interpreted. It also implies that Scriptural exceptions and alternative biblical models must be understood in light of Jesus as the central focus of the Scriptures, not the other way around. The record of the Church in recognizing these implications is a sorry one. Let us set that record aside for several pages and proceed as if one text, Luke 14:33, were the sole and sufficient statement of Jesus on the subject of economic ethics.

The verse is important for several reasons. Its placement is significant as the culminating passage in a chapter devoted to the subject of wealth and its relation to power (Ch. 16 and 18-19 are also important in this regard). The material in the passage gives evidence of extensive reworking by Luke to make its point as forcefully as possible. But perhaps most important for our purposes, there can be no mistaking the intended audience of the demand. Several of the sayings in Luke's Gospel that require dispossession of material goods may be sidestepped as directed only to the Twelve (5:11, 28; 6:20-21; 16:9; 12:33; 18:29-30) or to particular individuals (12:21; 16:14-31; 18:22; 19:8). 14:33 is not so subtle: whoever does not meet the condition "cannot be my disciple." "Disciple" (*mathetes*) is employed consistently in Acts to designate believers and so cannot be confined to followers of Jesus during his earthly ministry.[2] Indeed, were we to do so, we would lose the force not only of this but of virtually every command directed to disciples in the Gospel, and we would be forced to consider the ten chapters on discipleship to be intended as an interesting historical specimen. This is hardly admissable; we are left with a verse that is clearly intended to have some practical significance to believers of Luke's generation--and by extension, to believers of our own generation. Precisely what does the demand entail?

The Context: The Cost Has Been Counted

> For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build, and was not able to finish." Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:28-33).

"Counting the Cost" is the traditional title for these parables in commentaries. They follow the Parable of the Great Banquet and thus raise questions about the continuity of the chapter. If the "excuse makers" and the "disenfranchised" of the parable represent, respectively, the rejecters and receivers of the Kingdom, the ethical instruction of vv. 7-14 seems out of place. Banquet-attenders are instructed in vv. 7-11 to take humble places, and banquet-providers are instructed in vv. 12-14 to invite humble guests.

Critical commentators who regard the following parable as a literary vehicle to convey rejection or acceptance of Jesus often regard this ethical instruction as secondary moralizing. But a better explanation involves an appreciation of the convergence of ethical and soteriological matters in the first century Jewish mind. One's behavior at a banquet was in fact indicative of one's eternal destination, and the decision to accept or reject Jesus's invitation to the Kingdom generally coincided with social position. Thus when we conclude that the unifying theme of vv. 7-24 is that a person ought to renounce power or "humble" himself, this must be understood in terms of both inward orientation and outward manifestation (behavior and/or position). Therefore, while at a narrative level the transition from banquet parable to outdoor address is awkward, the continuity of theme justifies the construction of the chapter. The common theme is that personal sacrifice is an essential expression of one's standing before God. More specifically, economic sacrifice, or identification with the poor (perhaps in the sense of becoming poor), will mark an individual as a subject of the Kingdom.

At first glance, v. 33 appears to be an overly specific inference from the parables of vv. 28-32, and commentators have struggled to make sense of the connection. The explanation is found in the connection to vv. 26-27, which precede the parables:

> If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

The saying about family loyalty occurs in Matthew in another context (10:37), and the cross-bearing saying occurs in different contexts in three places (Mark 8:34; Matt 10:38; Luke 9:23-25). The formal connection between vv. 26-27 and v. 33 is obvious in the beginning, "Whoever does not...". The specific objects of sacrifice are repeated elsewhere in the Gospels and are in fact combined in the important summary of the Rich Young Ruler passage (Luke 18:29). The pattern in this passage, while unusual by modern standards, involves putting the central statement in the middle of the list. This B-A-B pattern means that v. 27 is the general statement, and vv. 26 and 33 are the specifications of it. This is confirmed grammatically by the *gar* which connect the parables as the ground of v. 27 and the *oun* which connects v. 33 as the inference from the parables.

This review of the context and structure of the passage helps to establish the general import of 14:33, but some crucial questions remain with regard to the parables and the meaning of the verse itself. The parables, as they are usually interpreted, present the unique notion that an individual calculates in advance whether or not he or she has "what it takes" (presumably spiritual strength) to become a follower of Jesus. It is also very odd to *infer* from this that discipleship is conditional upon renunciation, and I will suggest that another understanding of the parables clears away the confusion. The terms in v. 33 introduce another series of questions. Does "renounce" require physical abandonment or only mental detachment or "readiness" to part with things? Does "all that he has" mean material possessions or earthly attachments in general? Does "disciple" denote anyone who will enter the Kingdom or only those with a particular vocation? After setting out a new interpretation of the parables and their connection to the demands, I will argue for the first option in each case and then offer some thoughts about the practicability of the passage.

Inadequacy of Resources in the Parables of vv. 28-32

J. Jeremias summarizes the traditional explanation of the parables in vv. 28-32: "Do not act without mature consideration, for a thing half done is worse than a thing never begun."[3] There are two objections to this explanation. First, it presents an exception to the normal call to discipleship--and indeed, the surrounding demands--by describing it as deliberative and focused on the resources of the individual rather than the resources of God. Second, it makes the parables virtually irrelevant to v. 33. We should expect a consonant summary, such as, "Therefore, you must choose from the beginning to endure to the end." Instead, we find a resumption of the "humble yourself" theme.

A. Jülicher approached an acceptable understanding of the parables by arguing that both parables stress complete sacrifice as necessary to accomplish an important task.[4] The weakness of this understanding was noted by Wellhausen, who pointed out that v. 33 requires the opposite: instead of committing all of one's resources to the task, one must abandon one's resources.[5] Jülicher's explanation meets this objection of the parables' conclusion and is meant to be ironic, but this is probably overly subtle.

It is possible to understand the parables in a new way by stressing their linguistic connection to the conclusion rather than to the phrase, "count the cost." The key is the idea of *ability*. In vv. 26, 27, and 33, one is not able (*dunatai*) to be a disciple. In v. 31, the king must be able (*ei dunatos* cf. *ei eksei* in v. 28) to meet the opposing army. The implication in both parables is that the subjects do not have sufficient resources and that they will be mocked if they begin the task. Here a formal similarity to 14:8 (cf. v. 12) becomes important. In 14:8, the one who acts on the assumption of the adequacy of his resources (taking the place of honor) will be mocked (told to sit in a lower place). If, however, he begins by renouncing his resources (taking the lower place), he will be a disciple (moved to a place of honor). The connection between the parables of vv. 28-32 and their conclusion is more clear if we state the conclusions in converse form: "Reliance on one's own inadequate resources precludes discipleship." The theme is hardly strange to Luke's Gospel: in 17:28-33, ties to family and possessions preclude readiness for the judgment day, and in 12:16-34 and 16:9-12, disciples are urged to get rid of possessions which pose an encumbrance in the present crisis. The *outos* with which v. 33 begins, then, refers not to the beginnings of the parables, which depict cost-counting, but to their endings, which depict humiliation and failure. As tower-building or war-making with inadequate resources are doomed, so discipleship with the encumbrances of family and possessions is doomed. Humble yourself and you will be exalted: renounce tower and war making and you will escape ridicule; renounce family and possessions and you will be rewarded. This is the argument of Ch. 14.

The Terms of Luke 14:33

Luke finds a graphic word for renunciation in *apotassomai*. The verb is used only here in NT material concerning wealth. The usual, almost formulaic, expression is "sell and give."[6] In narrative passages, disciples simply "leave" (aphiemi) possessions.[7] *Apotassomai* is employed in several NT passages to denote physical separation from persons or things.[8] Its use in earlier and contemporary literature sheds light on its meaning here. The most interesting incidents are in Philo, where the word is used in a similar context, including the following:

> ...(N)ot only does (Moses) *renounce* the whole belly, but with it scours away the feet, that is, the supports of pleasure....We must not fail to notice that Moses, when he refuses the entire belly, that is the filling of the stomach, he practically *renounces* the other passions too (*Leg. All.* 3:142-145).

> Have you won the Olympic crown of victory over all wealth, and so risen superior to all that wealth involves, that you accept nothing of what it brings for your use and enjoyment?...Will you see all the treasuries of wealth, one after the other, full to the brim, yet turn aside from them and avert your eyes?...For (a celestial and heavenly soul) taking its fill of the vision of incorruptible and genuine goods, *bids farewell* to the transient and spurious (*Deus* 145-151).

The consistent use of *apotassomai* in the literature of the period to denote physical separation requires the translation "give up" (NIV, NASB, JB) or "part with" (NEB, Modern Language). "Leave behind" is preferable to these translations because it conveys the sense accurately here and in narrative passages. "Renounce" (RSV, Living Bible) and "forsake" (KJV), while fair enough translations according to their dictionary definitions, have been so weakened by abstractions of the verse that they are no longer useful in discussions of the subject.

The aorist tense of this verb indicates decisive action and not mere willingness to act, as some have interpreted the intent of the verse.[9] Not only is the notion of "willingness" excluded grammatically, but it also makes a mockery of NT ethics in general: "Not that I have reached the goal or even that I press on toward it, but I remain perpetually willing to move in the right direction if it ever becomes necessary."

"All that he has" (*pasin tois heautou huparchousin*) has been generalized to include not only the disciple's material goods but also "his dear ones and everything his heart clings to, yea, even his own life, his own desires, plans, ideals and interests."[10] This kind of explanation may follow from discomfort with v. 33 as an inference from the preceding parables. Unfortunately, the practical result is to render the command so general that no one feels obligated to obey it. The word used here for possessions (*huparchonta*) does not allow such vagueness. It is used consistently in the NT over a dozen times for personal property, including passages in Luke's Gospel on the same theme (8:3; 12:15; 12:33; 19:8; cf. Acts 4:32). The radical nature of the command is highlighted by the word "all" (*pas*), which Luke inserts elsewhere to intensify the tradition (5:11; 5:28; 6:30; 18:22). The terminology here is clear and specific: "all that he has" means things that can be sold, given away, or abandoned.

Can the Text Be Spiritualized?

We are left with a command which, if allowed to speak on its own merits, appears to call every believer to abandon all possessions as an expression of discipleship. Is there anything in the context which might mitigate the severity of this demand, which might justify the long history of rationalization by believers who read it? The only possibility that I can see in the immediate context is to extrapolate from v. 26b, which calls each believer to give up ("hate"[11]) family and "...yes, even his own life." If Jesus could not possibly mean that disciples must literally die as a *pre*requisite of discipleship, neither could he mean that they must literally leave behind possessions. Does he mean, then, that renunciation is primarily spiritual until death; i.e., that one's devotion culminates in death, which entails loss of family and possessions, and that this truth must be embraced at the beginning? Such a spiritualization of the passage would be inconsistent both with Jesus's interest in actual behaviors and the examples of obedience to these commands in the Gospels and Acts. Such "retroactive obedience" is the ethical companion of "cheap grace."

A more sensible common denominator of the commands to leave family, life, and possessions is to understand Jesus as demanding that *from the beginning point of discipleship, one must conduct oneself as if these old resources no longer exist.* The gospel deprives them of their power, or rather, replaces them with a new Power. When decisions are made now, they are not made with these old powers in view. The inevitable result, which is borne out in Gospel narratives and the epistolary literature, is that a new family comes into being, personal safety is disregarded, and possessions are employed exclusively for the work of the Kingdom. The new priorities are, respectively, disloyal, dangerous, and economically foolhardy. A new world has penetrated the old, refusing to compromise.

When we attempt ethical constructs in response to these kinds of statements of Jesus, then, perhaps it is best for us to resist not only spiritualizations of his demands but also justifications of our compromises. We should instead preserve the terminology of striving that Paul used, and we should remind ourselves that the first believers referred to themselves not as Christians but as those of The Way. To the extent that we follow the new way of Jesus, in our living and not only in our thinking, we are disciples. Renunciation of the power of money will cost us more than a troubled conscience.

Notes

1. My treatment of the relevant passages is contained in *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield, 1987) 101-162. The substance of the treatment of Luke 14:33 which follows is contained more recently in "Burden, Barrier, Blasphemy: Wealth in Matt 6:33, Luke 14:33, and Luke 16:15," *Trinity Journal* 9 (1989) 178-184.

2. The statements of Jesus here are directed to the "multitude" (*ochloi*), which Luke always uses to refer to the non-committed audiences of his teaching. In four places (6:17; 7:11; 9:18; 12:1), a distinction is made between "multitude" and "disciple." Although "disciple" is in some instances synonymous with the Twelve (9:18; 12:1), this is the case only when there is not indication of the presence of other believers. Luke distinguishes between "disciples" and "apostles" in 6:13, and elsewhere he employs "disciples" to designate large groups of believers (6:17; 19:37, and over 20 times in Acts).

3. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2nd ed.; New York, 1972) 196; see also I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, 1978) 591; J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (AB; Garden City, 1985) 1062.

4. A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols; Tübingen, 1910) 2:208.

5. J. Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Lucae* (Berlin, 1904) 80.

6. Mark 10:21 and parallels; Luke 12:33; 19:8; cf. Matt 5:42; 13:44-46; Luke 6:30.

7. Mark 1:16-20; 2:14; 10:28 and parallels.

8. Mark 6:46; Luke 9:61; Acts 18:18, 21; 2 Cor 2:13.

9. E.g. Marshall 594.

10. N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 1951) 399.

11. See Schmidt, *Hostility* 126-127 for the argument that "hate" means "leave behind."

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by Tom Hanks
author of *God So Loved the Third World*

Respondents:
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