

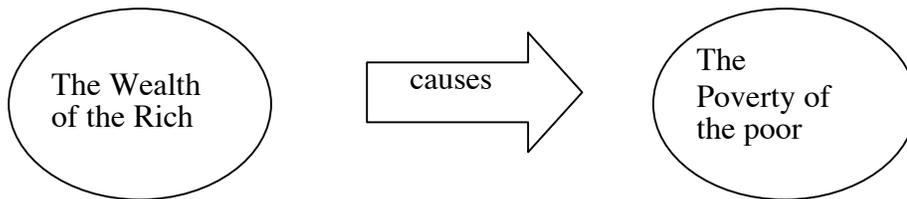
Friends,

This is a draft excerpt from Brian McLaren's newest title, *Everything Must Change*. We are borrowing it to stimulate our thinking around child sexual exploitation in Atlanta, which we believe to be rooted in issues of equity. To purchase the entire book, please follow the links on Brian's website ([www.brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net)) or visit Amazon.com. In honor of Brian's graciousness and copyright, please do not distribute this excerpt beyond the circle of those who will join us for conversation on Tuesday, 29 Jan 2008, at Tilt Coffee Shop at 274 Walker St SW, Atlanta, GA 30313. We look forward to seeing you then.

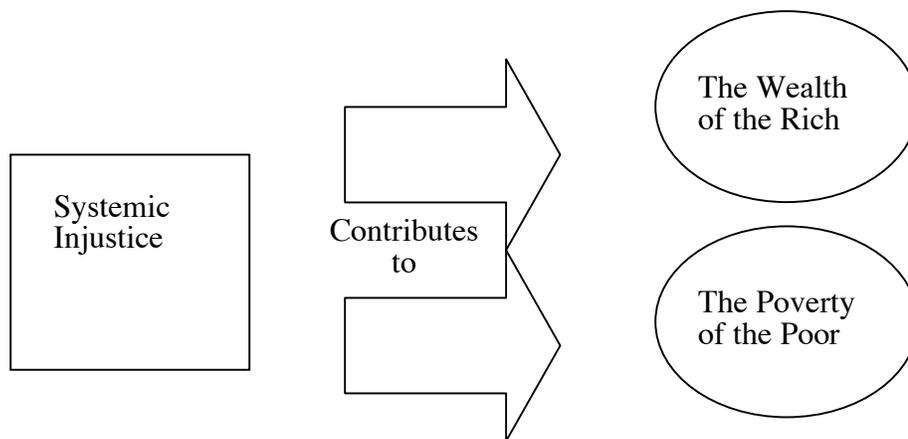
Atlanta Emergent Cohort

## Chapter 27: Beyond Blame and Shame

Whenever the subjects of inequity and poverty come up, many rich and middle class people feel they are being blamed and shamed for the poverty of others, when all they have done is taken advantage of their advantages, worked hard, and reaped good consequences. True, some rich people are corrupt, hard-hearted, and careless; they very much deserve blame and scorn for their behavior. But blaming the rich for the poverty of the poor can be another expression of inequity. It assumes that the relationship is linear and works like this:



But a more accurate diagram would work like this:



Whether the poor blame poverty on the rich, or the rich blame poverty on the poor – an economics of blame and shame is blind to the reality of systemic injustice. Jesus, though, was

not blind to this reality. For Jesus, the “system” often needed to be subverted because it was riddled with injustice.

Consider, for example, his thinking in regards to the so-called “justice system” of his day. It’s best, he suggests, to avoid it when possible – to seek reconciliation outside of the courts (Matthew 5:25-26). The justice system has a mechanistic quality to it that grinds away, producing “fair” punishment, while failing to produce true reconciliation. This level of just punishment might satisfy “the justice of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20), but it is not the justice of the kingdom of God, which is not satisfied until there is true reconciliation.

Or consider Jesus’ sensitivity to the systemic injustice of the economic system of his day. In Matthew (18:23 ff), Jesus tells the story of a servant – probably a poor tenant farmer - who owed the landowner (or master) a huge debt. The landowner requires justice: “the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.” The servant then asks for patience and promises to repay, and the master – going far beyond the request – actually cancels the debt. Then the servant goes out and demands repayment from a peer who can’t repay and also asks for mercy. But the recently-forgiven servant responds in a merciless and unforgiving way, throwing his neighbor into jail – demanding a penal justice that is devoid of mercy. His peers are incensed and report his behavior to the master, who replies, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” For Jesus, clearly, “penal fairness” that requires punishment “by the book” but that lacks mercy isn’t the kind of justice desired by God.

His approach is even clearer (yet more unsettling) in another parable, in which a landowner agrees to hire day-laborers for a full day's work, at the wage of one denarius (Luke 20:1 ff). As the day progresses, the landowner hires on more workers at midday, at mid-afternoon, and late in the afternoon. At day's end, he pays them all one denarius. Those hired at the beginning of the day feel slighted and complain, but the master again responds with a question: "Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ... Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Interestingly, their complaint is about equality: "You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." They resent the equality of reward for an inequality of burden and work, but God's justice goes beyond mathematical equality. It seeks a kind of healing equity that takes into account, not just burden borne and work accomplished, but also the unequal opportunity faced by the various workers at the beginning of the day. The fact that there wasn't enough work (or opportunity) for everyone seems to be a factor in the mind of the employer. By including that inequality in his equation, he creates an economy of care for the common good. In this light, the justice of God is not unfair, but it includes a concern for social sustainability, healing, and transformation; it is not unfair, but it includes a grace that can heal society and undermine systemic injustice, not just maintain its status quo.

Something similar occurs in Luke 16, which we considered briefly in Chapter ???. My old King James Bible inserted a title for the parable there: "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," but the word "unjust" revealed more about the presumptions of the editor than about the teaching of Jesus. Again, Jesus uses the common economic situation in Galilee, where Roman taxes forced

many small farmers to sell their land to rich landowners, reducing them to the status of tenant farmers. Landowners would frequently hire managers, or stewards, to be the middle-men, demanding a portion of crops from all the tenant farmers and saving the landowner from this unpleasant task.

The manager in Jesus' story has been accused of poor management and waste, so the landowner demands an account. Jesus conveys the man's inner dialogue: "What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg – I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses." He goes to all the tenant farmers and cuts their debts: a debt of nine hundred gallons of olive oil is reduced by half, a debt of a thousand bushels of wheat is reduced to eight hundred.

To modern readers, this move sounds like injustice. But Jesus sees the entire system as unjust, and so in his story, the man isn't condemned for malfeasance. By reducing an unfair debt that would further advantage the rich and further oppress the poor, the steward is actually decreasing injustice, so he is praised for being shrewd. In essence, he has defected from the systemic injustice of the dominant system and has switched sides, seeking to help the poor instead of seeking to help the rich. Jesus follows up the parable with words we've already heard from him: "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and Money." Interestingly, Luke offers this epilogue to the encounter: "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus." Obviously, they like the current system and see no injustice in it: it is "working" for them in a way it isn't "working" for the tenant farmers. But Jesus tells them their

concept of justice is skewed: “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.”

Even if the conventional “justice” of the current economic system is “detestable in God’s sight,” these religious leaders serve (recalling Bono’s diagnosis) the system’s apologists. And their own religious system is similarly critiqued by Jesus (Mark 7:9), with rhetorical flourish: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God,” he says, letting the word “fine” sting with irony. Then he details the “corban” system, where people could discharge their duties to their parents by making a gift to the temple establishment instead. “Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that,” he says.

“Tradition” here is another word for system. Whether we’re dealing with a dietary system (“Nothing outside you can defile you by going into you,” Mark 7:15), the Temple system (“...a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...,” John 4:21), or the Sabbath system (“The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath,” Mark 2:27), Jesus is acutely aware of the systemic injustice each may perpetuate. Just as Jesus judges as insufficient punitive or penal justice systems which reward and punish without healing and reconciling, he notes how religious systems frequently work against the good and just purposes for which they were intended (see Matthew 19:1-9, for example). Systemic injustice must be exposed and confronted wherever it occurs and replaced with a higher justice – one that surpasses that “of the scribes and Pharisees,” one that reflects the kingdom of God.

Similarly, Jesus constantly confronts and transgresses social systems or traditions of inequitable exclusion. In fact, one of Jesus' favorite images for the kingdom of God is a party to which "the wrong people" are invited. On one occasion, Jesus, himself a guest at a dinner party thrown by a Pharisee, offers this teaching: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13-14). He follows up with a parable which makes his meaning clear: the kingdom of God creates equitable space where the "lower classes" are treated with high dignity and respect, and where no advantages are given to the "higher classes." In other words, where the kingdom of God is, class distinctions and exclusive elitisms disappear (see Luke 14:28-30), the lost and excluded are recovered and given a place (Luke 15 demonstrates this with three stories), and a new inclusive equity appears. Jesus demonstrates this equity wherever he goes, welcoming outcasts (a woman with a gynecological disorder, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, tax collectors, and others) as equals.

Jesus' treatment of women is especially striking. He rejects the chauvinism and eroticism that typically team up to reduce women to inferior status; he includes women among his traveling entourage (Luke 8:3, 23:55), honors them and protects them from critique (for example, in Matthew 26:10), and legitimizes a woman to "sit at his feet" – which (contrary to its contemporary sound) suggests not dishonor but honor, as this is the place of a disciple, an identity which normally was exclusively for men (Luke 10:38 ff). And he shows similar respect to children (Luke 18:15 ff). In his presence, in his kingdom, there are no "second-class citizens," but there is equity for all.

Jesus' washing of the disciples feet (John 13:1 ff) provides yet another example of Jesus sabotaging the systemic inequities of class and hierarchy and creating a radical new kind of equity where the leaders serve. And as we've seen, his rejection of terms of status (Matthew 23:1-12) similarly signals the equity of the kingdom of God.

Through history, some adherents to the Christian religion, though not enough, have shared Jesus' perspective. Methodist pastor and activist Duane Clinker recalls John Wesley's term "social holiness," which expresses a deep sensitivity to systemic injustice.<sup>1</sup> Although the word "holiness" was, like many important theological terms in the modern era, personalized and privatized, for Wesley, it was inherently social and public: "Holy solitaires," he said, "is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness." Clinker observes, "As humans we inherit a certain history. We inherit sin caused by decisions made in previous eras. We inherit a sort of sin "frozen" into the institutions and social arrangements within which we are birthed."

David Lowes Watson and Douglas Meeks articulate the danger of shrinking Christian faith to personalized, privatized dimensions:

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<sup>1</sup> Clinker cites Wesley's response to the contemporary claim that slavery was an economic necessity (a claim that is echoed in various defenses of today's growing global equity gap): "Better is honest poverty than all the riches brought in by tears, sweat and blood of our fellow creatures." And responding to so-called "pious" slaveholders, Wesley showed remarkable sensitivity to systemic injustice: "It is your money that pays the merchant, and through him the captain and the African butchers. You therefore are guilty, yea, principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies and murders. You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion; they would not stir a step without you; therefore the blood of all these ... lies upon your head."

Only a fraction of our sins are personal. By far the greater part are sins of neglect, sins of default, our social sin, our systemic sin, our economic sin. For these sins Christ died, and continues to die. For these sins Christ atoned, and continues to atone... As long as evangelism presents a gospel centered on the need for personal salvation, individuals will acquire a faith that focuses on maximum benefits with minimal obligations, and we will change the costly work of Christ's atonement into the pragmatic transaction of a salvific contract..... The sanctifying grace of God in Jesus Christ is meant not just for the sinner but also for a society best by structural sin. David Lowes Watson, "Proclaiming Christ in All His Offices: Priest, Prophet, and Potentate," and M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Portion of the Poor*, Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995, 122-123, 17)

About a hundred years ago, Walter Rauschenbusch expressed a similar sensitivity to systemic injustice in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*: "Individualistic theology has not trained the spiritual intelligence of Christian men and women to recognize and observe spiritual entities beyond the individual." And Jacques Ellul, speaking as a twentieth-century French Christian scholar in the Reformed tradition, wrote,

"A major fact of our present civilization is that more and more sin becomes collective, and the individual is forced to participate in collective sin. Everyone bears the consequences of the faults of others. This becomes particularly poignant when nations are at war, for instance, but is true of all social situations.

Contemporary Pentecostal theologian Eldin Villafane concludes: "Our spirituality, and the very gospel that we preach, needs to be as big and ubiquitous as sin and evil. We will falter in our

spirituality and thus grieve the Spirit if ‘our struggle with evil’ does not ‘correspond to the geography of evil.’” *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry*, Eerdmans, 1995, 22 (quoting Steven Charles Mott)

With what David Korten calls “the owning classes,” running the show, “ordinary people find their choices controlled by the hierarchies of big business, big government, big education, big unions, big media, and big religion.” As a result, in the words of Duane Clinker, “Specific evil action is not required to wipe out vast sections of humanity, but simple apathy.” (19) Aided and abetted by apathy, “big business, big government, big education, big unions, big media, and big religion” will grind on with their gears of systemic injustice. All efforts to help victims of injustice will be overwhelmed by these big systems that constantly create and renew more injustice as a byproduct of every transaction.

What can be done to deal with this gross and growing inequity that is being produced by our societal machinery? Many claim that “the invisible hand” of “free markets” will resolve these problems naturally, over time. But you may recall David Ritschard’s analysis:

Whether from intellectual laziness or from single-minded pursuit of ideology, what these free-market fundamentalists fail to see is that while central planners were either cretins or fools, the market is a moron. An effective moron, but a moron nevertheless: left to its own devices, it will churn away mindlessly.... [If we are complacent,] if we leave all problem-solving to the market, emerging social problems will be left unattended. ... we’ll end up with scores of unnecessary social stresses over the next twenty years – and a lot of protesters on the street.

How would people with confidence in the message of Jesus deal with these problems and stresses? It's clear, for starters, that they would not be complacent and trust the fox to guard the hens. Instead, they would tell the truth about systemic injustice, as Jesus did, and they would choose to defect from it, bonding with and seeking "God's kingdom and God's justice" instead (Matthew 6:33). In this way, they would reject what Jesus called "hypocrisy," which means living by a dual narrative, wearing a mask of piety without "repenting" of their complicity in the inequitable system of their day. (The term "hypocrite" clearly has these more social and economic connotations, as we saw in Luke 16:14-15; see also 11:39 and 20:47.) If we take the story of Zaccheus as an example of "salvation" from greed and hypocrisy, they would then seek to heal the system, beginning with their own role in it. Their actions would, I imagine, have three dimensions:

First, they would seek to help the poor through generosity – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, showing hospitality to the homeless. In so doing, they would also be careful to avoid a dehumanizing and demoralizing paternalism.

Second, they would call the rich to generosity, as Jesus frequently did. They would call the rich to defect from their own enrichment and work for the good of their poorer neighbors. In today's world, this would often involve using their entrepreneurial skills to create good jobs, since unemployment is at the core of most of the sufferings of the poor, including substance abuse, violence, and disease.

And third, they would work to improve the system, to detect and remove systemic injustice, so that the equity system of the societal machinery would indeed be equitable.

An African American friend recently challenged me in this regard. He was referring to efforts of suburban churches like the one I served as pastor to help poor people in the inner city. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this,” he began, “but sometimes I have mixed feelings about you folks in the suburbs coming down to teach poor urban kids to read.” He paused for a minute, then continued, “Look, we know how to read, and we should be teaching our own kids. What I wish you would do is something we can’t do for ourselves. I wish you would get organized and go down to Congress, and go to the White House, and go to other branches of government, and get them to change the laws and policies that keep our people so poor and our schools so ineffective. If we go in there, they don’t listen to us. We have no power, no clout. We don’t wear the right clothes, and we don’t write letters and speak with the kind of English they respect. But you could do all those things, to try to confront systemic injustice. You could use your power on our behalf. That’s what I wish you would do.”

While neither he nor I want to squelch any generous impulse to tutor children, I think he had a point. With Micah’s famous words in mind (6:8), we might say that all Christians and churches believe in *walking humbly with God* (acknowledging that there can be a large gap between intent and behavior). More and more Christians and churches, thankfully, are also showing a concern to show *kindness* or *compassion* – through mission trips, giving to social needs, etc. But the number of individuals and churches focused on *doing justice* remains disproportionately low. Depending on how you look at it, that could be an indictment or an opportunity.

## Chapter 28: A New Kind of Question

Sometimes, as I face the colossal (and avalanching) failure of the equity system, as I watch the gap between rich and poor grow wider and wider, and as I sense resentment and fear intensifying among poor and rich respectively, I feel heavy with the dead weight of hopelessness. I have a delicious dinner with a group of “normal” friends in the U.S., all of us far wealthier by global standards than we can possibly fathom, eating food that is good beyond description, and then a few days and a few airplane tickets later, I sit on a dented old folding chair in a slum in Africa or Latin America, surrounded by the smells of sewage and the noise of barking dogs, eating simple bread, beans, maybe little dark, greasy chicken, and the contrasts crush in on me. Our societal machinery seems to be humming along, perfectly calibrated to give these results. I think about the consequences of a continuing and intensifying inequity - globally, nationally, locally. I think about the streets of Latin America and Africa, where every window must be protected by iron grates, and every wall topped with razor wire or broken glass, to keep out desperately poor people who have found robbery the only way to survive.

I think about the United States, growing ever more conservative because it has so much to conserve, spending larger and larger percentages – obscene and irrational percentages - of its unbalanced budget on an elusive abstraction (as elusive and abstract as *growth*) called *security*. I think about terrorism and counterterrorism, locked in a death-match to defeat one another through violence, and I remember the old Buddhist proverb that when two elephants fight, the grass gets trampled – and I know that the poor people of the world are the grass. I recall the words of Kofi Annan in March 2004:

We should have learned by now that a world of glaring inequality – between countries and within them – where many millions of people endure brutal oppression and extreme misery is never going to be a fully safe world, even for its most privileged inhabitants.

Then I think of Jesus and the beauty of his teachings, and there's a brief glimmer of hope, but then the realization of what happened to him, what (recalling Jackson Brown's song) he "got" from those who profited from the inequitable equity system of his day. And then I ask myself, "Do I believe in resurrection?" and suddenly that question matters a very great deal.

Occasionally, I hear hopeful news. For example, in an article by Jeffrey D. Sachs (a Jewish man whose dedication to overcoming extreme poverty resonates with that of his fellow Jew, Jesus), I read that twenty-five billion dollars could improve health care so as to save eight million poor people per year.<sup>2</sup> Then I read this:

In the year 2000, the top four hundred US households earned a combined income of sixty nine billion dollars. (This is annual earnings, not assets.) So the four hundred richest Americans, if they chose to do so, could save eight million lives a year and still be able to live on forty four billion dollars a year, or 101 million dollars of annual income for each household on average.

My mind starts calculating. The U.S.'s share of 25 billion would amount to about 8 billion.

Seven billion of that 8 billion could be raised in one easy step: by reversing the so-called "tax

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, "A Rich Nation, A Poor Continent," NYT, July 9, 2003.  
[www.earthinstitute.Columbia.edu/about/director/pubs/nyt070903.pdf](http://www.earthinstitute.Columbia.edu/about/director/pubs/nyt070903.pdf)

relief” given to those four hundred households by the Bush administration. Surely those four hundred families would agree that they need “relief” less than the desperately poor?

Then I read that according to the United Nations, 80 billion could provide all the poor people in the world with clean water, basic health care, basic education, and basic nutrition. With global income at 8 trillion per year, this represents only one percent of the world’s income, and less than ten percent of the world’s military budget (without including the U.S. costs for the war in Iraq).<sup>3</sup> Suddenly, equity seems almost ... doable. Then I think about the U.S. investment in the War in Iraq – over \$200 billion as I write, with the total cost predicted to reach \$1.2 trillion – and I think that if my government had made different decisions, just two years of the war’s costs could have taken care of the world’s poor for five years.<sup>4</sup> [??check numbers] And I wonder –

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<sup>3</sup> From Nikki van der Gaag, “Poverty: challenging the myths,” *New Internationalist*, Number 310, 222.newint.org/issue310/keynote.htm.

<sup>4</sup> The total cost of the war is predicted to reach \$1.2 trillion. Jim Wallis (sojo.net, Jan??, 2007) quotes a column in *The New York Times* by David Leonhardt on what this amount means:

The way to come to grips with \$1.2 trillion is to forget about the number itself and think instead about what you could buy with the money. When you do that, a trillion stops sounding anything like millions or billions.

For starters, \$1.2 trillion would pay for an unprecedented public health campaign — a doubling of cancer research funding, treatment for every American whose diabetes or heart disease is now going unmanaged and a global immunization campaign to save millions of children's lives.

Combined, the cost of running those programs for a decade wouldn't use up even half our money pot. So we could then turn to poverty and education, starting with universal preschool for every 3- and 4-year-old child across the country. The city of New Orleans could also receive a huge increase in reconstruction funds.

The final big chunk of the money could go to national security. The recommendations of the 9/11 Commission that have not been put in place — better baggage and cargo screening, stronger measures against nuclear proliferation — could be enacted. Financing for the war in Afghanistan could be

how much more secure would my country be if it had made that kind of investment instead?

Suddenly, the impossible doesn't seem so impossible.

And I also gain hope when I hear Christian leaders like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels express an increasing level of concern for the world's poor, or when I hear bold statements about equity from groups like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches:

The material wealth of the wealthy has grown enough. Their trees are now mature and should leave space for new trees to develop and blossom. Our alternative is an orchard of blossoming economies each bearing its own kind of fruit. The time has come for radical change if total catastrophe is to be prevented and all creation is to enjoy fullness of life.<sup>5</sup>

And my hope grows more when I recall the unquenchable commitment to equity of many of my heroes, displayed over decades, prophetic Christian leaders like John Perkins, Ron Sider, Tony Campolo, Bart Campolo, Barbara Skinner ??, Jim Wallis, Steve Chalke, Adam Taylor, Rudy Carrasco, Mary Nelson and so many others. I think back to the words and example of Anglican theologian John Stott, who has for my whole lifetime been echoing St. John Chrysostom, who said, "Feeding the hungry is a greater work than raising the dead":

What will posterity see as the chief Christian blind spot of the last quarter of the twentieth

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increased to beat back the Taliban's recent gains, and a peacekeeping force could put a stop to the genocide in Darfur.

All that would be one way to spend \$1.2 trillion. Here would be another:

The war in Iraq.

<sup>5</sup> from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Taskforce Report 2004, at the Accra Meeting of General Council.

century? ... I suspect it will have something to do with the economic oppression of the Third World and the readiness with which western Christians tolerate it, and even acquiesce in it. Only slowly is our Christian conscience being aroused to the gross economic inequalities between the countries of the North Atlantic and the southern world of Latin America, Africa and most parts of Asia. Total egalitarianism may not be a biblical ideal. But must we not roundly declare that luxury and extravagance are indefensible evils, while much of the world is undernourished and underprivileged?<sup>6</sup>

I am additionally encouraged when I meet increasing numbers of business people seeking to use their business skills for the cause of equity. They are creating microfinance projects and supporting micro-enterprise projects to help potential entrepreneurs in poverty stricken areas. They are addressing unfair trade policies and seeking to motivate large corporations to decrease their “social footprint” along with their “ecological footprint.” They are developing fair trade projects and finding ways to make ethical buying more convenient and widespread.<sup>7</sup> And along with business people, I am beginning to hear politically involved people speaking meaningfully about campaign finance reform, seeking ways for the voices of the poor themselves to be heard in the political process, which is too often controlled by elites with backroom influence.

Then I see how budding movements such as the ethical buying movement and the green movement are beginning to affect people’s behavior. For example, last month I met with a friend who is developing a website where people can buy “fair trade” gifts – meaning that the people

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<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *Culture and the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1981), p. 36, also available online at [www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/1952](http://www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/1952).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, [ambata.com](http://ambata.com), the heifer project, opportunity international, integra ventures.

who made these gifts in Africa or Latin America or Asia were paid a fair wage for their labor. Through his site, you can order a gift knowing that your purchase helps promote equity in the world. Or last week, I found a website where I could identify my ecological footprint which helps me be sure that I don't use more than my share of the earth's resources.

When these encouraging signs move me beyond both naivete and despair, I become confident that even though the current equity system is too often dysfunctional to the point of being counterproductive, it can be changed if enough of us are determined to change it. True, our current politicians and religious leaders, as those in Jesus' day, seem hell-bent on trivial matters (*straining out gnats and swallowing camels*, to use Jesus' terms in Matthew 23:23 ff.) and oblivious to weightier matters (*justice, mercy, and faithfulness*, according to Jesus). But perhaps we are the ones we have been waiting for: perhaps we – especially those of us who have confidence in Jesus - will finally take the sagely counsel of John Stott, that more and more of us ...

... should gain the economic and political qualifications to join in the quest for justice in the world community. And meanwhile, the development of a less affluent lifestyle, in whatever terms we may define it, is surely an obligation that Scripture lays on us in compassionate solidarity with the poor. Of course we can resist these things and even use (misuse) the Bible to defend our resistance. The horror of the situation is that our affluent culture has drugged us; we no longer feel the pain of other people's deprivations. Yet the first step toward the recovery of our Christian integrity is to be aware that our culture blinds, deafens and dopes us. Then we shall begin to cry to God to open our eyes,

unstop our ears and stab our dull consciences awake, until we see, hear and feel what through his Word he has been saying to us all the time. Then we shall take action.<sup>8</sup>

All of our initiatives for social justice will require courage, creativity, and perhaps above all, persistence. It is a mistake to imagine that inequity can be solved once for all. True, there are times (like ours) that demand bold and dramatic breakthroughs. But the struggle for a healthy equity system, like the struggle for a wise prosperity system and a sane security system, is perpetual: it is as much a part of the social task of being human as eating, drinking, and sleeping are part of the physical task of being human. As long as you're alive, you're not finished.

The struggle must begin by education, followed up by persuasion, resulting in the development of social movements. Wherever these movements are successful, their struggle will be institutionalized and preserved through improvable legislation and sustaining social custom. This book, in a sense, is a small expression – however flawed and incomplete – of an early phase in that struggle to educate and persuade and mobilize such a movement. If we follow the educational and persuasive strategy of Jesus (and Socrates too), one of our first and most important activities will be to ask a new kind of questions, because the right questions cause people to think rather than react.

Perhaps questions like these can dislodge us from our conceptual ruts and ideological reactions – and inspire some creative imagination: *What benefits will come to the rich if the poor are better off? What dangers and destruction will follow for the rich if the poor are not better off?* And we

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<sup>8</sup> Stott's seminal booklet *Culture and the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1981) is out of print, but it is available in its entirety online at [www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/1952](http://www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/1952).

can extend the frame of reference for these questions beyond ourselves to future generations, recalling the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois Nation: “Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations”:

*What kind of world will we who are comparatively rich and powerful bequeath to our children and grandchildren if we do not redirect our energies from accumulation, conservation, and protection toward compassion, service, and equity? And what kind of world will we bequeath to future generations if equity becomes our sacred passion and personal ambition?*<sup>9</sup>

Questions like these can liberate our imagination from its captivity and domestication within the closed and depressing narrative of the suicide machine, and that is no small thing, according to Brian Walsh and John Middleton:

It is only when we can imagine the world to be different than the way it is that we can be empowered to embody this alternative reality which is God’s kingdom and resist this present nightmare of brokenness, disorientation and confusion... A liberated imagination is a prerequisite for facing the future... If we cannot have such a liberated imagination

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<sup>9</sup> This concern for future generations must bring together both “left” and “right” in pursuit of a new moral center. For example, in spite of calling himself a “Christian conservative” and an “avid indoorsman,” Rod Dreher, in a *USA Today* article (4/23/2006), argued that ecological conservation and political conservatism should go together because both call us to self-discipline on behalf of our children:

“Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver, two founding fathers of modern American conservatism, hated the way industrial capitalism saw nature as merely a thing to be exploited. Weaver observed that we moderns ‘have allowed ourselves to be blinded by the insolence of material success [and] the animal desire to consume.’ He saw this as alienating us from nature and the foundations of a sustainable conservative order. Kirk wrote: ‘In America, especially, we live beyond our means by consuming the portion of posterity, insatiably devouring minerals and forests and the very soil, lowering the water table, to gratify the appetites of the present tenants of the country.’ He demanded that Americans act with more self-discipline to honor ‘the future partners in our contract with eternal society.’”

and cannot countenance such radical dreams, then the story remains closed for us and we have no hope. (Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be, IV, 1995, p 192)

Dr. King, of course, is remembered for his imagination, his dream, and that dream extended beyond racial reconciliation in the U.S. to economic equity around the world. In his last book, *The Trumpet of Conscience*, he wrote,

The developed industrial nations of the world cannot remain secure islands of prosperity in a seething sea of poverty. The storm is rising against the privileged minority of the earth, from which there is no shelter or isolation and armament. The storm will not abate until a just distribution of the fruits of the earth enables people everywhere to live in dignity and human decency. We may now be in only the initial period of an era of change as far-reaching in its consequences as the American Revolution.... If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridor of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight. A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast between poverty and wealth.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This selection comes from a handout by Josh Kaufman-Horner, who edited the text for inclusive language. For more on Josh's work to advance Dr. King's dream, see [eucharism.org](http://eucharism.org).

It is clear that Jesus' framing story of the kingdom of God calls for this kind of revolution of values. It is not clear how many believers in Jesus today will open their hearts to this revolution.<sup>11</sup> But there at least two of us, right?

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<sup>11</sup> Recent priorities of the so-called Religious Right suggest that their values revolution generally avoids economic inequity. Groups like Sojourners/Call to Renewal ([sojo.net](http://sojo.net)) have consistently modeled a broader values agenda.