

THE JOHN LELAND CENTER

FOR THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

GOD'S PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR:

AN EXAMINATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS,

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, AND CONTEMPORARY

CHURCH RESPONSES

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INTRODUCTION

God's preferential option for the poor stands as one of the most consistent themes in Christianity. While Scripture repeatedly demonstrates that God chooses to work through and identify with the economically marginalized, modern churches have largely domesticated this radical teaching into manageable charitable activities that avoid challenging systemic inequality.

This examination explores how Christian scholars understand God's preferential option as an ethical imperative, how Jesus himself embodied this divine preference through his incarnation and ministry, and how contemporary churches can work to implement this ethic. The evidence reveals that recovery of the preferential option for the poor is not optional for Christian faithfulness but represents a fundamental belief and practice.

The word "poor" in biblical terms refers specifically to those who are "wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed" through exploitation and oppression. This understanding transforms poverty from a private tragedy requiring charity into a justice issue demanding systemic transformation. The marginalized include all whom society pushes to the edges—economically, socially, and politically.

Contemporary Christianity's response to poverty has been corrupted by "white knight mentality" that positions Christians as rescuers of deficient communities, and "arms-length helping" that maintains social distance while providing charitable services. These approaches contradict the biblical vision of mutual community where the poor have essential gifts to contribute and dignity to be honored.

This analysis demonstrates that authentic Christian engagement with God's preferential option for the poor requires moving beyond charity to justice, beyond service to partnership, and beyond helping the poor to learning from the poor. The stakes extend beyond church faithfulness to human flourishing in a world where nearly one billion people lack basic necessities while others possess unprecedented wealth.

ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR GOD'S PREFERENTIAL OF THE POOR

Ronald Sider's Ethical Framework

Sider demonstrates that God's special concern for the poor appears consistently throughout Scripture in ways that reveal divine character and establish ethical obligations for God's people.

Sider identifies several key patterns that establish the ethical foundation of the preferential option. First, God consistently chooses poor and marginalized people as instruments of revelation and salvation. When God selected a chosen people, "he picked poor slaves in Egypt" rather than a wealthy and powerful nation.¹ When God called the early church, "most of the members were poor folk," as Paul marvels in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.² Most significantly, when God became incarnate, he came as a poor Galilean rather than a powerful Roman emperor or influential religious leader.

¹ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in the Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 48.

² *Ibid.*, 49.

This pattern reveals something fundamental about God's character and purposes. As Sider observes, "When we want to effect change, we almost always contact people with influence, prestige, and power. When God wanted to save the world, he selected slaves, prostitutes, and sundry other disadvantaged folk."³ This contrast between human and divine values establishes an ethical framework that challenges conventional assumptions about power, worth, and effectiveness.

God's identification with the poor reaches its climax in the incarnation. The ethical significance of Jesus' poverty extends beyond personal example to theological revelation: "Only as we feel the presence of the incarnate God in the form of a poor Galilean can we begin to understand his words: 'I was hungry and you gave me food... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"⁴ This teaching establishes an ethical framework where treatment of the poor becomes treatment of Christ himself.

Elsa Tamez's Liberation Ethics

Elsa Tamez's analysis of the Epistle of James provides crucial ethical insight into how the preferential option for the poor functions as a criterion for authentic Christian community. Tamez demonstrates that James presents God's partiality toward the poor not as arbitrary favoritism but as a necessary response to systematic oppression and exploitation.

She shows how the rich in James systematically exploit the poor through withholding wages, using legal systems to extract payments, accumulating wealth while others lack

³ Ibid., 49-50.

⁴ Ibid., 48.

necessities, and living luxuriously while others suffer deprivation.⁵ The ethical significance of James' teaching becomes clear in his explicit statement of God's preferential option: "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"⁶ Tamez observes that this rhetorical question expects an affirmative answer, indicating that the Christian community already understood God's special concern for the poor.

Tamez's ethical analysis reveals how favoritism toward the rich within Christian communities contradicts the gospel itself. When churches show "special attention to the man wearing fine clothes" while telling the poor man to "stand there" or "sit on the floor," they demonstrate that their values align with worldly systems rather than divine priorities.⁷ This favoritism represents more than social insensitivity; it denies the fundamental equality that the gospel establishes.

Tamez's analysis also reveals the ethical implications of ignoring God's preferential option. She demonstrates that James presents a stark choice: either align with God's concern for the poor or be identified with their oppressors. There is no neutral position in situations of systematic oppression. Christian communities that fail to embody God's preferential option effectively side with the oppressors regardless of their stated intentions.

⁵ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 14-24.

⁶ James 2:5.

⁷ James 2:2-4.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's Justice Ethics

Nicholas Wolterstorff's in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* provides a sophisticated ethical framework for understanding how God's preferential option for the poor relates to biblical concepts of justice and human rights. Wolterstorff demonstrates that God's apparent bias toward the poor actually represents commitment to true justice rather than partiality.

The ethical foundation of God's preferential option lies in the divine commitment to shalom—God's intended order where all people flourish. Wolterstorff argues that poverty represents a fundamental violation of shalom because it prevents people from experiencing the fullness of life that God intends. "To be impoverished is to fall short of shalom. That is what is wrong with poverty. God is committed to shalom. Jesus came to bring shalom. In shalom there is no poverty."⁸

He argues that all people have fundamental rights to food, shelter, healthcare, and other necessities for human flourishing. These rights are not charity that the wealthy may choose to provide but obligations that society must guarantee. "If a rich man knows of someone who is starving and has the power to help that person but chooses not to do so, then he violates the starving person's rights as surely and reprehensibly as if he had physically assaulted the sufferer."⁹

The ethical implications of sustenance rights transform the question of Christian obligation toward the poor. Rather than asking "How much should I give to help the poor?" the question becomes "How must society be structured to ensure everyone's basic rights?" This shift

⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 76.

⁹ Ibid., 84.

from charity to justice represents a fundamental ethical reorientation that challenges a comfortable christian life.

Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden's Dignity Ethics

Samuel and Sugden's ethical analysis begins with recognition that the poor suffer not only material deprivation but loss of dignity and identity that oppressive systems create. As Samuel defines it, human dignity involves "a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance and a sense of having something to contribute to the world and others."¹⁰ When systems of oppression deny people opportunities to contribute their gifts or participate in decisions affecting their lives, they violate human dignity as fundamentally as they violate material needs.

The ethical significance of the gospel for the poor lies in its restoration of dignity and identity through new community relationships. Samuel and Sugden argue that "the gospel creates new community in which social barriers are broken down and people relate to each other as equals in God's family."¹¹ This transformation addresses the dehumanization that poverty creates rather than simply providing material relief.

Their ethical framework emphasizes that authentic Christian engagement with poverty must recognize the poor as partners rather than passive recipients. The gospel reveals that everyone has gifts to contribute to the community, which means "the poor must be seen not as passive recipients of charity but as active contributors to community life."¹² This perspective

¹⁰ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 238.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249-250.

¹² *Ibid.*, 246-247.

transforms relationships from patronizing charity to mutual sharing based on recognition of everyone's dignity and contribution.

Miguel De La Torre's Marginality Ethics

De La Torre demonstrates that reading from the margins reveals aspects of biblical teaching that privileged interpretations often obscure.

De La Torre's ethical analysis begins with recognition that Jesus deliberately identified with the economically marginalized through his birth, life, and death. "The radicalness of the incarnation is not so much that the Creator of the universe became a frail human but rather that God chose to become poor, to take the form of a slave."¹³ This incarnational solidarity establishes ethical obligation for Christians to maintain similar solidarity with the marginalized.

The ethical implications of reading from the margins become clear in De La Torre's analysis of Jesus' parable of the rich fool. While privileged interpretations often spiritualize this parable to focus on spiritual attitudes toward wealth, those reading from the margins "agree with Jesus' pronouncement that this rich person is a fool" because he hoarded resources while others lacked necessities.¹⁴ This literal reading reveals economic implications that comfortable interpretations avoid.

Philip Yancey's Ethics

Yancey draws on Catholic scholar Monika Hellwig's analysis of why the poor might be more receptive to the gospel. Here are the ten advantages she identifies:

¹³ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 108.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption
2. The poor know their dependence on God and powerful people, plus their interdependence with each other
3. The poor rest their security on people, not things
4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their own importance and no exaggerated need for privacy
5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation
6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries
7. The poor can wait - they've developed patience born of acknowledged dependence
8. The poor have realistic fears - they know one can survive great suffering and want
9. When the poor hear the Gospel, it sounds like good news rather than a threat or scolding
10. The poor can respond with abandonment because they have little to lose and are ready for anything

Yancey emphasizes that God's preference for the poor is not about moral superiority. He explicitly states "I do not believe the poor to be more virtuous than anyone else." Instead, the poor have what he calls a "peculiar advantage" in their openness and receptivity to the gospel because of their circumstances.¹⁵

The ethical significance of these advantages lies not in romanticizing poverty but in recognizing how wealth can create spiritual obstacles. As Yancey observes, "Dependence,

¹⁵ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 115-116.

humility, simplicity, cooperation, and a sense of abandon are qualities greatly prized in the spiritual life, but extremely elusive for people who live in comfort."¹⁶

Reflection on Ethics

Based on the ethical analyses from these scholars, I find their collective insights about God's preferential option for the poor both compelling and challenging to contemporary Christian practice. What strikes me most powerfully is how these authors demonstrate that God's identification with the poor is intentional throughout biblical history. Sider's observation that "when God wanted to save the world, he selected slaves, prostitutes, and sundry other disadvantaged folk" rather than people with influence reveals something profound about divine values.¹⁷ This pattern culminates in the incarnation itself, where, as De La Torre emphasizes, God chose "to become poor, to take the form of a slave."¹⁸ I find this incarnational solidarity both theologically stunning and ethically demanding—it suggests that Christians cannot authentically follow Christ while maintaining comfortable distance from the poor.

The systemic justice framework that emerges from these scholars, particularly Wolterstorff's concept of sustenance rights, convinces me that charity alone is insufficient. Wolterstorff's reframing of the question from "How much should I give to help the poor?" to "How must society be structured to ensure everyone's basic rights?" represents the fundamental shift in thinking that contemporary Christianity desperately needs.¹⁹ This moves beyond paternalistic approaches to recognize what Samuel and Sugden emphasize—that "the poor must

¹⁶ Ibid., 115-116.

¹⁷ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in the Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 49-50.

¹⁸ De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 108.

¹⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 84.

be seen not as passive recipients of charity but as active contributors to community life."²⁰ Their dignity ethics challenges me to examine how my own privileged position might blind me to insights that could only come from those who have experienced marginalization.

Most challenging personally is Yancey's point that "dependence, humility, simplicity, cooperation, and a sense of abandon are qualities greatly prized in the spiritual life, but extremely elusive for people who live in comfort."²¹ This suggests that the poor may be blessed not because of their material circumstances but because those circumstances create openness to divine grace that wealth often inhibits. The poor have "little to lose and are ready for anything" when responding to the gospel, while wealth can create barriers of false security that make authentic discipleship more difficult. These ethical analyses collectively convince me that recovery of God's preferential option for the poor is essential for understanding both the character of God and the nature of authentic Christian discipleship.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: JESUS AND THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

The Incarnational Foundation

The theological significance of the incarnation for understanding God's preferential option cannot be overstated. As De La Torre emphasizes, "the radicalness of the incarnation is not so

²⁰ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 246-247.

²¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 116.

much that the Creator of the universe became a frail human but rather that God chose to become poor, to take the form of a slave."²² This divine choice reveals fundamental truths about God's character and priorities that have profound theological implications.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth provide concrete theological demonstration of God's identification with the poor. As De La Torre observes, Jesus was born not in comfortable circumstances but "in a barn, full of the manure of those 'angelic cows' and the flies attracted to most stables."²³ Mary's offering at Jesus' presentation—"a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons"—represents the sacrifice prescribed for those too poor to afford a lamb, providing biblical evidence of the family's economic status.²⁴

The theological implications of Jesus' origins extend beyond his birth to his geographical and social location. Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, a region so insignificant that "the Hebrew Bible never mentions it" and so despised that people asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"²⁵ This identification with the marginalized regions and peoples of his time reveals God's preferential option in concrete historical terms.

Jesus' adult life continued to demonstrate incarnational solidarity with the poor. As De La Torre documents, Jesus lived as an itinerant preacher without permanent housing, describing himself as having nowhere to lay his head while "foxes have holes, and birds of the heaven nests."²⁶ His dependence on the charity of others for survival and his lack of funds, evidenced by incidents such as needing to find tax money in a fish's mouth, demonstrate his genuine identification with economic marginalization.

²² De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 108.

²³ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

The theological significance of Jesus' poverty extends beyond personal example to revelatory function. His material poverty serves as divine testimony that God's values differ fundamentally from worldly values that equate worth with wealth. The incarnation reveals that God chooses to work through the powerless rather than the powerful, the despised rather than the celebrated, the poor rather than the rich.

Jesus' Messianic Mission

The theological foundation of Jesus' preferential option for the poor appears most clearly in his understanding of his own messianic mission. In his sermon in Luke 4, Jesus explicitly identifies his calling with Isaiah's prophecy: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."²⁷

This statement establishes the theological framework for understanding Jesus' mission. As Sider observes, when John the Baptist questioned whether Jesus was the expected Messiah, "Jesus simply pointed to his deeds: he was healing the sick and preaching to the poor. Jesus also preached to the rich but apparently it was his particular concern to preach to the poor that validated his claim to messiahship."²⁸ This reveals that concern for the poor was not incidental to Jesus' messianic identity but central to it.

The reference to "the year of the Lord's favor" connects Jesus' mission to the jubilee tradition, which provided a systematic address to economic inequality through land redistribution

²⁷ Luke 4:18-19.

²⁸ Sider, *Rich Christians in the Age of Hunger*, 47.

and debt cancellation. This connection reveals that Jesus understood his mission as involving not merely spiritual salvation but economic justice. The theological implication is that the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed includes material dimensions that address poverty and oppression.

The theological significance of Jesus' messianic mission appears in his response to those who questioned his association with tax collectors and sinners. Rather than defending himself by appealing to universal love, Jesus declared, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."²⁹ This response reveals that Jesus' preferential attention to the marginalized flows from their greater need for the healing and restoration that his mission provides.

The Cross and God's Identification with the Oppressed

The theological climax of God's preferential option for the poor appears in the crucifixion, where Jesus experiences the ultimate form of marginalization. Crucifixion was specifically designed as punishment for slaves and political rebels, those without social standing or legal protection. By dying this death, Jesus experienced complete identification with the most despised and powerless members of society.

The theological significance of the crucifixion for understanding God's preferential option lies in its demonstration that God's solidarity with the oppressed extends to sharing their suffering. This was not theoretical identification but costly solidarity that involved experiencing the ultimate consequences of challenging systems that oppress the poor.

²⁹ Luke 5:31-32.

The cry of agony from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—can be understood theologically as expressing the experience of abandonment that the poor regularly face.³⁰ In this moment, Jesus experiences not only physical suffering but the spiritual anguish of feeling abandoned by God that characterizes the experience of oppression.

The theological implications of the resurrection include vindication of God's preferential option for the poor. The resurrection demonstrates that God's identification with the oppressed does not end in defeat but leads to victory over the powers that create suffering and death. This provides the theological foundation for hope that current systems of oppression are not final and that God's justice will ultimately prevail.

Jesus' Teaching on Wealth

Jesus' theological teaching about wealth consistently challenges assumptions that prosperity indicates divine blessing while poverty suggests divine disfavor. His warnings about the spiritual dangers of wealth establish a theological framework that directly contradicts prosperity theology and cultural assumptions about the relationship between spirituality and material success.

The encounter with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-27) provides crucial theological insight into Jesus' view of wealth. When the young man claims to have kept all the commandments, Jesus responds by calling him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. The young man's refusal and subsequent departure leads Jesus to observe, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"³¹

³⁰ Matthew 27:46

³¹ Mark 10:23.

The theological significance of this teaching lies in its revelation that wealth can become an ultimate loyalty that competes with devotion to God. Jesus' statement that "you cannot serve both God and money" establishes theological framework that makes wealth accumulation while others suffer a form of idolatry.³² Authentic discipleship requires willingness to sacrifice economic advantage for the sake of justice and community.

Jesus' teaching about anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount provides an additional theological framework for understanding wealth and poverty. His instruction not to worry about food and clothing because "your heavenly Father knows that you need them" establishes theological foundation for trusting God's provision rather than accumulating wealth for security.³³ The theological implication is that those who trust God can share generously because they believe God will provide for their needs.

Reflection on the Theological Foundations

The theological foundations presented in this analysis convince me that Jesus' preferential option for the poor is not a peripheral aspect of his ministry but the very heart of his incarnational mission. What strikes me most profoundly is how the incarnation itself represents God's ultimate identification with the marginalized. The way he was born into an economically poor life, born in a no-name town as Nazareth, and lived to preach salvation to the marginalized is a powerful testimony to God's character.

This theological foundation culminates in the cross, where Jesus experienced the ultimate form of marginalization through a death reserved for slaves and political rebels. The cry of

³² Matthew 6:24.

³³ Matthew 6:32.

abandonment—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—expresses the spiritual anguish that characterizes oppression, while the resurrection vindicates God's preferential option by demonstrating that identification with the oppressed leads ultimately to victory over the powers of death and injustice.

What challenges me most personally is Jesus' teaching about wealth, particularly his observation that "how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"³⁴ His statement that "you cannot serve both God and money" reveals wealth as a competing ultimate loyalty that can constitute idolatry.³⁵ Yet I find hope in his teaching about trusting God's provision rather than accumulating wealth for security—that "your heavenly Father knows that you need".³⁶ This theological framework suggests that authentic discipleship requires willingness to sacrifice economic advantage for justice and community, trusting that God will provide what we truly need. The theological foundations convince me that following Christ necessarily involves concrete solidarity with the poor, not as an optional expression of charity but as fundamental to understanding both who God is and what it means to be his disciples.

³⁴ Mark 10:23.

³⁵ Matthew 6:24.

³⁶ Matthew 6:32.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TODAY

Contemporary Church Responses to Poverty

Most contemporary churches acknowledge some obligation to help the poor, but their responses typically operate within frameworks that avoid the radical implications of God's preferential option. Churches organize food drives, sponsor missionaries, fund homeless shelters, and support various charitable causes while maintaining structures and practices that effectively exclude poor people from full participation in church life.

The predominant model of church engagement with poverty can be characterized as charitable rather than transformational. Churches provide services to poor people—meals, clothing, temporary shelter—while maintaining social distance between those who give and those who receive. This approach allows churches to feel they are addressing poverty without examining their own participation in systems that create economic inequality or developing genuine relationships with the poor people they claim to serve.

This charitable model reflects what can be termed "white knight mentality"—the assumption that affluent church members possess superior knowledge, resources, and moral virtue that enable them to rescue poor communities. Churches operating with this mentality position themselves as saviors bringing solutions to deficient communities rather than partners learning from and working with people who have different experiences and perspectives.

The white knight approach is problematic both theologically and practically. Theologically, it contradicts the biblical understanding that the poor have gifts and wisdom that the wealthy need. As Samuel and Sugden observe, the gospel creates mutual relationships where everyone has contributions to make to the body of Christ.³⁷ When churches assume that the poor need what the wealthy have to offer but have nothing to offer in return, they violate this theological principle and miss opportunities for mutual learning and growth.

Practically, the white knight mentality creates dependency relationships rather than empowering poor communities to address their own challenges. When churches provide services designed and delivered by members to passive recipients, they reinforce assumptions about the competence of wealthy people and the deficiencies of poor people. This approach may provide temporary relief but does little to address the systemic causes of poverty or build the capacity of poor communities to advocate for their own interests.

Arms-Length Helping Patterns

Church engagement with poverty typically maintains emotional and social distance between helpers and those receiving help. This "arms-length helping" allows church members to address poverty without developing personal relationships that might challenge stereotypes or reveal the complexity of poverty's causes and effects.

Short-term mission trips exemplify arms-length helping patterns. Groups from affluent churches travel to poor communities for brief periods, work on construction projects or distribute supplies, and return home with a sense of having helped without developing ongoing relationships or understanding the systemic causes of the poverty they witnessed. While such

³⁷ Samuel and Sugden, *Mission as Transformation*, 246-247.

trips may provide some material benefit and raise awareness among participants, they often reinforce cultural assumptions about poverty while avoiding the relational engagement that might lead to deeper understanding.

Similar dynamics operate in local contexts when churches provide services to poor communities without developing genuine relationships with those they serve. Food pantries that operate by having poor people wait in lines to receive predetermined food packages from volunteers they never see again maintain social distance that prevents mutual learning and relationship building. Homeless shelters that provide beds and meals while maintaining strict rules about behavior and interaction preserve institutional control while limiting opportunities for genuine human connection.

The theological problem with arms-length helping is that it contradicts the incarnational principle at the heart of Christian faith. If God's response to human need involved becoming human and dwelling among us, then Christian response to poverty should involve genuine solidarity and relationship building rather than distant charity.

Arms-length helping also prevents the transformation that could occur for both poor and wealthy people through authentic relationship. When Christians are insulated from the perspectives and experiences of poor people, they lose access to insights about faith, life, and community that might challenge their assumptions and deepen their understanding of the gospel. Similarly, when poor people are positioned only as recipients of services rather than contributors to community life, their gifts and wisdom are lost to the broader Christian community.

Charity Versus Justice Frameworks

The most fundamental problem with contemporary church responses to poverty is the substitution of charity for justice. Churches that organize occasional service projects while supporting economic and political systems that create and perpetuate poverty demonstrate the compartmentalization that characterizes much contemporary Christianity.

Sider's analysis reveals how charitable giving can actually reinforce the systems that create poverty by providing just enough relief to prevent social upheaval while leaving fundamental inequalities intact.³⁸ When Christians give small percentages of their income to help the poor while supporting economic policies that concentrate wealth among the already wealthy, their charity serves to relieve conscience rather than address injustice.

The theological distinction between charity and justice is crucial. Biblical teaching presents care for the poor not as optional generosity but as a matter of justice and rights. As Wolterstorff demonstrates, the poor have legitimate claims on society for basic necessities rather than being dependent on the voluntary charity of the wealthy.³⁹ This rights-based understanding transforms the ethical question from "How much should I give to help the poor?" to "How must society be structured to ensure everyone's basic rights?"

Churches that operate with charity frameworks typically focus on meeting immediate needs—providing food, shelter, clothing—while avoiding questions about why such needs exist. This approach treats symptoms rather than causes, making ongoing charity necessary while avoiding structural changes that could eliminate the need for charity.

³⁸ Sider, *Rich Christians in the Age of Hunger*, 56-58.

³⁹ Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 81-85.

Justice frameworks, by contrast, focus on addressing the systemic causes of poverty through changes in economic policies, labor practices, housing markets, educational systems, and other structures that determine resource distribution. Churches operating with justice frameworks would examine how their own institutional practices—investment policies, employment practices, contracting decisions—either support or undermine economic justice.

Segregation and Exclusion Patterns

Contemporary churches often maintain de facto segregation along economic lines that contradicts biblical teaching about the unity of the body of Christ. While churches may not explicitly exclude poor people, their practices often make poor people feel unwelcome or unable to participate fully in community life.

Economic segregation occurs through various mechanisms that churches rarely acknowledge or address. Church locations in affluent suburbs make them inaccessible to people without reliable transportation. Expectations about dress, speech, and behavior reflect middle-class cultural norms that may make working-class or poor people feel out of place. Financial expectations for participation in activities, trips, or educational programs can exclude those with limited resources.

The theological problem with economic segregation is that it contradicts Paul's teaching about the body of Christ as a community in which social divisions are overcome. When churches function essentially as social clubs for people of similar economic status, they fail to embody the reconciling power of the gospel that James condemns when he criticizes showing favoritism to the wealthy while marginalizing the poor.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 108.

Educational and social programming in many churches assumes middle-class perspectives and experiences that may be foreign to people from different economic backgrounds. Bible studies that assume participants have flexible schedules, small group activities that require transportation to members' homes, and social events that involve significant expenses all contribute to creating environments where economic diversity is difficult to maintain.

The absence of economic diversity in Christian communities impoverishes the wealthy as well as excluding the poor. When affluent Christians are insulated from the perspectives and experiences of poor people, they lose access to insights about faith and life that might challenge their assumptions and deepen their understanding of the gospel.

Reflections on Practical Implementations

The practical implications outlined in this analysis resonate deeply with my own observations of contemporary church responses to poverty, and I find myself convicted by how accurately they describe patterns I have witnessed firsthand. I have seen countless churches organize food drives, sponsor short-term mission trips, and fund charitable causes while maintaining what can only be described as the "white knight mentality"—positioning themselves as saviors bringing solutions to deficient communities rather than partners learning from people with different experiences and perspectives. This approach, as Samuel and Sugden observe, violates the theological principle that "the gospel creates mutual relationships where everyone has contributions to make to the body of Christ," and I have watched churches miss profound opportunities for mutual learning

and growth by assuming the poor need what the wealthy offer but have nothing to offer in return.⁴¹

The "arms-length helping" pattern described here particularly challenges me because I recognize how it allows church members, including myself, to address poverty without developing the personal relationships that might challenge our stereotypes or reveal the systemic causes of economic inequality. I have participated in service projects that provide temporary relief while maintaining social distance, and I now see how this contradicts the incarnational principle—if God's response to human need involves "becoming human and dwelling among us," then our response should involve genuine solidarity rather than distant charity. The analysis reveals what I have suspected: that arms-length helping prevents transformation for both poor and wealthy people, robbing affluent Christians of insights about faith and community that could only come from authentic relationships with those who have experienced marginalization.

What strikes me most powerfully is Wolterstorff's rights-based understanding that transforms the question from "How much should I give to help the poor?" to "How must society be structured to ensure everyone's basic rights?"⁴² This shift from charity to justice frameworks challenges me to examine not just individual giving but systemic engagement with economic policies, labor practices, and institutional decisions that either support or undermine economic justice. I am convinced by the recognition that churches often maintain economic segregation through practices we rarely acknowledge—suburban locations, middle-class cultural expectations, financial barriers to participation—that effectively exclude poor people while we

⁴¹ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 246-247.

⁴² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 81-85.

claim to welcome everyone. The absence of economic diversity impoverishes wealthy Christians like myself by insulating us from perspectives that might challenge our assumptions and deepen our understanding of the gospel. The analysis calls me to recognize that authentic implementation of God's preferential option requires not just charitable giving but fundamental transformation in how churches organize themselves and engage with the systemic causes of poverty.

This analysis compels me to call fellow Christians to honest self-examination about how we interact with the poor and marginalized. Are we genuinely connecting and building meaningful relationships with people who occupy different economic, political, or racial positions than ourselves? How can we challenge our churches to recognize these unconscious biases and implement concrete changes that create truly inclusive communities? I must ask myself: Am I primarily seeking counsel and community from people who look like me, think like me, and share my economic status? How can I envision and work toward a future where decision-making in our churches includes voices from across economic and social divides? The preferential option for the poor demands that we move beyond comfortable homogeneity to embrace the transformative diversity that reflects God's kingdom, where the last truly become first and the marginalized are centered rather than peripheralized.

CONCLUSION

This examination of God's preferential option for the poor through the lenses of contemporary Christian ethics, theological foundations, and practical church responses reveals both the

centrality of this biblical teaching and the profound gap between Scripture and contemporary Christian practice.

The ethical analyses from scholars like Sider, Tamez, Wolterstorff, Samuel and Sugden, De La Torre, and Yancey demonstrate remarkable consensus: God's preferential option for the poor is not peripheral to Christian faith but central to understanding divine character and Christian obligation. Their collective insights convinced me that God's identification with the poor is intentional throughout biblical history, culminating in the incarnation where God chose "to become poor, to take the form of a slave."⁴³ The systemic justice framework they present, particularly Wolterstorff's reframing from "How much should I give?" to "How must society be structured to ensure everyone's basic rights?" represents the fundamental shift that contemporary Christianity desperately needs.⁴⁴ Most challenging personally is Yancey's insight that the spiritual qualities "greatly prized in the spiritual life" are "extremely elusive for people who live in comfort," suggesting that wealth creates barriers to authentic discipleship that poverty can actually remove.⁴⁵

The theological foundations examined reveal that Jesus' preferential option flows from the very heart of his incarnational mission. The incarnation itself—God choosing to be born in poverty, raised in despised Nazareth, living without permanent housing—represents concrete solidarity rather than mere symbolism. Jesus' messianic mission statement explicitly identifying himself with "good news to the poor" and his teaching that it is "hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God" establish this preference as fundamental to understanding both who God is and what discipleship requires.⁴⁶ The cross, where Jesus experienced ultimate marginalization, and

⁴³ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 108.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 84.

⁴⁵ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 116.

⁴⁶ Luke 4:18-19; Mark 10:23.

the resurrection, which vindicates God's identification with the oppressed, provide theological foundation for hope that current systems of oppression are not final.

However, the analysis of contemporary church responses reveals how thoroughly modern Christianity has domesticated this radical biblical teaching through "white knight mentality," "arms-length helping," and the substitution of charity for justice. I find myself convicted by patterns I have witnessed and participated in—churches organizing charitable activities while maintaining economic segregation, providing services while avoiding genuine relationships that might challenge assumptions or reveal systemic causes of poverty. This compels me to call fellow Christians to honest self-examination: Are we genuinely building relationships across economic divides? How can we challenge our churches to recognize unconscious biases and implement concrete changes toward true inclusivity?

The preferential option for the poor stands as both judgment on contemporary Christianity's accommodation to economic inequality and invitation to recover the transformative power of the gospel. The choice facing modern Christians is whether to embrace the radical implications of Scripture or continue domestication that empties the gospel of its transformative potential. This choice determines not only Christian faithfulness but the church's relevance in a world desperately needing to hear authentic good news for the poor.

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