

From The Word

Sufficient Wages and the Reign of God

by Stephen Charles Mott

I have long puzzled with the parable of the workers hired at different times of the day to work in a farmer's vineyard, but paid the same wage (Matthew 20:1-16). A parable is an earthly comparison to teach a truth about God's new way. One does not expect to learn from it normative truth about the earthly comparison--the treatment of workers--but about the different reality that Jesus is teaching by making the comparison. When Jesus tells the parable about the king counting the cost before going to war, the lesson is not about kingship or war. It is about counting the cost before making the commitment to be Jesus' follower.

What is tantalizing about the content of this earthly story of the paying of the laborers is that it is so harmonious with the view of social justice that is very central to the Reign of God, God's new society breaking into the world with Jesus. This harmony is a key indicating that the treatment of laborers is a part of the teaching of the passage.

This parable has two aspects which are intertwined. The primary focus is upon membership in Jesus' new society and standing within it. Those who are secondary in terms of the worldly power and acceptance are equal members by faith. This is the primary thrust of the parable. Every parable does not have its image of everyday life left out of its overall normative teaching, however. The parable of the prodigal son not only tells of the love of God in accepting the sinner in salvation. It also speaks in its image to earthly life as it actually relates to God's new world. In the story the alienated and destructive life of the younger son, the forgiving love which accepts him back, the envy which cannot abide his return have normative truth which finds only its highest expression in the welcoming love of God through Christ.

The conduct of the farmer, most explicitly and most fully expressed in God in our salvation, is conduct expected of those who follow God in salvation. This is the secondary focus. The historical situation is one repeatedly addressed in Scripture. The wage earner is included with other vulnerable groups such as widows and orphans who are the particular objects of biblical justice (e.g. Mal. 3:3-5). Wage earners, cut off from the economic power of productive land ownership, were at the bottom of the economic heap; work was seasonable and undependable. They were extremely dependent.

The parable applies to the earthly story the language and content of biblical justice. The farmer tell the earliest group that their wage will be "just" (Matt. 20:4). The wage all received is the denarius, the wage sufficient for the daily needs of workers and their dependents. All who accepted the work available to them received that wage no matter their might expressed in the length of their effort. They all did what they could, and they all received what was sufficient for their needs.

There is similarity to God's earlier intervention in the manna in the wilderness. All who gathered had enough and no more than enough for their needs (Exod. 16:18). So in the parable, those who worked last and least are "equal" (Matt. 20:12; cf. 2 Cor. 8:13-15). The first and longest workers received what they needed for sustenance. They were not treated "unjustly" (v. 13). Biblical distributive justice is a rendering to each according to their need. The complaining early workers should not be filled with greedy envy (literally, the "evil eye" [cf this column for January 1998]) because the farmer is "good" (v. 15). The Good Farmer is both our savior and our model. The church's long battle for the living wage for all workers, a battle encouragingly revived recently, finds support for its conviction in the image itself of this parable.

From The Word

Jesus and the Politics of Galilee

by Stephen Charles Mott

One of Jesus' most political acts during his earthly life was the triumphal entry into the city, into Jerusalem--a non-violent demonstration, proclaiming him as the promised ruler. When the shaken city inquires who this is, part of the reply is that this is the prophet Jesus from Galilee (Matt. 21:11). Jesus proceeds symbolically to take control of the temple, the seat of power of the ruling oligarchy. He draws on the prophetic tradition of Isaiah 5 to indict this leadership and to predict its removal from power (Mark 12:1-12 par.). He then acts against the temple by predicting its destruction (Mark 13:1-2 par.)

The outsider from the hinterlands making this political intrusion brings to mind the role of the city in Palestinian history. The city from the very beginning of the nation of Israel represented the base of the power of the wealthy against the peasantry of the land. The book of Micah protests against the injustice of the mighty economic interests based in Jerusalem. Protests against the power based in the temple in Jerusalem rose again in the time of Jesus.

Another tension fed into the urban-rural tension. Professor Richard Horsley has recently developed extensively the tensions between Galilee and Jerusalem and has shown its pertinence for understanding Jesus. (This is found in his 1995 book, Galilee; a shorter presentation of his argument is in Hervormde Teologiese Studies [1996].) Professor Horsley argues that Jesus and his movement were engaged in social and political organizing which brought them into the conflict the Jerusalem based rulers, which the Gospels indicate led to Jesus' death.

The popular revolts in 4 B.C. and 66 A.D. involved Galileans as well as rural based Judaeans. Galilee, as part of the northern kingdom, was a society, like the south, based on the Hebrew Scriptures; but for centuries it was politically separated from the south and was not subjected to the Jerusalem temple system. About a hundred years before Jesus, Galilee had lost its political separation from Judea as it came under the Jewish Hasmonean kings. Professor Horsley suggests that in the decades before Jesus there was strong pressure, particularly in the presence of scribes and Pharisees from the south, for the inhabitants of Galilee to support the temple system religiously and financially. This financial pressure, combined with Roman tribute and the cost of Herod Antipas's building program, made Galilee's renewed domination by alien forces painfully evident.

Against this pressure a tradition of protest based in the agrarian society was articulated. It sought not the reform of the temple system, but its rejection. At times the protest became politically manifest in forms of symbolic conflict. Professor Horsley argues that this is the context of Jesus and his movement. Recognition of this situation adds social depth to our understanding of Jesus teachings and exemplary actions.

For example, Jesus' activity and commissioning of the "twelve" leads to the "renewal of all things" in the restoration of Israel to economic sufficiency and egalitarian mutuality (Matt. 19:16-30 par. [the rich young ruler and the subsequent interpretation]). Jesus sharply criticizes the scribes and Pharisee who come down from Jerusalem (Mark 3:22; 7:1). The "burdens" which they impose are economic in their extortion of the principle crops on which the peasants depend (Luke 11:39-41; Mark 7:9-11).

Those who continue today to "walk as he walked" must then strive in all arenas of life for this in-coming Reign of God in which true worship of God will be combined with just relations among all of God's creatures.

From The Word

When There Is No Comforting Power

by Stephen Charles Mott

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 illustrates well the complex view of power in the Bible. The power of being, the life that the Creator gives, has been crushed for the oppressed (cf. 5:19 with 6:2). "Look, the tears of the oppressed" (NRSV). This is because exploitive power, the power of the oppressors ("on the side of their oppressors there was power"), receives no just opposition. There is no intervening power: ". . .with no one to comfort them."

The atmosphere of powerlessness and domination is accented, as Jean-Jacques Lavoie points out in a recent article (in French) (Studies in Religion, 1995), by the fact that the words for the exploiters and exploited are in the plural while term for the comforter is in the singular. There are oppressors and oppressed but not a comforter.

The situation is not one particular socio-economic location or time, as Lavoie also demonstrates. "Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun" (v. 1a, NRSV). Two expressions in this statement, which are also used elsewhere by Ecclesiastes, show that this is to be understood as the typical human situation. All is used by the author before a judgment that relates to all the reality of the world and the human condition. For example, speaking of the wise and fools, he observes that the same fate befalls "all of them." What he observes happens "under the sun." This phrase occurs twenty-nine times in the book and always of injustice. For example, in 3:16 he writes, "Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there"

The situation calls for intervening justice. Lavoie suggests that the phrase (fairly literally from the Hebrew) "from the hand of the oppressors there was power" echoes two others uses of this phrase. In Jeremiah 21:12 and 22:3 the command is given to the ruler to "deliver from the hand of the oppressors." Here this intervening power is absent. There is no deliverer. There is no comforter. This divine mandate is flouted. There is no one to comfort between the exploited and the exploiter.

God is so often the comforter, as in Isaiah and the Psalms (e.g. Isa. 40:1; 52:9 and Psalms 71:20-21), that Lavoie suggest that Ecclesiastes expects the reader to see that it is God who is absent. The phrase "there is no one to comfort someone" occurs elsewhere only in Lamentations 1:2, 9, 17, 21, where God is the comforter of Zion who is absent. In this connection, Lamentations 1:2 is the only other text with tears along with the absence of the comforter.

An attribute of God is missing. Life in this situation of oppression without God's intervening power is worse than death (Eccles. 4:3). Death is a deliverance from the sad and intolerable struggle of life. Lavoie sees Ecclesiastes contesting the absence and indifference of God to the exploited. God is not a saviour.

Ecclesiastes can be read differently, however. The book in the early chapters shows what life is like without God. It not only is empty; its oppression is intolerable. The book goes on, however, to show that we must bring God into the picture. We are to remember God in our youth and to fear God and keep God's commandments (12:1, 13).

When this is done, there will be intervening justice. God looks for someone "to intervene" as a faithful channel of God's intervening power (Isa. 59:16). The channel may be the ruler, who is to receive God's justice and deliver from exploitive power (Ps. 72.1-4; Jer. 21:12; 22:3). Then there is a power to comfort.

From The Word

Hanging in There Politically

by Stephen Charles Mott

There is danger that the political idealism of youth can turn into a complacency in later years. The values of social justice and the need for social change remain, but one no longer has the surging hope that political effort makes a significant difference. One reason is a sense that evil is too much endemic to society and in government.

The book of Ecclesiastes is of help in this situation. The author has seen and experienced the lasting power of evil, yet he advises continued involvement. Professor Duane Garrett understands the political passages of Ecclesiastes to be written to those who have access to the circles of political power (Trinity Journal, 1987). He has several helpful insights. Christian political activists in a democratic society can take heed.

We are aware of the pessimism of Ecclesiastes about life humanly understood. Its abiding sense of evil is applied to governments also. A reason for oppression being unresolved is the multiplicity of government officials. "The high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them" (Eccles. 5:8, NRSV). The political system often prefers social position and prestige over soundly moral insight just as dead flies make foul perfumers' ointment (10:1).

Ecclesiastes' greatest pessimism and sorrow relate to social oppression. In a transitory world of sorrow, the book advises most people to learn to be satisfied with the simple joys of life: food, companionship with one's spouse, and the good sleep of the laborer (e.g. 3:11-14). Oppression, however, deprives people of even these pleasures; this deeply grieves the author.

Professor Garrett demonstrates this contrast. He notes that understood by their normal meaning, the words, "God seeks the persecuted" (v. 15b), which occur at the end of a passage advising contentment (3:11-14), provide a transition and link to the following passage. That passage despairs over injustice: In the place where justice is decided, instead of the rights of the poor being secured, injustice and oppression reign (v. 16). As we may sometimes feel when looking at their misery, the poor and oppressed would be better off never to have been born than to face this heartbreaking reality (4:1-3).

Ecclesiastes responds in two ways to the despair of social oppression. Both can be helpful in keeping us going. One is the growing realization in the Bible that present life only makes sense in the light of eternity and God's ultimate judgment. God is the ultimate vindicator. "I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work" (3:17, NRSV).

The response to that future hope is not passivity, however. For those who have access to political power, Ecclesiastes commends hanging in there, even though glorious victories for justice are not imminent. This is the second response. Despite its corruption and failures, government is necessary to avoid chaos, as Professor Garrett suggests for 5:8, "a king is needed for the sake of agriculture."

One should "not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence" (8:3, NIV) because of despair or disgust. That would be abandoning political opportunity. Instead we should select what causes are capable of being pursued (8:3b-6). With patience and tact we accept political reality and work with it. Effective politics for the sake of justice require savvy and tact, as public interest lobbyists will acknowledge, although we may not often affirm that in our idealism. "If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will undo great offenses" (10:4).

Such patience, tact, and forbearance will keep us moving toward modest victories, but they must be kept servant to the controlling political mandate to "establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:15).

From The Word

A New Millennium and the Politics of Time

by Stephen Charles Mott

We are probably tired by now over the beginning of a new millennium. We also are harried by our culture's struggle to do everything in the shortest amount of time. Serious attention to time, nevertheless, is a contribution to our civilization from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Cultures, and even political ideologies in a culture differ sharply according to their attitude toward the three dimensions of time. A reactionary politics may give value only to the events of the past while a revolutionary political faith may look only to the future. A materialist culture looks only to the present. Biblical theology places great significance on all three dimensions of time.

In a fascinating study Professor Simon De Vries shows how the Hebrew references to "that day" or "this day" on which an event occurs reveal the importance given to the past, present, and future (*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 1975).

The day past is "a moment of revelatory confrontation." "That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians" (Exod. 14:30). For Israel and the church, the past provided the evidence of God's purpose in history in mighty acts and the knowledge of God's will. Direction in life comes from the past.

Accordingly, the Hebrews were the first to produce any extensive historiography.

This sense of history gives a basis for self-identity and a sense of community. Clarity on what we have been provides a basis to build on the past and to transcend it so that the future can be faced with a sense of individual and group purpose. From this sense of purpose policies can be made for the present.

Professor De Vries describes the day present "a moment of crucial decision." "Today, if you hear his voice (Heb. 3:13). "This day" is a call for decision. Something with a decisive effect for time to come is involved. Every aspect of public life is included. "I have set before you, this day, life and good . . . if you obey . . ." (Deut. 30:15-16). The present is the time of responsibility and action.

Political orientations which glorify the past (and thus also distort it) can be the basis of resistance to opportunities in the present. Likewise, over-concentration on the future with its indeterminate possibilities also can excuse a neglect of difficult responsibilities in the present. As Martin Luther King stated in his letter from the Birmingham jail, "We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."

The day future is described by Professor De Vries as "a new opportunity for decisive action." The view of the future provides new reasons for decisive action in the present. The prophet Isaiah warned that "on that day" human arrogance will be brought low and the Lord alone exalted (Isa. 2:17) He appealed for a corresponding change in current behavior. "O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord!" (v. 6, NRSV).

Jürgen Moltmann has stated that the future as a form of sensitivity for history arose for the first time with the God of promise of the Old Testament. Since the promise has not yet found its fulfillment, it draws the mind to the future in creative and obedient expectation (*Theology of Hope*, 100, 118).

The promise also affects most significantly the attitude toward the present, so that by comparison to the hope the present loses its aura of final truth. A different and superior future "in which justice dwells" (2 Peter 3:13) devaluates the present. The present is not the automatic product of the past. We can work for change and must. Present conditions with their woes are capable of being surpassed.

Professor De Vries notes that the biblical future can be affected by two factors in interrelationship: God's will and the human response to God's will. We are not helpless or passive before the forces inherent in nature and history. They guarantee neither happiness nor corruption. Constructive change must come from who understand God's purposes and respond in obedience and hope.

From The Word
Doing Justice Because Christ is Coming Again
by Stephen Charles Mott

The white haired veteran of Martin Luther King's marches on racism and a pioneer for civil rights in his own stead opened what would become a stirring address on confronting racism. His opening was less auspicious, however. He appealed to his audience that to be effective in responding to racism as Christian believers, they should set aside the teaching of the Second Coming of Christ.

He reminded the audience of the tele-evangelists who frequently cite this promise while resisting social change. Their hope was a basis for passivity as they wait Christ's return.

This attempt at motivating our people to social action surrenders the doctrine of Christ's coming again in glory to those who have inadequately applied it. The problem of the conservative Christians who have been criticized on this score is not that they take seriously the Second Coming of Christ, but rather that they understand incompletely the mission that we are to be doing as we wait.

The Second Coming has not led Fundamentalists to passivity but rather has been a powerful spur to global missions. I have seen working class Fundamentalist Christians actually lower their standard of living because of sacrificial giving to missions. A significant part of their motivation was to hasten the coming of Christ, who will come only after the Gospel is preached in every nation (Matt. 24:14), and to be found faithful when Christ returns. For them, hope in the Second Coming is a spur to do the mission of Christ. The problem is their not perceiving that the mission includes social justice as well as evangelism.

The Scriptures connect Christ's Second Coming to social obedience. In Luke 12 the parable on being found faithful when the master returns (vv. 35-48) directly follows the most powerful teaching about possessions in the Bible (vv. 13-34). In this passage Jesus declares that life does not consist in acquiring more than the essentials of life, represented by the food and clothing (vv. 15, 22-23). In contrast to the rich farmer who built barns to retain what he did not need, Jesus' standard is to give what is beyond our needs to the poor (vv. 16-21, 33-34). The giving to the poor shows that the concern is not an ethic of private purity but a social ethic in which possessions are linked to a world in which many people are deprived of the basics of life.

Jesus immediately ties this imperative to mission. There is no break in Luke. In contrast to the casual dress of private life, they are to be ready for public action with a belt around their waist (v. 35). The following parable gives the reason. The servants will want to be diligent at their tasks when their master returns from his journey. Because Jesus' return will be unexpected (cf. v. 40), his followers must always be alert to be carrying out the tasks which he has assigned them to do while he is gone (v. 43, 47). According to Luke 12, the way to be alert for the return of Christ is care for the poor grounded on a lifestyle of mere sufficiency.

Instead of taking from the people doctrines of faith which are precious to them, our task is to show how these beliefs point to social justice. One of these is the diligence and urgency in action which they receive in their hope for the return of their dear Lord and Saviour.

From The Word

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

When Prayers for Justice Are Overheard

The book of Psalms contains powerful social justice materials. We learn of the character of God as one "who executes justice for the oppressed" (146:7). God acts against exploiters "so that those from earth may strike terror no more" (10:18). The responsibility of the political ruler is to "defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor" (72:4).

The Psalms also help us to understand the situations of injustice. In origin and in repeated practice, they were acts of worship. They include actual pleas for justice and assurances in worship that it would be granted.

The ancient world was an oral society. Even when by oneself, one read a text aloud. Similarly, even when praying alone, a person prayed out loud. This is why Eli thought that Hannah was drunk when she was praying (1 Sam. 1:13). He saw her lips moving, but he could not hear her. In an exceptionally insightful essay, Professor Gerald Sheppard demonstrates the social dynamics that praying aloud created in the prayers for justice of the Psalms (in *The Bible and Liberation*, 1993). Prayers for justice were often overheard or reported to the perpetrator of the injustice. The person offering the prayer would assume that. What impact would this have? Pursuing this question helps us to discern element of justice today and to be sensitive to the intertwining of worship and social justice. It also provides a valuable perspective in utilizing the Psalms.

The enemies responsible for injustice in the Psalms were not only absentee landlords in distant cities. Professor Sheppard notes that the "enemies" often belonged to the same social setting as the one offering the prayer. We often are bothered by the threats and the cries for judgment in the prayers of the Psalms. We can understand them better when we realize that they are assumed to be "overheard and pertain also to family violence, sexual abuse, and internecine conflict that are common today" (p. 385). Amidst economic injustices, which is also reflected in the prayers, such abuse within families and between previous friends and neighbors increase.

The most obvious consequence of the prayers is eliciting God's protection. Professor Sheppard notes that the prayers also seek a response from others in the community who will overhear them. "The righteous will surround me" (Psalm 142:7). The prayer undermines the potential of hidden injustices by the enemy because friends who would respond in justice become alerted to the presence of the enemy. When people fail to pick up such communal responsibility, the suppliant rightly complains, "My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off" (Ps. 38:11, cf. v. 19).

The overheard prayer for justice often contains an indictment or a threat. The threat might be an effort to persuade the enemy to change his or her actions. "It is not enemies . . . who deal insolently with me--I could hide from them. But it is you, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company" (Psalm 55:12-13).

This prayer of Psalm 55 can be an empowering resource today for victims of violence associated with addiction, child abuse, date rape, or wife abuse, Professor Sheppard states. "The one praying is challenged to become fairly articulate to God about the injustice in order to name it and to instruct those who stand nearby, even when the enemy may be included in that group" (p. 388). Professor Sheppard concludes, such prayer serves its proper function of summoning God to act while articulating reality and nurturing courage to persevere. It provokes change even in the conduct of the one who prays.

From The Word by Stephen Charles Mott

The People of God and the Social Justice of the Ancient Near East

Social justice in ancient Israel centered on defense of the poor. "Did not your father do justice and what is right? Then it was well with him. He carried out justice for the cause of the poor and needy: then it was well" (Jer. 22: 15-16). This typical approach in the Bible stands in contrast to other understandings to justice, such as the perspective that everyone should be treated the same without respect for burdens emerging from racism or poverty. This assumption is expressed in the attack on affirmative action and in the argument that even the wealthiest families should receive the child tax credit.

Justice in which the poor were the object was not unique in Israel but was widespread in the ancient Near East. Years ago Hendrik Bolkestein compared the view of the eastern Mediterranean with that of the Greek and Roman world. In the latter justice was a matter between citizens as citizens; the slaves were ignored. In the Near East, where there was an immense army of the poor and a small number of great landed proprietors, the focus of justice was directly and exclusively upon the poor (*Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum* (1939).

The perception that Israel's view of justice, which centered upon the oppressed, was widely shared in its cultural world has two important implications. The first addresses those who are reluctant to apply biblical justice to contemporary politics. Some question how one can apply to the secular world a concept which is found in the special revelation of the Bible and among the people of God. Can such a justice be understood apart from God's people and does it belong there? The answer is that in the time of the Hebrew Scriptures this justice already was widespread among peoples separate from biblical faith. Now that the inspiration of Scripture discloses that this type of justice is God's will, there is no reason not to continue to apply it in politics and economics.

The second helpful result is that the ancient Near East provides a standard of comparison through which we can recognize special developments in the biblical materials that we might otherwise ignore. For example, Norman Porteous ("The Care of the Poor in the Old Testament," in *Living the Mystery*) noted that there are two ways in which there was no parallel to how the concern for the poor was carried out in Israel. The first is the way it was related to the concern of the covenant God. The most important characteristic of the Israelite concept of the poor is that Yahweh is the the ultimate defender of the poor. The second is the elaborate way in which the concern for the poor is carried out in the Hebrew law codes.

More recently, Leon Epsztein has perceptively extended this comparison (*Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*, 1986): In Israel more importance is placed on human life than property; the protection of those who are at the greatest disadvantage is based not only on charity but also on a feeling of humility derived from Israel's history of having been a recipient of just deliverance; and because there is only one God who is over all, there can be no discrimination which would take advantage of the weak or favor the mighty.

Epsztein notes the quest for social justice came to a halt in Mesopotamia. The covenant with God in the Hebrew Scriptures, however, commanded action as well as faith, and accordingly made human behavior a factor which affected people's fate. As a result the quest for social justice was pursued by the people of the Bible almost without interruption down to our own day.

From The Word
A Black Power in the First Testament
by **Stephen Charles Mott**

Ethiopia represented the southern end of the world. The Ethiopian eunuch, the first identified Gentile convert (Acts 8), is theological significant for Luke's purpose in showing the faithfulness to Jesus' mandate to be witnesses to the end of the earth. The first extension of the gospel beyond Israel to the Gentile world is to and through the Ethiopian. The witness was brought by this black believer as he returned home. In reaching the ends of the earth, the good news extended to people of all colors.

The Cushites, mentioned several times in the First Testament, prepare the way for this interpretation. The Cushites are clearly black and African. Professor J. Daniel Hays demonstrates this thoroughly in a recent two-part article (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, 1996). Cush is the land upstream from the fourth cataract of the Nile River in what today is Sudan. This is the area of the great bend in the river as it flows southwest before resuming its northerly flow. The Greeks called the black people south of Egypt "Ethiopians," but most of these were Cushites. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, translates Cushite as Ethiopian.

The Cushites were black people with classic negroid features. Professor Hays shows how this is portrayed in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art. Many of the artistic portrayals can be found in beautiful color pictures in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Vol. 1, edited by Ladislav Bugner (1976). One picture shows a battle between a 14th century B.C. Pharaoh and the Cushites. These famous archers are black, not merely dark-skinned or tanned. The Cushite king who ruled Egypt as pharaoh around 700 B.C. is not portrayed in the art style of the Egyptian pharaohs. His features are thick lips, broad nose, and tight curly hair. A scene from about 1120 B.C. shows individuals of four nationalities; the Cushite similarly has traditional negroid features. As Frank Snowden demonstrates in his *Before Color Prejudice* (1983), the Cushites (i.e. Ethiopians in Greek usage) in ancient literature not only are described as black, but also have flat noses, thick lips, and woolly hair.

The Cushites were not a marginal, backward people in relationship to the surrounding nations. They were one of the major powers in the ancient Near East for over two thousand years. Professor Hays argues that they should be given a proper place alongside the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hebrews and other significant nations of the ancient world. In the earlier period, around 2000 B.C., their culture produced some of the most advanced pottery of that period. Their area was the general gold-mine of the ancient world. Adept as warriors, they served other nations as auxiliary troops. Later in the Assyrian period there was an iron-smelting industry in their major city.

In the late second millennium B.C. they were under Egyptian control and had considerable intermingling with the Egyptians. Some were of a wealthy high social standing; some were slaves. They embraced many aspects of Egyptian culture in this period. In 720 B.C. the Cushite king Piye led the first successful invasion of Egypt in over one thousand years and established the twenty-fifth dynasty of rulers over Egypt. The Assyrians then took Egypt but were unable to invade Cush. This similarly was the case for the Persians, Greeks under Alexander, and the Romans. The Roman period was one of peace and prosperity with a flourishing of art and architecture.

The Cushites are referred to fifty-four times in the Bible. Many of the references picture them as a known and significant people but one which dwells at the farther limit of the known world (Esther 1:1). They are cited often in descriptions of the extent of God's care and judgment (e.g. Ezek. 30:4-8). Isaiah pictures them as an attractive and powerful people at the end of the world, yet who also are under God's power and judgment. In Psalm 87:4, God states that there are citizens of the city of God among representatives of all the nations of the world, including Cush. "'This one was born there,' they say." As James Luther Mays interprets it (*Psalms*, 1994), "those who acknowledge the Lord have a birthright status in Zion, no matter where they live." This includes this black people on edge of civilization.

In Numbers 12 Miriam and Aaron grumble against Moses because he married a Cushite wife. God responds in anger and judgment against Miriam and Aaron. Miriam becomes leprous. John Holder interprets that the racists opposing Moses' black wife are ironically made "white as snow." The message when confronted with racism is that "God is not a racist, and neither am I" (*Journal of Religious Thought*, 1993, p. 50). I don't see, however, that skin color is the issue in these cultures although it is noted. Jeremiah asks, "Can Cushites change their skin?" but not because they would be expected to want to change anymore than leopards would want to change their spots (13:23). Rather, the issue in Numbers 12 is that she is a foreign woman; and, as God's answer indicates, even that is a smoke screen for challenging Moses' unique role.

In his conclusion of the significance of the many references to the Cushites in the Bible, Professor notes that black people were a regular part of the Biblical world. As far back as nations go, Cush was there (Gen. 2:13; 10:6). The black heritage in the Bible and ancient world is rich and deep. We could add, we are the ones who are out of step when we leave it out and exclude its bearers.

As representing the significant people at the far extent of the world to the south, the Cushites in the First Testament also prepare for the extraordinary role Luke gives to the black witness to Ethiopia.

From The WORD

Healing as Justice

Stephen Charles Mott

Health care as a right is supported by the association of healing with justice in the Bible. In Matthew 12 Jesus' actions are said to fulfill the prophesy of Isaiah 42, which includes announcing justice to the Gentiles and bringing justice to victory (Matt. 12:18, 20). Healing is what Jesus has just performed (V. 16). Matthew understands Jesus' healings to be the justice anticipated in Isaiah 42.

Healing as an act of justice may seem surprising to us. In the Bible, however, those who are sick or who have other physical infirmities are frequently associated with those suffering from economic and political injustices. In Luke 4:18-19, in which Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 and 58, the blind are referred to alongside the poor, captives, and those who are oppressed. Psalm 107 gives a stanza to each of several needy groups. These are wanderers (v. 4), prisoners (v. 10), the sick (v. 17), those endangered at sea (vv. 23, 27-28), and the hungry and landless (vv. 36-37).

The next three passages are similar. but in addition they use the language of justice to describe the situation. In Job 29:

14-16, Job is described as clothing himself in justice. The ones to whom he comes to aid are the blind, the lame, the needy, and the stranger. In Proverbs 31:8-9, the king is instructed to execute justice by defending the dumb, the destitute, the poor, and the needy. Psalm 146:7-9 applies God's justice to the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, the bowed down, strangers, the orphan, and the widow. With this background, it is not surprising that Matthew would perceive Jesus' healing as an act of justice.

The body in Scripture is the person as one relates to one's physical and social environment.

Disease, like hunger, landlessness and captivity, is one source by which the body is attacked by external forces. Psalm 107:39 (*NRSV*) summarizes the various needy groups whose deliverance it has sung as those who are "diminished and brought low through oppression, trouble, and sorrow." Justice, that empowers the needy and delivers the oppressed, includes the physically ill and disabled.

The body is the most basic social unit. The medical missionary who personally heals the sick is social in a simple and personal form. When her or his work inevitably becomes institutionalized in a hospital or clinic, it becomes more complex socially. A further development is a legal framework providing health care for all. There is a continuum in healing from direct treatment of the body to a political framework ensuring that all receive basic health care.

The Bible understands the whole spectrum of meeting the basic physical needs of health as justice. The duty of the sovereign is to establish justice (I Kgs. 10:9). Accordingly, the king in defending the rights of the destitute and of the poor

and needy also is to defend the dumb. This king in Proverbs 31:8-9 is not an Israelite sovereign, so this material cannot be dismissed as restricted to the theocracy or the old covenant. Similarly, the rulers in Ezekiel 34 are condemned for not healing the sick or binding up the injured (v. 4). This irresponsibility will be corrected by God through the coming messianic ruler (vv. 15-16, 23-24).

Care for the sick and the defense of the disabled is a task of justice and a responsibility of the ruler when it is not being carried out. Rights are the claims upon the community that are granted by justice. Basic health care is a right supported by the teaching of Scripture.

From The WORD

Sin and Society

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

Often Christian social activists are suspected of being soft on sin. Sin is felt to be personal and internal, and so is missed by those who are working to change the behavior of the major economic, social, and political institutions of society.

Sin in the Bible is both personal and social; and the two aspects are mixed together. Understanding sin helps us to define our mission as individuals and as a church. We seek to resist everything which is against the will of God, who has redeemed us and whom we now seek to serve. The Letter to the Ephesians says that we are to "expose" "the unfruitful works of darkness" (5:11). Our struggle against evil must correspond to the geography of evil. If we ignore a significant area of life in which sin and evil reside, we will fail to extend our mission to that area.

From the older versions of the Bible, we may be familiar with the terms "the principalities and powers" (e.g. Col. 2: 10, 15). In more current English, they are called "rulers and authorities." The principalities and powers are angelic powers. They are not human. In this passage from Colossians, Paul said that Christ triumphed over them at the cross. The Roman emperor, the human ruler, continued to rule after Jesus' death; and the Roman empire continued for several centuries. Those defeated were spiritual, angelic powers. 1 Peter 3:22 makes the connection: Jesus has gone into heaven "with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him" (cf. Rom. 8:38-39)

These angels are described in political terms because of the area of life of their influence. We know their function from Jewish writings from the time of the New Testament. God's care of everything in creation from the stars to the elements, from individuals to nations was put under the care of angelic agents. One Jewish writing from the first century A.D., 2 Enoch, speaks of "angels who are appointed over seasons and years, the angels who are over rivers and seas, and who are over the fruits of the earth, and the angels who are over every grass, giving food to all, to every living thing, and the angels who write all the souls of men, and all their deeds and all their lives before the Lord's face" (19:4-5). Another writing, the Book of Jubilees (from the second century B.C.), describes "the watchers," who are linked with angels. Their role is to instruct humankind in justice and righteousness (4:15). In addition, according to the biblical book of Daniel, angels called "rulers" are assigned to guide and guard each nation (10:20-21).

In the thought of the New Testament, these angelic rulers and authorities are fallen. They have rebelled against God and corrupted their tasks. Because of their fall, evil penetrates the customs and institutions of society.

Our response is not to argue about whether angels and demons exist. Rather we must pay attention to the point the New Testament writers are making in talking about them.

Evil is social, not only personal. Satan and his evil forces are prowling the world, struggling for control of God's creation. We know how our families have become a battlefield. The battle also takes place in our larger, more complex social institutions, including our customs, our laws. It includes government, our practices of finance, education, and hiring, and our systems of distributing goods and services. We have to fight evil in those places too. Our missional tools include such resistance actions as reform, lobbying, organizing, and boycotting.

Evil is a mystery. Both within us and within our society it cannot be fully comprehended rationally. It is out of control. It rears up just when we think peace and justice are at hand.

Evil is supernatural, and so is our struggle. Our tools must include prayer. Evil is beyond our human resources. Our battle is not against "flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12). We need a power which is higher and stronger. The battle must be God's. Prayer which invokes God's power must be a part of the arsenal against sin and evil in all their forms, not only personal but also social.

From The WORD

Worldliness and Social Evil

by Stephen Charles Mott

Growing up often when someone talked about not being "worldly," I would think of not smoking, drinking, dancing, or going to movies. In the Bible worldliness is even more challenging.

The New Testament often uses "the world" to talk about evil. Why does it use this term, "the world"? The usage with which I was familiar as a youth pointed to visible habits of behavior from which we were to be separated. We were the church; the sinful life outside the church was "the world." The biblical term goes further, however, The world refers to the order of society. It is one of the ways in which the Bible warns us that evil has a character which is social and political. It involves more than isolated actions of individuals. Evil is social as well as personal.

Our word "world" points us too quickly to a physical place World is a translation of the Greek term, cosmos. Cosmos means order, that which is assembled together well. We have an echo of that in our word cosmetics, that which orders our appearance. So 1 Peter 3:3 admonishes women not to let their external adornment [or order] be with gold ornaments. The term used is cosmos.

The term was applied to most important ordering of the earthly life, our social order. With that it was used for the civic order, the life of state, which provided a congenial order rather than social chaos. The whole universe was viewed as city-state and called order, or our "world." Values such as friendship, self-control, and justice were important bonds of that order.

For the Greeks cosmos stood guard against evil. The New Testament and first-century Judaism, however, had a powerful and forbidding realization of the significance of humankind's fall away from God. For them cosmos is an intruder bearing immorality into our lives. Paul says that to avoid immoral persons of the fallen order (cosmos), one would have to leave human society (cosmos) altogether (1 Cor. 5:10).

Ephesians 2:1-2 describes how Christ as made believers alive when "dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world (cosmos)."

The significance of this biblical understanding of "the world" is that it expands our sense of mission by expanding the geography of evil that we are to oppose on behalf of Christ. Evil exists in the ordering of society around the person and exerts a powerful and destructive influence on him or her. Our mission must be social.

The breadth of the fabric of society is included in the New Testament use of cosmos. It involves the system of property and wealth. I John 3:17 speaks of "whoever has the world's means of livelihood." When Paul instructs us that we are to "make use of the world" but to not "overuse" it, he is referring to economic relations so necessary for life that we cannot separate ourselves from them.

The New Testament includes in "the world," the class and status classifications of social life, ways in which we identify and separate individuals and groups. Reference is made to the poor, foolish, weak, and lowly of the world (Jas. 5:5; 1 Cor. 1:27-28). The political rule of societies also belongs to this ordering of life (Matt. 4:8). The government controlled by "the world," the evil social order, now is subject to Christ (Rev. 11:15).

The most important aspect of this social use of "world" in the New Testament is as a system of values which are in opposition to God. "Love neither the world nor the things of the world. . . . Because everything that is in the world--the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the boasting of wealth is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:15-16).

We can say that for the New Testament in such passages "the world" is social life as it is organized in hostility to God. It points not only to the social breadth of our challenge of working for God. We must critique our political, economic, and social patterns and all the values and assumptions associated with them. Where they are in resistance to God's ways, we must work toward change.

"The world" also indicates the power of what we must resist. We were born into this social world. It influences us from our birth through our immediate family. We accept its patterns and thoughts by familiarity and habit.

Worldliness occurs when sin is so familiar that we accept it without reflection. We were socialized into it, and it is reinforced constantly by the life around us. It is the seduction of the ordinary.

From The WORD
When We Face the Full Biblical Teaching on Sin

By StephenCharles Mott

In the last two reflections we have seen two ways in which the New Testament points to evil existing in our social life. The "principalities and powers" are fallen angels who had been responsible for protecting all of God's creation, including its social institutions. The "world" represents the rebellious ordering of life in hostility to God and God's purposes.

As those who seek that God's will be done and who are directed to "expose the works of darkness that bear no fruit" (Matt.6:10; Eph. 5:11), our attitude and actions in society will be changed by this awareness. Our struggle with evil must correspond to the geography of evil. Evangelism and Christian nurture are not enough. Along with other responses, they must lead to social action, action directed to institutional practices of the world.

We will read and practice the Bible more completely. Too often when we think of sin, our list is something like "sexual immorality, stealing, gambling, profanity, lying, and murder." The biblical sins of economic exploitation or oppression or hoarding of wealth from the poor have vanished.

The biblical prophets, however, spoke out against not only sinful personal relationships but also against breakdowns in the complex relationships between social groups with unequal shares of power, such as the absorption into the vast estates of the rich of what once were independent peasant holdings (Isa. 5:7-8).

We are called to expose all works of darkness. In Scripture sin includes failure to correct social injustices (Amos 5:15, 23-24)

Selective reading of the Bible often passes over this dimension of sin and failed action. We are familiar with the words of Isaiah 1:18 (KJV), "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Some familiar gospel songs use these striking words, "Whiter than snow, white than snow, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." We fail to recognize, however, that the sins spoken of here are specific social evils. The preceding two verses state, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan, plead for the widow (vv. 16-17; cf. v. 23 also).

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9, KJV) is a familiar and powerful indictment of our common fallen condition. Less taught and less known is that the first example of this condition that Jeremiah gives is "all who amass wealth unjustly" (v. 11).

As those who are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-14), the recognition of evil in social life will change the mode of Christian citizenship from passive obedience to active responsibility. We then resist the corruption of God's will for social relationships as salt resists rot and light combats darkness. To the old order there must be enmity; according to James 4:4 to be a friend of the fallen order is to be an enemy of God. One option that Christians have used to express this enmity has been separation. Home, church, and monastery have been refuge places from an evil society. If the opposition ends in flight, however, where then is the mission to see that justice is done in the public place (Amos 5:15)? The other option is to find strength in the refuge of the Christian gathering and to use it in the world not only to call individuals to repentance but also to work for the establishment of a society of justice and mercy.

Sometimes the two options have been inconsistently combined with an attempt to flee social evils on one hand and involvement in world-wide evangelism on the other hand. Being fully informed of the biblical concern for sin will not take away from the mission of saving the world. Rather that mission will be carried out to its proper social consequences.

A rigorous social involvement of challenge, reform, and change of institutional practices reflects not a softening of one's view of sin. Rather it requires a deeper view of evil that faces the total range of the biblical concern.

Then we respond not in mere dogmatic condemnation of the evil of others. We know our own involvement in evil. We also feel for the fear, humiliation, and suffering, and the loss when people hurt people. Then we can weep with those who weep, and turn to the God who knows that hurt, cries out against it, and dies for that world. We then ask, "Lord, what must I do?"

From The WORD

Being in Society What We are By Grace

by Stephen Charles Mott

This summer and autumn we have been examining in this column the deep biblical understanding of sin. Evil is so penetrating that its imprint lies deep within the institutional practices of our society. The Christian message, however, for both individuals and their society, moves quickly to God's grace. At this season of Thanksgiving and Christmas, we consider God's grace and our action in the world.

Social activists are too often viewed as people hurrying to make changes in society out of their own energy. Christians not actively involved to confront institutional evil too often fail to act on the radical demands of the Bible; fulfillment seems beyond their personal resources.

Christian social action, like all genuine Christian conduct, when understood biblically is grounded in the grace of Jesus Christ. It too bends its knee at the manger. The sin that penetrates society penetrates our own abilities and strategies. Because of sin the social activist is thoroughly dependent upon God's power through Christ working for us, working in us, working through us. Christian activism starts with the cross in the reception of Christ's atonement for us.

The basis of our hopes and efforts for the needy is society lies in the most basic impulse of our lives. We exist to give glory to God and to see that God is glorified in the world. We seek to obey God in society as well as in the rest of our lives because God has been gracious to us in Jesus Christ. "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4.19). Our obedience flows out of that love for God, and changed life is expected of us.

Paul says that because "Christ our paschal lamb was sacrificed," "you are to clean out the old yeast in order that you may be a fresh batch just as you are, without fermentation" (1 Cor. 5.7). Our behavior in our personal and social is to conform to our new identity as the redeemed followers of Christ.

We are "without fermentation." That is what we are by God's grace. That is our new reality, yet we have a duty rising out of it. We are to conform ourselves to that reality. We are to "clean out the old yeast." In the context Paul shows us that the yeast to be discarded includes personal behavior such as sexual immorality (v. 9). It also includes social conduct that goes to the heart of injustice, such as greed (v. 10).

We are "without fermentation." At the same time, we are told to "clean out the yeast." This is not a contradiction. As those who have received Christ's gift of salvation, we are to "become what we are."

This response does not come from our own independent efforts. Our actions of obedience are allowing God to work through us. John 3:21 states, "Those who do what is true come to the light that their deeds may be clearly seen as being done in God." Our activity rises out of a relationship with God and is in harmony with that relationship. When we do what is right, the power of God is at work. What we do is done in God.

The commands of Scripture, including carrying out justice in the gate and opening wide our arms to the poor, now can be understood and carried out under the motivation of love for God. We are set free by the act of Christ so that "the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom. 8:4).

The grace of God for us is indispensable for living in harmony of God. In turn, living lives of humble obedience at home and in the community is a central part of God's gift. God through Christ's work has created a new realm of social existence, a believing and obedient human community. When we urge and develop new ways for human beings to relate to each other, we are in tune with the essence of God's gracious and saving activity in Christ. We are being what we are.

Our actions are natural and spontaneous because they rise out of an inner affection and feeling of gratitude to God. A great example of this is the publicly known sinful woman who embraced Jesus at supper (Luke 7:36-50).

Overcome by her feelings and without premeditation, she washed his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, inviting shame by letting down her hair in public. She "continually kissed" his feet--a sign of complete submission, further humiliating herself for Jesus.

Jesus' acceptance of these actions itself was in indication of his forgiveness of her sin. He explained the situation with a beautiful and endearing lesson. His story about the forgiveness of two debtors, one whose debt was about ten times more than the other's, states that those who are forgiven more, will love their benefactors more.

In Greek the word for forgiveness used by Jesus here is a verbal form of the noun for grace. It is "to be gracious to." Grace is the power which frees us for love and action. The force of the sinful woman's love comes from the grace she has received. The power in actions to shape social conduct according to the just and loving standards of God arises out of gratitude. In worship and in deed, we are being what we are by grace.

From the Word

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

The Egalitarian Roots of Biblical Justice

The significant social change that biblical justice can achieve is due to a crucial characteristic. In the powerful statements of justice in the Bible there is an understanding that something has gone seriously wrong in the society. People have been mistreated and deprived. A change in society is needed.

This change orientation of biblical justice can be appreciated when contrasted with the classical Greek view of justice, such as was expressed by the great philosopher Aristotle. Here justice functioned to preserve society as it had been. What was just for a particular person or group was understood in terms of their differing positions in community. Rank, merit, rank, level of wealth, and personal ability were all considerations in what had to be done. Since they were not equal before, they would not receive equal shares in the benefits awarded by justice. Marginal people remained marginal.

Biblical justice, however, starts with a different assumption about human beings. As creatures of God and, in the New Testament, as those also for whom Christ has died, the equal worth of every person in the community is affirmed. Since justice lies in continuity with love, justice is concerned with the basic needs of each person. Justice includes overcoming social practices and institutions which deprive those needs and obstruct that basic equality. Biblical justice brings something new.

Biblical justice continues on where Aristotelian justice ends. Because of the different assumptions about people in society, there is also a different assumption about what is to be the normal situation of society. Biblical justice remains dissatisfied with conditions which deny the ability to participate fully in the life of society. For this reason, biblical writers speak of justice as action on behalf of the deprived.

One can best understand the First Testament and the Gospels by thinking of their society as basically composed of peasant farmers. The ideal Hebrew community had a relatively egalitarian nature. It was to be a society of vinedressers and herders who had similar resources in orchards, pastures, and habitations. Central was the provision in the Law that each family unit possessed its own patrimony in the land, the precious means of production. This inherited property was to be held in perpetuity and was ultimately unalienable. The result was to be an egalitarian society of independent peasants.

In Numbers 26, God dictates that the original distribution of the land was to be divided in relatively equal portions among the basic family units (vv. 54-56; cf. 33:54). The prophets understand this patrimony as a sacred right from Yahweh. Micah condemns those who in seizing fields oppress a man and his house, a man and his landed inheritance (Mic. 2:2). Applying the terminology of political equality to property, Albrecht Alt states that the prophets view was that according to the ancient and holy regulation of Yahweh, the property system was to be and to remain in unconditional recognition of one man one house one allotment of land (*Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, III, 374).

By Micah's time in the eighth century B.C., as frequently later in biblical history, many of the small holdings of peasants were being absorbed into large estates of the wealthy. Through mortgage foreclosings and oppressive sharecropping arrangements, this heritage from the Lord as their productive property was being lost, and with it their economic and social position. They were disappearing as an independent class, many even passing into slavery (Isa. 3:14-15; 5:7-8; Amos 5:11, 8:4-6).

This is the context in which the prophetic call to justice is to be heard, as with Amos, Micah, and Isaiah in this period. The task of justice was not to maintain fairness within the rising inequality. The task of creative, intervening justice was to restore the poor to their position of equivalent economic and social power in the community. This is the stamp of biblical justice.

From the Word

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

Justice As Inclusion in Community

The good life that God wants for every human being, in addition to a relationship with God, is not an isolated existence but membership in a healthy community. The concern for justice arises when a person is in danger of exclusion from community life in some way. Leviticus 25:35 addresses the situation where a person becomes poor and his power slips [literally] *with you*. The person has become weakened in ones relationship with the community: slips with you. The concern is for each member of the community to be strong enough to maintain his or her position in relation to other members of the community. The injunction in v. 35 is you shall make him strong. One way to do this (v. 36) is not to charge interest so that they may live with you.

There are many aspects of this restoration to community. One dimension is of course is having the essentials for physical existence, food, clothing, shelter (e.g. Deut. 10:18; Isa. 58:7). One also is to be included fully in the political aspects of community in the due process of law (Exod. 23:1-3, 6-8), independence from subjugation (Lev. 25:39, 42; Deut. 23:15-16; 1 Sam. 8:11-17), and participation in legal decisions.

Moreover, full inclusion means not living in dependence. Land is included. In this agricultural society restoration to land was an important part of the redress of justice in bringing people back to a normal level of advantage in the community. This includes the capacity to earn a living and to have a reasonably happy life. The Year of Jubilees, recorded earlier in Leviticus 25, is the best known of these provisions for being strong in community through access to land. These concerns related to land are also reflected in other ways in the Law and in the wisdom literature, as well as the prophets.

The provisions of the Year of Jubilee exemplify biblical justice. Among its stipulations is that after every fifty years all land, whether sold or foreclosed, is to be returned to the family whose heritage it was (Lev. 25:25-28). The effect of this arrangement was to institutionalize the relative equality of all persons in the landed means of production. It was a strong egalitarian measure and a far-reaching means of redress.

The Book of Ezekiel, written in the context of the exile and the destruction of the old society, spells out what should be done when the people were given the opportunity to begin again. The prophet sets forth a new distribution of the land which would correspond to the first: And you shall divide it equally; I swore to give it to your ancestor, and this land shall fall to you as your inheritance (Ezek. 41:14, *NRSV*). As G. Ch. Macholz puts it, the provision of land for free and independent peasants is understood as normative, in contrast to previous injustice (*Vetus Testamentum* 19 [1969], 330-341). The oppressive forces which removed it from them were to cease. O My princes shall no longer oppress my people . . . Put away violence and oppression. Cease your evictions of my people . . . so that none of my people shall be dispossessed of their holding (Ezek. 45:8-9; 46:18, *NRSV*).

The prophet Micah warns the economically powerful that there will be a social reversal. Those who had taken the land will lose it (2:1-5). Families who went into debt slavery would regain property, the division of which would be as equitable as possible. Micah looks forward to a time when, with equal and secure access to the means of production, all would again sit under their own vines and their own fig trees (4:4; cf. Zech 3:10).

In different economies, the means will vary, but the goal of justice will be the same: inclusion in community through full participation in the political and economic systems.

From the Word

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

The Partiality of Biblical Justice

Partiality is a characteristic of Biblical justice. In contrast, some forms of justice demand impartiality. We are familiar with the goddess of justice standing blindfolded while she holds the scales of justice.

Whether justice is considered as partial or impartial makes a tremendous difference in the politics which carries it out. The politics of impartiality is freedom oriented. The same procedures of political freedom are to be secured equally for all. The politics of partiality, on the other hand, include economic benefits, which cannot be provided without giving more to the needy and taking from the strong.

The task of justice to which the Bible calls us, as exemplified by the prophets, is to restore the marginal, such as the poor, to participation in all the essential aspects of community. Biblical justice accordingly has a bias toward the weak. If security of life and well-being are to be sought for all, some individuals will need more care than others. In passage after passage the group to whom justice is applied are those on the edge of the community - the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, the wage earner, the poor. We can understand such special treatment in the case of a threat of violence made on some citizens life. That person then justly receives special police protection to bring his or her security level to that of others. The Bible recognizes hunger or the loss of productive property as also threats demanding special treatment.

The unequal treatment that the person under the threat of violence received ensures equal distribution of the right to security. The equal provision of basic rights, including economic rights, requires unequal response to unequal needs. Justice must be partial in order to be impartial. It is not that God loves the poor person more than the rich person, but the poor person requires special attention to receive the good that God wants for all.

Such biblical justice is dominated by the principle of redress. Inequalities in the provisions of life necessary for the standards of well-being must be corrected. God is the source such redress. All my bones shall say, Oh Lord, who is like you? You deliver the weak from those too strong for them, the weak and needy from those who despoil them (Psalm 35:10, *NRSV*). The Lord, the mighty creator, is the one who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. This justice reaches out to the prisoners, the blind, those who are bowed down, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (Psalm 146:7, 9).

Normally, such justice by God is implemented by means of human justice. The ideal ruler receives justice from God (v. 1) and is to defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor (Psalm 72:4). The ideal individual is one who in justice (v. 14) championed the cause of the stranger but broke the fangs of the unrighteous (Job 29:16-17).

As these passages indicate, the redress often will not be to the advantage of everyone in the community. The wealthy who have profited from the distress of the needy will have to suffer loss (1 Sam. 2:4-10). Their luxury is as much out of line as is the affliction of the poor on which it is based (Isaiah 3:14-26). This partiality for the sake of redressing economic deprivation is affirmed in the Economic Community portion of our Social Principles. To alleviate poverty, policies are supported that provide such benefits as adequate income maintenance, decent housing, adequate medical care, and humanization and radical revisions of welfare programs. On the other hand, measures are advocated that would reduce the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. This approach is partial, but from the biblical perspective it is just.

From The Word
The Black African Who Brought the Gospel to the End of the Earth
by **Stephen Charles Mott**

The first Gentile convert in Acts, at least first identified, is the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). The Samaritans, with whom Philip had ministered earlier in the chapter, were ethnically related to the Jews.

This perhaps made their religious "departures" all the more hateful and threatening. The Ethiopian eunuch, however, came from a people completely Gentile. (His being a eunuch was also significant, because eunuchs had been excluded [Deut. 23:1]. I want to concentrate in this column, however, on his Ethiopian identity.) Would Luke's readers understand an Ethiopian to be African as we know it? Is racial inclusiveness being brought into the scheme of Acts? The answer has to be a strong "Yes!" to both questions.

Ethiopian (in Greek Aithiops) was "the most common generic word denoting a Negroid type in Greco-Roman usage." This statement is made by Professor Clarice J. Martin in his strong essay on the Ethiopian eunuch (reprinted in *The Bible and Liberation*, ed. N. Gottwald and R. Horsley, 1993). Professor Martin draws also on Frank Snowden's study, *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (1970). Prodigious evidence from the ancient Greek and Roman writers and artists indicates that whether in the land of their origin or as expatriated in Mediterranean lands, skin color was uppermost when Greek and Romans described Ethiopians. Black and Ethiopian were almost synonymous. "To wash an Ethiopian white" was a proverbial expression. Their skin was viewed as blacker than that of any other people. The Indians whom Alexander the Great visited were said to be blacker than the rest of humankind with the exception of the Ethiopians. They were also characterized, or stereotyped, by "puffy" or "thick" lips, tightly curled or "wooly" hair and a flat or "broad" nose.

Professor Martin found that the ethnic identity of the Ethiopian in Acts 8 had been ignored by most writers. When it was admitted, often the significance of this for the theological perspective of Luke and Acts was not drawn.

The central concern of the book of Acts is to show how the early church by the power of the Holy Spirit fulfilled Jesus' departing statement that they were to be his witnesses "to end of the earth" (1:8). This meant the remotest parts of the world. In this as the redeemed people, they were fulfilling the prophecy that the Servant of the Lord was to be "a light to the nations," bringing God's salvation "to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6).

Acts' main story line is to show this witness brought to Rome, the geographic, political, and psychological center of the empire. That is a long journey to the center. Rome is not the end of the earth, however. Acts 8 and the Ethiopian is thus crucial for its portrayal of the early church.

Luke-Acts has an interest in the scattered ends of the earth. For example, as Professor Martin notes, when Jesus describes from where the peoples in the Reign of God will come, only Luke includes "from the north and south" along with the words from "east and west" (Luke 13:29, cf. Matt. 8:11). These are the four ends of the earth.

Ethiopia represented the south. It referred to area of the upper Nile, the corridor where the cultures of the Mediterranean and the African worlds met. As Professor Martin notes, the geographer Strabo (1st century A.D.) in fact called all peoples south of Libya "Ethiopians." Each end of the world was represented by Greek and Roman writers with a particular group. The Ethiopians represented the south, as the Indians did the north, the Indians the east, Scythians the north, and Celts or Iberians the west.

For Luke the Ethiopian represented the ends of the earth. The Christians witness extended not only to the political capital; it reached the margins. In reaching the ends of the earth, the good news extended to people of all colors. In fact the first extension of the gospel beyond Israel to the Gentile world is to and through the Ethiopian.

Professor Martin raises the question, how did the gospel then actually reach the ends of the earth? The witness was brought by this black believer as he returned home. Martin cites C. Eric Lincoln, who saw the empowering significance of this text. The Ethiopian is not merely recipient. He is participant. He "symbolizes from the beginning the African involvement in the new faith that was to spread throughout the world" (*Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma*, 1984, p. 24). Whenever the Christian church has fallen from that full inclusion or seeks anything less in life around it, it has fallen short of its standard in the book of Acts.

From The Word

God the Creator and the Destruction of Racism

by Stephen Charles Mott

The most dominant attack on racism in the Christian tradition has been the conception of God as the universal creator. The creation account in Genesis discloses the nature of God's relationship with the world. All human beings have a common origin in the man and woman created by God. The dignity of the original human beings is established not by a description of their attributes. Their dignity rather stands in the fact that God is their creator, that God blessed them and declared them good (Gen. 1:28, 31), indeed that they were created in the image of God. No human being is an exception to this common origin.

Such an universal egalitarian foundation to humanity is not inherent in creation stories. One of the oldest Chinese creation myths, for example, stated that humans were made from the yellow earth. Among them, however, nobles were sculpted, but the poor were made by dripping mud from a rope. In Scripture there is no possibility for such distinctions.

Scripture also demonstrates the marring of the human creation in the primordial fall into sin. This fall, however, is just as universal in its implications as the creation. The fall is attributed to the original man and woman, from whom all peoples descend, no matter their race, class, or culture. The fall, however, provides a basis for showing that racial discrimination lies in sinfulness, not in hierarchical differences established by the Creator. John Holder, a Caribbean First Testament scholar, notes in a recent article (*Journal of Religious Thought* 49,2 [1993]), that right after the description of the Fall, the biblical account shows how sin will exploit the perception of human differences. The very first qualities identified of first two human offspring were differences in occupation. "Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground" (Gen. 4:2). "Sin lurked at the door" (v. 7), and the differences created a tension and a disruption that ended in death. Cain and Abel had unbreakable bonds in the same parents, but their differences prevailed. Racism persists in our day as evidence that sin continues to lurk at the door. It continues to capitalize on the tension that differences produce among the fallen and insecure children of Adam and Eve. Racism continues to drive toward death.

If people with certain distinctiveness in appearance are treated with abuse despite the fundamental teaching of equality in a common Creator of all, sin must establish a rationalization for the abuse. The humanity of the victims must be denied. Holder notes how Martin Luther King parodied this rationalization: "All human beings are made in the image of God; God, as everyone knows is not a black; therefore, the black is not a human being" (quoted from King, *Strength to Love*, 1969). The muddled thought of sin makes the unfounded assumption that God is any less black than white.

The Creator, however, does not abide such distortion. The dignity and care bestowed on every human being is held jealously by the Creator, who continues in history as the protector of the creatures and finally as the restorer of their original beauty. The implications of creation for social justice are explicitly drawn out in the Bible. Let the racist exploiter be warned. If I do not respond to the just cause of the human creature placed by fallen society on the lowest rung of life, "What shall I answer when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:13-15).

From The Word

The Royal Law and Discrimination

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

Discrimination constantly creeps into the church from the world. This occurred already in the first century church. James 2 deals with a situation in which the rich are given preferential treatment. The rich are described as oppressing the poor (2:6; cf. 5:4). They also come with gold rings and fine clothes, which in the prophetic tradition are signs of wasteful luxury at the price of failing to provide the poor with the minimum requirements of life. Despite all this the rich are honored with the best seats, while the poor are made to take positions which suggest inferiority and subjection (v. 2).

James states that this is no small matter. It is a serious evil incompatible with faith in Christ. He questions whether with these "acts of favoritism" "they really believe in our glorious Jesus Christ" (v. 1). Such distinctions come from evil thoughts (v. 4), that is, from a deeper source of evil. At the final judgment "those who do not carry out mercy will receive no mercy" (v. 13). Equal dignity of the poor was established firmly in the Hebrew Bible on the grounds that they have the same Creator as the rich, and their Creator undertakes their cause when they are abused (e.g. Prov. 22:2, 22-23). James, like John Wesley, supplies a even more powerful argument for the equality of the poor. "Has not God chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith" (v. 5). The greatest dignity that anyone has is that the Son of God died for their salvation--and Christ died for all. Treating anyone with indignity is dishonoring one for whom Christ died. How do we know when we are being impartial in an unjust way? James provides a guide which he calls "the royal law": "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 8). This ruling principle of conduct has helped Christians see full implications of Scripture not previously discerned, such as with slavery and the equality of women. It still helps us to acknowledge further injustices. Recently, a United Methodist pastor in Madison, Wisconsin, had her dog maced in her back yard. This followed the burning of the house of the Wesley Foundation, which she directs at the University of Wisconsin. The reason was the opening of its ministry to gay and lesbian people. The violence to gay and lesbian folk about which we read in the newspapers is only the extreme form of discrimination, including name calling, ridicule, and constant slights. How do they know that the church is any different?

One response is the Reconciling Ministry movement. Its affirmation is not new, but it states clearly that gay and lesbian people are included in the call of all people to the salvation offered by Jesus Christ. It affirms not particular gay or lesbian lifestyles, but the biblical and Wesleyan principle that the church of Jesus Christ invites to its midst all persons, who, as Wesley said, are fleeing from the wrath to come.

The weakness in the Reconciling Ministry movement is that some interpret it not only as rejecting discrimination which blocks people from the Gospel, but also as challenging the social stance of the United Methodist church on homosexual conduct. Those who regard the current Social Principles as biblical then may find a vote to be a Reconciling Church or Conference too confusing or too open to an undesired interpretation. When that is the case, we have a obligation to find other ways explicitly to invite with tender love and compassion gay and lesbian persons to the love and discipline of Christ. It is in this context of discrimination that James goes to say that faith without works is dead (vv. 14-26)

From The Word

Lazarus, Dives, and Affirmative Action

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

The best theological and ethical case made for affirmative action is Daniel Maguire's book, [A Case for Affirmative Action](#) (rev. ed., 1992). The strength of Maguire's approach is that he grounds his argument in a biblical understanding of justice.

The sentiment seeking to undermine affirmative action is different. It argues that people should be understood abstractly as individuals, not in terms of the groups to which they belong. This position also holds that the degree of inequality that people endure is politically irrelevant as long as they have equal opportunity, which again is an abstraction, separated from long-standing barriers which the groups to which they belong have endured.

In the perspective upon justice in the Bible, however, human beings by nature live in community and belong to groups. Thus much of biblical responsibility and accountability is presented in terms of groups: rich, poor, stranger, widow, priest, Pharisee, powerful. Biblical justice also has an active and central concern with the actual inequalities of life. The story of Lazarus and the rich man illustrates well the biblical perspective.

Jesus tells this story according to Luke 16:19-31 to respond to the Pharisees, religious leaders who in time of Jesus increasingly were becoming also political leaders. Because they were "lovers of money, they were unhappy with Jesus' rough choice of God or money (vv. 13-14).

The story begins with a harsh contrast. Jesus bluntly begins, "A certain person was rich." This person is immediately described in terms of his clothing: He was "dressed in purple and fine linen." Clothing reflects how he appeared to the public, showing his social status and ranking. Everyone knew where he stood. He was admired and powerful in his wealth. Jesus' next characteristic of the rich person was that he lived in excess, the treasures that Jesus has earlier said are to be given away to the poor (Luke 12:33 [cf. 12:15-21]; 14:33). "Everyday he enjoyed himself sumptuously" in splendid feasts.

Jesus then paints the sharp contrast. "A poor man by the name of Lazarus lay at his gate, covered with sores." The poor man's desire was to satisfy himself with the scraps from the rich man's table. Not only was his material fate miserable, he had the lowest social position. His sores were licked by dogs, which were not regarded as kindly pets, but disliked and considered unclean.

The text starkly deals with these individuals in terms of their socioeconomic identities. Who are they and what do they deserve? They are the rich and the poor. It goes on in this fashion to simply state, "The poor man died . . . ; the rich man died . . ." (v. 22). They then encounter the anticipated eschatological correction of earthly social injustices in a social reversal of both physical and social status.

Similar stories are known in Egyptian, Jewish, and Hellenistic sources. Richard Bauckham in a recent study (in [New Testament Studies](#) 1991) shows that Jesus' parable is unique in that he makes no ethical evaluation of either the rich or the poor man. Lazarus is not said to be righteous. Like the prophets (e.g. Amos 6:4-7; Isa. 3:13-4:1), Jesus' condemnation is solely of the stark inequality of the living conditions of the two. What is intolerable is luxury existing side by side with poverty. The scraps received from the rich man were irrelevant since he remained rich and the poor man remained poor.

One does not need someone appearing from the world of the dead to know this, the parable states in closing. Just read the Hebrew Bible.

From The Word

The Sharp Edge of the Golden Rule

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

The Golden Rule of Jesus can become commonplace. We can slip into an attitude of seeing it as a prosaic piece of wisdom that Jesus quoted. Something like a saying of Benjamin Franklin. Indeed some have suggested that the saying goes little beyond the ethic of reciprocity that characterized the Greek and Roman world of Jesus' time. "I return good to you when you do good to me in hopes of receiving further good from you." "Everything that you want people to do to you, you also do so to them" (Matt. 7:12). In this interpretation the first phrase is the dominant thought. To get good from other people, we do good to them.

If this should be the interpretation of this saying then it would be an incidental piece of wisdom that Jesus is quoting. It would not be central to his thought. In the same Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Jesus explicitly condemns such thinking: "When you give to charity do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. In this way give to charity in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will award you in secret" (Matt. 6:3-4). Those who follow this interpretation indeed would say that the radical and distinctive ethic of Jesus is found instead in his teaching on the love for the enemy (Matt. 5:43-48).

For Matthew, however, the Golden Rule is the key to the right interpretation of the whole Law: "For this is the Law and the Prophets" (7:12). Matthew follows it with Jesus' command to enter the narrow gate, discovered by few (vv. 13-14).

In one other place, Matthew speaks of a principle which provides the measure of every requirement of the Law. It may give a clue to the correct interpretation of the Golden Rule. The whole Law and Prophets "hang" on the Great Commandment, to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves (22:40). The standard for how much to love our neighbor is the powerful depth of our own self-seeking.

Likewise in the Golden Rule what we want people to do for us is not cited as the goal of what we do. Instead it is a measure of what is to be done. The good to be done to others is nothing less than our understanding of our own self, of what we need and want. The nature of the Golden Rule as a gauge perhaps is clearer in Luke's version. Luke presents the first clause as a comparison, "Just as you want people to do to you" (6:31).

In any case the interpretation of the Golden Rule as reciprocity is destroyed by the context into which Luke places it. It is found in the middle of Jesus' teaching of love for the enemy (6:27-36). Explicitly, we are to "do good and lend without expecting anything in return" and then our "reward will be great" and we "will be children of the Most High" (v. 35). For Jesus, the reward for our action does not come from other people's actions in response to ours; it comes from God, in heaven.

What follows in Luke 6:35 is what Paul Ricoeur (*New Testament Studies* 36 [1990]) says undermines more than anything else the interpretation of the Golden Rule as equivalence and establishes it rather as an ethic of superabundance. "Because God is kind to those who are ungrateful and evil. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful." As Ricoeur rephrases it, "Because it has been given to you, go and do likewise."

Such a basis of ethics Ricoeur rightly notes will bring a motive of compassion into our codes of social justice. For example, the harshness and stereotyping in much of the current rhetoric of welfare reform would be challenged by that perspective.

From The Word
Violence and Social Justice
by Stephen Charles Mott

The interconnection of violence and injustice is significant for strategy in dealing with violence. It is not that the two are inseparable. Many perpetrators of violence are not victims of social injustice or conditioned by environments in which it is rampant. The spread of child and wife abuse across all socio-economic layers is a case in point. Yet the link with injustice is such that in many communities violence cannot be treated in isolation from the economic privation and status discrimination. One can understand the biblical perspective that "the effect of justice shall be peace" (Isa. 32:17).

Biblically, "violence" is not merely any application of physical injury or the taking of life. It tends to be found in one of two forms. The first is physical force which is employed by the economically strong that victimizes the weak. The second is excessive brutality, cruelty, or murder of innocent persons. Proverbs 21:7 () states the link between violence and injustice: "the violence of the wicked will sweep them away because they refuse to do what is just."

In the Older Testament, violence (*h>a\ma's*) is frequently tied to economic and social oppression. Amos 3:10 speaks of "those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds." The image is of those who use their power to annex the production of the peasants by illegal and forceful means. The command not to "do wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place" (Jer. 22:3) similarly brings together various forms of exploitation, not necessarily illegal, some of which use of physical force against the weakest economic groups. In Psalm 72 the recipients of "oppression and violence" are the poor, the weak, and the needy (vv. 12-14). The perpetrators are described as rich and powerful (Ezek. 7:11, 24; Amos 6:12).

Violence frequently accompanies the perversion of legal processes in the context of oppression of the weak. "I see violence and strife in the city Oppression and fraud do not depart from its market place" (Ps. 55:9-11). Social repression occurs both in the use of force and by means of fraud and false testimony in court.

The connection of violence to the market and trade (cf. also Ezek. 28:16) (along with Amos's relating violence to the practices which led to the expropriation of the peasants' lands) shows that the unjust structures also could be called violent. In trade powerful economic groups could physically destroy the goods or equipment of weaker rivals.

The prophetic denunciation of violence side by side with economic, social, and judicial injustice gives indication that efforts to deal with violence without addressing other forms of exploitation in a community will be limited in their effect. The kind of violence faced in the Hebrew communities was an expression of the distorted behavior that follows the temptation provided by the gross maldistribution of resources. Micah 2:1-2 states that the wicked are able to take possession of other people's fields because "it is in their power."

The attitudinal, cultural, and psychological aspects of violence must be addressed, to be sure, as well as the weapons that make it easy. The prophetic approach indicates, however, that economic and social disparity and disempowerment must be faced if we desire civil tranquility.

From The Word

by **Stephen Charles Mott**

Roots of Equality in Early Israel

The growing inequality in American society has been expressed in the rapidly growing wealth of the richest few and the declining real income of the poor and working class. It raises the issue of equality in biblical values. I have heard unequivocal claims that there is nothing in the Bible about equality. This is an appropriate time to review the normative claims for equality in the Bible. In this column we will consider aspects of equality in earliest Israel.

A major development in the sociological understanding of ancient Israel in the past two decades has been the proposal that pre-monarchic Israel was a society of unusual equality, which the Scriptures present as an ideal which had been lost.

Norman Gottwald argued in *The Tribes of Yahweh* (1979) that the people united by faith in Yahweh formed an egalitarian social system in the midst of stratified societies. The extended families were on an approximate par in production and consumption. It was Yahweh's will that there be a social system in which suffering and disempowerment would be rectified not so much by charitable deeds to individuals as by assuring the ongoing stability of a functionally effective egalitarian social system.

Carol Meyers (*Discovering Eve*, 1988) finds in this period a division of labor which approached parity between the sexes that resulted, if not in equality, at least a mutual dependence grounded in ethical dignity in the covenant with Yahweh. Meyers, like Gottwald, finds a deterioration of the earlier equality in the later monarchy. As walled cities replaced pioneer villages and centralized distribution systems developed, male dominance appeared.

That Scripture itself presents the pre-monarchic period as normatively superior to the monarchic needs to be more firmly established. The sociological descriptions of the equality of early Israel are nevertheless valuable for identifying egalitarian elements in the clearly normative materials of the Hebrew Scripture.

The sabbatical years with the cancelling of debts and the year of Jubilee with the return of land are institutions at the heart of duties to the poor. Elie Munk rightly noted that "the point of departure of the system of social economy of Judaism is the equal division of land among all its inhabitants" (*La justice sociale en Israël*, Opp 1948, p. 75). Equality was established in general conditions rather in personal positions. Inequalities themselves were not prevented. They arose from different qualities of soil, personal capacities and effort, and the caprice of nature. Existing classes with extreme contrasts in the distribution of wealth were opposed, however. The personal inequality, moreover, was not advocated or given normative support.

The one indivisible God provided a powerful basis for one indivisible people. The equality in the land was grounded in the person of Yahweh. The land distribution was to be respected because it had been portioned out by Yahweh (Deut. 19:14). The land belonged to Yahweh. They were only sojourners on it. The consequence demanded in practice was that the patrimony in land given to every extended family was to be preserved (Lev. 25:23-24). To the international wisdom protecting family boundaries, the Hebrew Scriptures added a divine basis: The families "have a powerful guardian who will take up their cause against you" (Prov. 23:10-11).

This voice is needed once more in an age when intentional changes in the general conditions have taken the form of tax breaks for the wealthy, increasing profits for the few through the restriction of labor costs, and the undercutting of public provisions for the needy.