

“Call Me Scrooge”

A Bible Study on Poverty

Go ahead. We might as well get it over with. Call me Scrooge.

In this paper I am going to ask some searching questions about the poor. Perhaps I should be more precise. I am going to ask some questions about poverty. No, that is not quite it either. I am going to ask some questions about the way that poverty is viewed today. That's still not it. This paper is aimed at how the evangelical church in America thinks about poverty. No, I need to be still more precise! I want to examine how the evangelical church in America understands the Bible's teaching on poverty.

But I know that I will probably be called a Scrooge no matter how careful I try to be in this paper. Why do I say that? When I read what prominent evangelical Christian speakers say about poverty alleviation and then see how other Christians readily repeat that teaching, I find that the Bible's actual teaching on the subject is not carefully studied. Sweeping generalizations are bandied about as obvious truth. Furthermore, there is not much attention given to how to apply the Bible's teaching.¹ To put it simply, the subject of poverty is popular. Woe to the person who dares so much as even ask a question about poverty alleviation!

If you have not already dismissed me as a hopeless Scrooge, then let's move beyond the slogans and look carefully at this subject. For the purpose of this study I will be referring to *The Hole in Our Gospel*, written by the President of World Vision, Richard Stearns.² I pick this book not because I think that it, in particular, is misguided; rather, it is typical of what is said today by evangelical Christians about poverty. Therefore, it stands as a good recent representation of popular teaching.

What the Bible Does Say about Poverty

First, let's recognize that the Bible *does* say a lot about poverty. Helping the poor should be a responsibility that is embraced by God's people. The Old Testament law contains instructions on the subject.

²² "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. ²³ If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. ²⁴ My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. (Exodus 22:22-23)

² "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, ³ and do not show favoritism to the poor in a lawsuit. . . .

¹ That issue is beyond the scope of this paper. For an investigation of that subject, I recommend Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert's excellent book, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009).

² Richard Stearns, *The Hole In Our Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2009).

⁶ "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. ⁷ Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. (Exodus 23:2-3, 6)

¹⁹ When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹ When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²² Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this. (Deut. 24:19-22)

¹² When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. (Deut. 26:12)

We also find teaching that emphasizes responsibility for the poor in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

³ Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Ps. 82:3-4)

⁹ Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:9)

The Old Testament prophets warn the people of their day about the evil of oppressing the poor. They call upon their contemporaries to repent of the way they take advantage of the poor.

¹⁴ The LORD enters into judgment
against the elders and leaders of his people:
"It is you who have ruined my vineyard;
the plunder from the poor is in your houses.
¹⁵ What do you mean by crushing my people
and grinding the faces of the poor?"
declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty. (Isaiah 3:14-15)

⁶ This is what the LORD says:
"For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not turn back [my wrath].
They sell the innocent for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.
⁷ They trample on the heads of the poor
as on the dust of the ground

and deny justice to the oppressed.
Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name. (Amos 2:6-7)

Many other passages could be cited. Throughout the Old Testament there is concern for the poor. God's people are called upon to help those who are less fortunate or those who are being taken advantage of by others.

In the New Testament we find similar instructions given to Christians. Jesus spoke strongly about money and how it should be used.

¹⁶ Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

¹⁷ "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."

¹⁸ "Which ones?" he inquired.

Jesus replied, " 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,' ^[d] and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

²⁰ "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

²¹ Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:16-24)

¹³ "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, "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. (Luke 16:13-15)

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:1-9)

The book of Acts records how the early church handled material resources and how they demonstrated concern for the poor.

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the believers living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27-30)

In the letters of the apostle Paul we find the famous missionary taking steps to help Christians who were in physical need.

²⁵ Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. (Romans 15:25-26)

¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little." (2 Corinthians 8:13-14)

²⁸ Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. (Ephesians 4:28)

¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ In this way they will lay up

treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

James and John also provide pointed teaching about the responsibility that Christians have toward the poor and disadvantaged.

²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

Even though additional passages could be cited, these verses from both the Old and New Testaments adequately demonstrate that the Bible gives God's people throughout the ages commands to become involved in establishing justice for the oppressed and taking steps to help the poor.

What the Bible Does Not Say about Poverty

So what more needs to be said? Many prominent Christians would cite the previously mentioned teachings found in the Bible and conclude that the case is closed. Enough talk! Let's get to work! We don't need to study the Bible any more. We just need to start obeying its commands about the poor!

It's at this point where I want to start asking my questions. Yes, the Bible does indicate that God's people are to be involved in poverty alleviation, but does it teach that it is to be the church's top priority? What role should it play in the overall ministry of the church of Jesus Christ? Is it primarily a responsibility of individual Christians or a responsibility of the church too?

To begin our search for answers to these questions, let's take a closer look at what the Bible says. Is it possible that in order to emphasize Christians' proper responsibility for the poor that the Bible's teaching has in some ways been distorted?

For example, the prophet Amos's unmistakable denunciation of those who oppress the poor is often cited. But Amos also spoke in strong terms about the people's need to devote

themselves once again to the living God. How many sermons that have cited Amos's teaching about justice have also stressed his message about heartfelt humility before God himself? If that part of the prophet's message is not given its due weight, then have we been true to the totality of his teaching or have we in some way distorted his message?

In *The Hole in Our Gospel*, Richard Stearns refers to what Jim Wallis and some of his classmates did while they were in seminary.

They went through all sixty-six books of the bible and underlined every passage and verse that dealt with poverty, wealth, justice, and oppression. Then one of Jim's fellow students took a pair of scissors and physically cut every one of those verses out of the Bible. The result was a volume in tatters that barely held together. . . . (According to *The Poverty and Justice Bible*, there are almost two thousand verses in Scripture that deal with poverty and justice.) When Jim would speak on these issues, he would hold his ragged book in the air and proclaim, "Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible; it is full of holes. Each one of us might as well take our Bibles, a pair of scissors, and begin cutting out all the scriptures we pay no attention to, all the biblical texts that we just ignore."³

Wallis's tattered Bible was no doubt an effective tool for communication, but we should ask whether his method of interpreting the Bible is correct. Do we establish the Bible's teaching simply by counting how many times a word is used?

In *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance* there are 1462 references to the word *land*. Suppose we took scissors and cut out every reference to *land* that we find in the Bible. What would our Bible look like? Therefore, it might be concluded, that concern for the environment should be a priority for Christians today!

Of course, someone might point out the word *land* is used primarily to refer to the land of Israel and not to the earth as a whole. Therefore, Christians' proper concern should be for present-day nation of Israel or more precisely the environment of the land that is today found in modern Israel.

My point is simple: This is no way to interpret the Bible. We don't come to a true understanding of any subject by simply counting the number of times some word is found. The issue is not how many times a word is used; the issue is what message is being delivered when that word is used.⁴

Jim Wallis's actions were dramatic, but they are ultimately nothing more than a means to grab people's attention.

³ Stearns, *The Hole*, 24.

⁴ Evangelical Christians frequently use the same method of interpretation when it comes to the subject of money. Stearns cites Randy Alcorn's statistics on how often Jesus said something about money. *The Hole*, 210. Stearns uses those statistics to reinforce his message about how Christians should use their money to help the poor. Other Christians use those same statistics to encourage Christians to get out of debt and build wealth. Both applications are based on a faulty method of interpretation.

Consider another frequently cited Bible passage about the poor. In the Gospel of Luke we find Jesus making a summary statement about his ministry.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

Stearns, like many before him, cite this teaching as an example for Christians and the church to follow.

Proclaiming the whole gospel, then, means much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice, efforts to right the wrongs that are so prevalent in our world. God is concerned about the spiritual, physical, and social dimensions of our being. This whole gospel is truly good news for the poor, and it is the foundation for a social revolution that has the power to change the world. And if this was Jesus' mission, it is also the mission of all who claim to follow Him. It is my mission, it is your mission, and it is the mission of the Church.⁵

Even though such an interpretation and application of Luke 4 is frequently given by Christians, we need to ask whether it is the correct interpretation of the passage. Tim Stafford succinctly examines the issue.

A traditional interpretation sees these words as describing various facets of Jesus' ministry. He healed blind people. He spoke good news to the poor. Taking the prophecy quite literally, Christian groups have used these verses to justify their "kingdom ministries" (1) to the poor, (2) to prisoners, (3) to the blind and (4) to those oppressed by unjust governments or economic forces.

They are right in a very general sense. In the new era of the kingdom that Jesus announced, all kinds of ministry to needy people are justified. The kingdom of God brings justice, health and peace—and these may come through ministries to the poor, to the blind, to prisoners and to the oppressed, among others.

In a literal sense, though, this traditional interpretation misses Jesus' clear meaning, which his audience understood perfectly. There is a reason why this story is

⁵ Stearns, *The Hole*, 22.

included in Luke, and it has nothing to do with ministries to poor people, blind people or prisoners.

If you read the passage from Isaiah in its original context, you will find that it clearly refers to God's promise to restore Israel from exile in Babylon. Isaiah goes on, "They will rebuild the ancient ruins . . . / They will renew the ruined cities / that have been devastated for generations . . . / You will feed on the wealth of nations, / and in their riches you will boast. / Instead of their shame, / my people will receive a double portion . . . / In my faithfulness I will reward them / and make an everlasting covenant with them" (Isaiah 61:4-8).

Anybody who studies Isaiah—and I am sure Jesus did—will recognize what is going on in these predictions. Isaiah spoke to Israel about a specific historical reality: her destruction by Babylon. After that war most of Israel's population was deported, her cities razed and farmland allowed to go to seed. In a deliberate insult to Israel's religion, Babylon knocked down the temple and burned it. Isaiah interprets this in a strange way, not as a victory of pagan forces over Israel's God, but as God's own victory. All this happened, he says, as a punishment from God because of Israel's sins.

Yet Isaiah also predicts repeatedly that God will forgive, that Israel will return to her land, that the cities will be rebuilt and that a period of great blessing will begin. That is the sense of the passage Jesus read.

In that passage, "the poor," "the oppressed," "the prisoners" and "the blind" all refer to the same people. They are the people of Israel, taken as prisoners to Babylon, blind to God's love for them, oppressed by their captivity and their own sinfulness.

Since Jesus says these prisoners are liberated at the very moment he speaks, he implicitly maintains that Israel has remained captive, blind, poor and oppressed, even though they returned physically from Babylon five hundred years before. The audience listening to Jesus—his former neighbors—is poor, blind and imprisoned, according to Jesus. The exile has continued to Jesus' own day. Sins still dominate their national reality. God has not forgiven and restored them. However, Jesus has good news as well. At this exact moment in their hearing, their long-predicted liberation has come. God is forgiving their sins and returning to bless them.

No wonder that "all spoke well of him" (Luke 4:22).

Certainly the town's excitement did not come from the thought that Jesus was launching a ministry outreach to the blind. Their excitement stemmed from the possibility that their nation would be liberated, rebuilt and reconsecrated. That longed-for event was what Jesus came home to announce. He had been saying precisely the same thing in his core message: the kingdom of God is at hand.⁶

Please note that Stafford is not against ministry to the poor! In the second quoted paragraph he states, "In the new era of the kingdom that Jesus announced, all kinds of ministry to needy people are justified." The point is that this frequently quoted passage is not teaching what it is so often said to teach. Jesus is reminding his contemporaries of God's promise through Isaiah and then confidently asserting that it is fulfilled in no one but himself.

Another New Testament passage that often surfaces in discussions about Christians' responsibility toward the poor is the famous teaching about "the least of these" in Matthew 25.

⁶ Tim Stafford, *Surprised by Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matt. 25:31-40)

Stearns provides a commentary on this passage that is typical of the way that the passage is often interpreted.

One last startling aspect of this passage is the remarkable claim of our Lord that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40). Even the good sheep in this passage were surprised at this. What they had seen as simple human gestures of love to the needy turned out to be gestures to a "Christ" incognito. Mother Teresa once said that in the faces of the poor whom she served, she saw "Christ, in His most distressing disguise."⁷

I hesitate to question this interpretation of the passage because it is so well accepted among evangelical Christians. And who am I to question the example of Mother Teresa and the motivation behind her ministry!

Our goal, however, is to understand the teaching of Jesus and not just to accept what is commonly taught. There is a key issue of interpretation that is usually overlooked. Jesus talks

⁷ Stearns, *The Hole*, 60.

not about “the least of these,” but “the least of these brothers of mine” (Matt. 25:40). (The TNIV that is quoted above translates it as “brothers and sisters” to indicate properly that Jesus’ teaching is not limited to males.) Who are Jesus’ “brothers”?

Various suggestions have been proposed, and none of them have won complete acceptance. The usual interpretation is that it refers in general to the stranger, the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, and the imprisoned. Others suggest that it refers to the Jewish people in the end times. Or perhaps it refers to Christian missionaries. Through my study of the passage I have come to the conclusion that Jesus is talking about Christians who have been persecuted or oppressed because of their faith in Jesus.

Proper hermeneutics requires us to interpret words in their context. That requires inspection of both the larger context of Matthew’s Gospel and the immediate context in Matthew 25. Look at the way that “brothers” is used in Matthew’s Gospel.

⁴⁶While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

⁴⁸He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matt. 12:46-50)

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Matt. 28:8-10)

“Brothers” is used in Matthew 12:46-50 and 28:8-10 to refer to Jesus’ faithful followers. Therefore, it should be asked if “brothers” in Matthew 25 also refers to Jesus’ disciples. Is it possible that Jesus is talking about his followers who are hungry, sick and imprisoned and not to the poor and needy in general?

That possible interpretation fits with the teaching that Jesus gives earlier in the Gospel when he sends the Twelve disciples out on a mission.

⁴⁰ "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes someone known to be a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes someone known to be righteous will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded." (Matthew 10:40-42)

This interpretation also fits the context of Matthew 24-25. This long speech, often called the Olivet Discourse, begins with a discussion of the persecution that Jesus’ disciples are going to experience. Jesus describes his disciples’ trials in Matthew 24:4-35. Then in Matthew 24:36-51 he calls upon them to remain faithful to him when they encounter those trials. The Parable of

the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Bags of God in Matthew 25:1-30 reinforce that message of faithful discipleship. Then comes Jesus' teaching about the sheep and goats. Jesus announces to his disciples that the nations will be judged on how they treat his followers who are being persecuted.

The Olivet Discourse is best understood as a message that Jesus gives to his disciples to prepare them for the hardships that they are going to encounter. Contrary to popular opinion, Matthew 25:31-46 is not a passage describing the treatment of the needy in general.⁸

In evangelical literature that addresses the issue of poverty and calls for the church to rediscover the importance of helping the poor, special attention is often focused on today's leaders and their blindness to this subject. Stearns' comments are typical.

. . . Jesus' strongest denunciations were directed not at thieves, murderers, and adulterers, but at the faith leaders of the day, the very men who had studied the Scriptures most (in today's terms, the pastors and seminary professors). Yet in just twenty-one verses (Matt. 23:13-33) Jesus called them hypocrites seven times, blind guides twice, blind fools, sons of hell, whitewashed tombs, snakes, and a brood of vipers! How had these men, steeped in the Law and the history of Israel, gone so wide of the mark?⁹

It's difficult to know exactly how to reply to that observation and its not-so-subtle implications without becoming defensive. First, let's readily acknowledge that Jesus does have harsh things to say about the religious leaders of his day. Second, let's also admit that today's "pastors and seminary professors" (including the one writing this paper!) can be guilty of sinful blindness. But, third, it should be understood that Jesus is not condemning all faith leaders simply because they are leaders. If that were true, Stearns would be condemning himself because he leads World Vision! Finally, we should acknowledge that Jesus did not just have harsh things to say about religious leaders. In the course of his ministry Jesus had strong words for every class of people (Luke 3:7; 11:29-32, 50).

Slamming today's religious leaders can be an effective and well-received rhetorical approach, but it does not genuinely address the issue at hand. We need to do better than simply condemn Christian leaders who disagree with us. We need to look more carefully at what the Bible actually says about poverty.

To reinforce his message about the blindness of the church, Stearns cites the example of slavery.

Slavery, of course, is another dark blot on the reputation of the Church, another example of culture blindness. The slave trade and the inhumane treatment of slaves flourished for hundreds of years, not just in sight of the Church, but within the church

⁸ D.A. Carson, "Matthew" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), Vol. 8: 518-521; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 957-958.

⁹ *The Hole*, 64.

itself. . . . There were, in fact, many Southern ministers who campaigned strongly against the abolitionist movement.¹⁰

Stearns is correct in what he says. In fact, he could have gone even farther and said that there were ministers in the North who also condemned the abolitionists and their fight against slavery. Unfortunately Stearns doesn't tell the whole story. Why does he say nothing about the nineteenth century Christians who spoke out against slavery? Couldn't he have mentioned William Wilberforce, who courageously led the long fight against the slave trade in England? The lack of historical perspective makes one wonder if Stearns is so dedicated to his cause that he skews church history in order to make his point.

One final topic needs to be addressed: What is the church's role in addressing poverty? Stearns laments the low priority that churches in America place on helping the poor.

A few years ago World Vision did a survey of pastors, in which we asked them to rate the things they considered real priorities for their churches. Based on a list of items that we provided, these ministers were to tell us which ones they thought took precedence over the others. In the highest-priority category, 79 percent listed worship; 57 percent evangelism; 55 percent, children's ministry; and 47 percent, discipleship programs. Just 18 percent said that "helping the poor and disadvantaged people overseas" was of "highest priority."¹¹

To discuss this aspect of the issue, we must first ask a question: What is the church? At first, that sounds like such a simple question that it shouldn't even need to be asked. But that is perhaps the problem. We don't know what the church's role in society should be because we haven't first thought about what the church is. Is "church" a noun that merely refers to "all Christians"? When we say that the "church" should be doing something, are we really saying that "all Christians" should be involved in that concern or activity? Or does the "church" refer to a distinct organization or institution? D.A. Carson discusses the difference that such a distinction makes.

It is hard to ignore the many injunctions of Scripture to do good, to show mercy, to care for the poor, to be concerned with matters of justice. If all such responsibilities belong to the church *as a church*, to the church *as an institution*, then surely the leaders of the church—its pastors/elders/bishops and deacons—should take responsibility for them and direct them. But what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:2). Even matters of justice *within the congregation* were in some measure handed over to the other spirit-filled men (6:1-7).

If it is true that the "church" is not necessarily to be equated with "all Christians," then it might be appropriate to differentiate between what the "church" should be doing and what "all Christians" should be doing.

¹⁰ *The Hole*, 191.

¹¹ *The Hole*, 185.

This discussion suggests that there are opposing dangers for thoughtful Christians. On the one side, some Christians apparently think that faithful evangelism and teaching the bible are the only things about which they should be concerned. They need not get involved with, say, the indigent, of those who suffer from AIDS or who are abused. . . . On the other side, some Christians become so engrossed in ministries of compassion and justice to the exclusion of evangelism and teaching the Bible, or so fascinated by the challenges of governing, that they delude themselves into thinking they are faithful when in reality they are overlooking what is central to any Christian's obligation to the risen Lord. They marginalize their responsibilities as members of *the church* of Jesus Christ, the church that lives and dies by the great commission.¹²

Carson properly calls our attention to Jesus' words in Matthew 28:16-20. Isn't the mission of the church *as an institution* called primarily to making disciples?

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Conclusion

So where does this discussion lead us? First, contrary to what a reader of this paper might think, I am grateful for *The Hole in the Gospel*. It is a provocative book that raises important issues that need to be discussed. Whether it arrives at the precise answer to the various issues that it raises is another question. But let us discuss poverty and how we should address it as followers of Jesus Christ!

Second, let's be sure that we study the Bible carefully. It is easy to cite a verse or two and then think that we have done all that is necessary. Let's be sure that we have looked at the totality of what God's Word teaches and not just rely on a proof-text here and rest on traditional interpretations of commonly cited sections of the Bible.

Third, let's not distort church history. Plenty of bad examples can be found and lamented, but looking at the positive examples that previous generations of Christians provide us will be more inspiring toward facing today's challenges.

Fourth, we should think through the distinction between what Christians should do as individuals and what a local church should do as a distinct fellowship of believers. Could it be that the church should concentrate on the making of disciples through the preaching of the gospel message and that disciples as individuals and in voluntary organizations should then exert themselves to alleviate poverty and fulfill other crucial aspects of the will of God in their daily lives?

¹² D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 151-152.

This is a difficult subject that will elude simplistic answers, but it is one that must be discussed. I strongly recommend Tim Keller's excellent thought-provoking article on "The Gospel and the Poor."¹³ In many ways it serves as the positive complement to this paper. I have concentrated on critiquing current popular teaching among evangelical Christians. Keller presents a positive exploration on how the proclamation of the good news of Christ should intersect with ministry to the poor. If you aren't satisfied with being a Scrooge (and I hope you aren't), then be sure to read Keller's article!

¹³ Tim Keller, "The Gospel and the Poor," *Themelios* 33.3 (2008):8-22. Go to: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/publications/33-3/the-gospel-and-the-poor>.