# The Poor and Poverty In Church History

Summary by Viv Grigg, July 1993, updated Jan 2012

**1.     The Jerusalem Community:**

a.     The Context ( i )    Roman Empire (ii)        The rich: owned property gave rights to slaves, to freedom, to independence and power (iii)    The poor: owned no land worked for daily bread (iv)    Slaves were lower yet b .     The Makeup of the Community (1)    Poverty was a negative term (cf. Jewish; pious poor). The church attracted the poor (1 Cor. 1:26-31) (2)    Not primarily powerful people Though many priests believed Though the rich sold their possessions and gave... (3)    Primarily the "pious poor” Common sharing Not common ownership but redistribution through a common fund

**1b.     The Jerusalem Community**

 (ii)    Material sharing was an expression of a spiritual fellowship the spiritual precedes the sharing, the sharing perfects the spiritual. a reflection of a communal solidarity goods are not shared to make oneself poor (an ideal), but to vanquish and eradicate poverty. (iii)    Voluntary sharing (Acts 5:1-11). "as any had need" means it was not a denial of the need of possessions or property. properties were maintained (e.g. the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). (iv)    In later centuries men took the specific practices as models of abstract ideals which lead to "love communism". ( v )    Relationship to Jubilee. It appears that the early church understood the coming of the Kingdom as the coming of the Jubilee. This explains the motivation behind such a dramatic sharing of goods across such a large grouping of people.

**2.     Paul's Teaching on Poverty and The Poor**

 (i)    Not a poor man , nor one focused on the poor as with Jesus or James, yet committed to remembering the poor (Gal 2:10), understanding that God has chosen the weak (1 Cor. 1:18-30), and calling on people to imitate Christ's humility (Phil. 2:5-8).  he also makes specific provision in church structure for the orphans and widows. (ii)    Not opposed to wealth .  The love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:17-19), but wealth can be used for good, and he sees the effect of Christ in people as being economic wealth.  On the other hand he equates greed with idolatry (Eph. 5:5), and gives as a qualification of elders that they not be greedy (Titus 1:7) or miserly (1 Tim. 3,2,3).  he comes down with a centre on a life of contentment (1 Timothy 3:3-8). (iii)    He himself chose a life of sacrificial simplicity when he could have lived a relatively wealthy life even at the end he seemed to have enough assets to live in Rome in  a house "at his own expense". i.e. probably had property back in Antioch that enabled him to be independently wealthy. He upholds Christ as such a model of economic sacrifice (II Cor. 8:9).

**2.     Paul's Teaching on Poverty and The Poor**

2.     Paul's Teaching on Poverty and The Poor (iv)    His accent in community was on the body of Christ, not so much on the community of goods.  He did not put forth the Jerusalem community as a model, but did teach on equality and caring for each other.  In a sense he extended the Jerusalem model to networks of churches internationally (11 Corinthians 8,9).  this was so important as to take up two years of his life collecting for the famine- stricken community in Jerusalem. (v)    He strongly emphasizes work, laboring to support himself at times as a model(1 Cor 9:12) and teaching that one should meet his own needs and others through his work (1 Thes. 4:12). (vi)    He continues the heritage of the Old Testament on the support of workers

**3.     James, Brother of Jesus, Apostle of Equal Dealings and Justice**

 (i)    James deals with the relationship of rich and poor. He associates himself with the tradition of the people of God The Lord ’ s judgment is different to the rich person ’ s judgment

**4.     The Early Church Fathers**

1. The Context ( i )    The next two Centuries saw an increasing disparity of social classes, rich and poor come into the church. (ii)    Mission was from the powerless to the powerful

2.     The Shepherd of Hermas - poverty is an Evil "He who is in need and poverty in his daily life is in great torment and anxiety.  Thus he who frees the soul of such a man from his great need attains great joy for himself." ( i )    Lack of solidarity (identification) ( p ) is unfaithfulness to the Lord ( q ) is lack of brotherly love ( r )  means the poor are not redeemed ( s )  means we are not redeemed (ii)    Materialism ( t )   means risking a loss of faith ( u )  in persecution we may choose wealth instead of suffering ( v )  means we become submerged in business dealings, wealth, friendships with the world ( w ) means we become incapable of spiritual understanding. (iii)    The rich cannot be useful till their wealth is taken away. (iv)    There is still an awareness from the time of Jesus that it is either faith or wealth.

3 .      Didache (written in Syria at the turn of the 2nd Century) ( i )    The 3 dangers of wealth or poverty ( y )  over-ambition     -  to have what is not ours     -  excessive accumulation of possessions can only be achieved through dissension, hate and injustice ( z )  the influence of the world     -  the justice of God and the expression of his love are rejected     -  thus it is wiser to take the way of poverty ( aa )       skepticism      - When hopes are not fulfilled, and the justice of the Kingdom not triumphant, the poor may not give up hope .

4.     The Early Church Fathers d .     The Rich Enter the Church ( i )    It is only at the time of Clement of Rome that the issue arises "Can the rich be saved and not give up their wealth?"  up to this point it had always been normative. (ii)    He proposes that it is the spirit of renouncing that counts but that wealth can be used for charitable purposes.  This is the beginning of the heresies that destroyed the church in the middle ages and remain in effect until today. (iii)    Tertullian on the other hand adopts a more extreme opposite view renunciation now becomes:     - a demand of obedience     - from a command of love     - and an ascetic idea Poverty     - becomes an obligation     - not just from the depths of the heart     - lost dimension of grace and freedom (iv)    This may be in reaction to the realities of the time.  After the faithful met, the rich prepared a common table .

**The Synthesis of the 2nd Century**

 (1)    The context         the gospel became the gospel of the powerful and the message became distorted. (2)    The Problem Poverty was considered evil (socially, theologically and spiritually) but the scriptures were not applied to the rich and powerful. James admonitions, Jesus existential demands were ignored.         -  Comfort was permitted         -  Private property was normal (3)    Brotherly charity was practiced But not to eradicate poverty Rather to educate people in a spirit of love (4)    Service to the poor did not lead to solidarity with the poor people gave and remained in comfort (5)    This resulted in two extremes Ordinary Christianity accommodating to the demands of faith and life around Monasticism  - a radical response  - with no concessions to the context (6)    Both practiced charity but not social reform i .e. to eradicate poverty or create a community of equals (7)     Modelling did not affect imperial legislation The bishops were supposed to feed the poor daily the clergy were to be poor, as an example of self- sacrifice

**6.     Prophets of the Church in the Time of Constantine**

a.     The Context (i)    The radical opposition between church and culture had lead to accommodation. (ii)    This lead prophets to emerge who reaffirmed the gospel demands concerning justice and care for the poor

b.     Ambrose (i)    care for the rich who have become poor, for prisoners (ii)    practice discernment of impostors and swindlers (iii)    ignore social differences

c.      St. Basil (i)    A hermit theologian who created a whole complex of charitable welfare institutions.  There arose a whole new city consisting of hostels, alms houses and hospitals for infectious diseases.  the bishop himself took up residence there and organized the free meals. (ii)    He saw wealth as a "good to be administered and not a source of enjoyment."  The error lies in covetousness (iii)    Covetousness leads to evil which leads to injustice (1 Timothy 6:10) (iv)    He criticizes irresponsible economic growth ( Luke 12:16-21) (de Sta. Ana 69). (v)    He saw poverty as an evil not as an ideal (vi)    The value of wealth depends on how far it is applied to helping the needy. (vii)    The greater a man's wealth , the less perfect his charity. "Though you have not killed, like you say, nor committed adultery, nor stolen, nor borne false witness, you make all of this useless unless you add the only thing which can allow you to enter the Kingdom. Clearly you are far from that requirement (charity) and you are mistaken in claiming that you love your neighbor as yourself.  If it is true that you have kept the law of charity from your childhood, as you claim, and that t you have done as much for others as for yourself, then where does all your wealth come from? care for the poor absorbs all available resources..." (quoted in de Sta. Ana 73).

d.     St. Augustine on the Duty of the Rich In the World Augustine Being = Having Being > Having The more I have the greater I am One has in order to be   One does not exist in order to have   e.     Conclusions: The Road to Overcoming Poverty (de Sta. Ana) (i)    Accumulating wealth hurts the poor and so hurts Jesus (ii)    The poor cannot overcome by dependence on the wealthy.  It must be through self-reliance (iii)    The solution is in true solidarity, community, mercy, not through  extreme sacrifice and only verbal agreement to seek the common good. (iv)    The struggle to eradicate poverty had ceased to exist, and was replaced by ways of alleviating the sufferings of the poor, the victims of injustice, rather than to present the  radical witness to the justice of God.

**D. Historical Responses By The Western Church in the Late Middle Ages**

a.     Context (i)    It was a time of population growth, development of crafts, industries, textiles, communities.  The church preached charity but ignored reforms needed in society.  this resulted in a time of protest against the prevailing social, economic, and political order of the times. (ii)    The church remained captive to the structures of mediaeval power which prevented it from making a concrete response to the challenges of the poor.  The orientation of charity as assistance to the suffering was maintained with orphanages, hospitals, schools etc. b.     Precursors (i)    The Celtic Monks - powerless monks who converted Northern Europe.

Itinerant Movements (i)    Charismatic Leaders            St. Francis of Assisi           St. Domic           Peter Valdes

(Ignatius of Loyola) " I heard from our great molder of men, Ignatius, that the toughest material he had ever handled was the young man Francis Xavier in the earlier stages.  God, however has made better use of him than any other man of our time ... to conquer nearly a fourth part of the world to the cross of His Son. " He was a young, gallant and noble Basque, well versed in philosophy.  He thought little of Ignatius who depended on charity to keep body and soul together.  He would not break off his career of liberal arts and theology he was pursuing.  He never met Ignatius without making sport of his his designs and burning his friends into a joke... But Ignatius learned to humor him and win him with such tact and patience that he made him the immortal apostle of the Indies ...(see notes) (ii)    Similarities           Poverty (not as an ideal, but as a way of sharing for the advance of the gospel)           Freedom of mission in popular forms through popular culture           A church of the people not of the gentry

Waldensians c.1170-c.1570 "These people do not own houses. they travel in twos, barefoot, with no luggage, placing everything under common ownership, following the example of the apostles.  Naked they follow the naked Christ."  Walter Map. (i)    Valdes and the poor men of Lombardy were thrown out of the church (ii)    A communal movement that defeated Emperor Frederick (1176) (iii)    A movement of the poor which exposed the responsibility of the rich and powerful for the social evils of the time. (iv)    For Valdes the gospel involved no compromise (v)    Poverty should be the companion of itinerant preaching.  This was a criticism of the daily routine of life. (vi)    Mission leads to service to the poor.

The Franciscans (i)    Rejection of social structure, accumulation of wealth and its effects on commercial agreements and exchanges of that time. (ii)    Opened the possibility of monastic life to the poor (iii)    Poverty was a condition of itinerant preaching (iv)    Poverty also renews the church, releasing it from the worldly powers, freeing it for the struggle of love between human beings without which no true justice can exist. (v)    Free community, in a democratic style. (vi)    A vow of poverty was required of its members but the order could own property

**The Mendicant Orders**

f. The mendicant orders are religious orders which depend directly on the charity of the people for their livelihood. In principle, they do not own property , either individually or collectively (see corporate poverty ), believing that this was the most pure way of life to copy followed by Jesus Christ , in order that all their time and energy could be expended on religious work. In the Middle Ages , the original mendicant orders of friars in the Church were the Franciscans (Friars Minor, commonly known as the Grey Friars), founded 1209 Carmelites , (Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Carmel, commonly known as the White Friars), founded 1206–1214 Dominicans (Order of Preachers, commonly called the Black Friars), founded 1215 Servites (Order of Servants of Mary), founded 1233 by the Seven Holy Men of Florence, Italy. Augustinians (Hermits of St. Augustine, commonly called the Austin Friars), founded 1244 - 1256

The Second Council of Lyons (1274) recognized these as the five "great" mendicant orders, and suppressed certain others. The Council of Trent loosened their property restrictions. Afterwards, except for the Franciscans and their offshoot the Capuchins , members of the orders were permitted to own property collectively as do monks . Among other orders are the Trinitarians (Order of the Most Blessed Trinity), founded 1193 Mercedarians (Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy), founded 1218 Minims (Hermits of St. Francis of Paola), founded 1436 Capuchins ( Order of Friars Minor Capuchin ), established 1525 Discalced Carmelites , founded 1593

**E. Responses to the Poor: Modern Western Movements :**

a.     The Wesleyans Context: Time of urbanization and emerging urban poor. The established church did not deal with the poor. He was educated.  Had a passionate devotion. He was an Anglican priest. He believed that each group had the gifts needed for ministry.  That this would function independent of socio-economic status. An organizational genius.  The general rules were for "classes" of about 12.   The leader was to visit each person in the classes weekly to enquire, advise, receive the offering.  He then met with the steward (supervisor ) to show the account. His use of laymen in leadership broke the status barriers.  Some of his earliest leaders had no formal education.  This gave them status and roles.  A class leader could become a deacon, elder or a steward.

b.     The Salvation Army (i)    A breakaway from the Methodists. (ii)    They gave a prominent role to women (iii)    The use of a highly regimented structure enabled the poor to function effectively.  Poor people need clear structure.

c.      The Modern Missionary Movement William Carey - a powerless person from a powerful culture.  This created a dilemma for Carey.   Later China had to be swept clean of Western Imperialism before the gospel could be seen as the pearl of great price. The China Inland Mission - the concept of incarnational living was brought to the fore of missions.  Because of living by faith, they lived closely to the people. d.     Early Pentecostal Movements Azusa Street was a revival through reconciliation across racial lines.  Only later was speaking in tongues defined as the mark of it.  in its early days reconciliation was. It gave a prominent role to women. The Assembly of God in Brazil was begun by two Swedish Pentecostal men who came to Belem.  They encouraged their new converts to preach.  If a church grew the leader would become a pastor.  The whole movement was based around non-formal training for pastors.

**8 Lessons from Church History**

A vocation of poverty arose as a response to the poor man of God. Missionary existence demanded poverty Helping the poor, criticism of riches, willingness to accept poverty were often a protest against the ruling order , a spiritual strike.  only radical impoverishment could free the church. Denunciation of class structures .  A practical response leads to a position of militant and active criticism of unjust structures at a social and economic level as well as gospel confrontation with the powers which maintain them.  In those days this involved a Christian confrontation with a Christian order which only sanctified social injustices, the division of society into classes of clergy, masters and servants.  The church of Christ must renounce any type of accommodation with authoritarian power.   It is a minority community.  It is salt. Practical solidarity results in popular pedagogy and popular theology.  i.e. identification results in poor peoples’ patterns of preaching and theologizing. Incarnation: if you do not live among them, you do not minister among them Leadership Selection and Training; Renewal movements have new methods of Selection and training. Strong sense of community of goods Upward Social Mobility:   There has to be a pattern of leadership selection that keeps sending people down.

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**Resources**

* Julio de Santa Ana. (1981). *Good news to the poor: The challenge of the poor in the history of the church* . WCC.
* Paul Pierson. (2009). *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History Through a Missiological Perspective* . Pasadena: William Carey University Press.