

The Modern Day American Church's Response to the Impoverished

Madalaine Mishler

Indiana State University

Abstract

For centuries, impoverished people have been a part of societies around the globe. The United States' Church has struggled with how to approach the issue of poverty. According to the Biblical history of Christianity, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament suggest God's compassion for the impoverished. As individualism has grown in American culture, the Church has been influenced by it. Through examining the theological viewpoints and actions of the Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist Churches in America along with a study about how the American Church is less responsive to the destitute than the European Church, this essay proposes that individualism has infiltrated into the Church's culture, affecting its heart for the poor. This paper will suggest that the self-focused mindset of individualism has led the Church to lose its emphasis on Jesus' teachings and methodologies of serving the poor; leading it either not serving or doing so for personal gain. Implications for the modern day American Church will be discussed.

Key Words: Church, Impoverished, Individualism

The American Church's Response to the Impoverished

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "It's all right to tell a man to lift himself up by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself up by his own bootstraps" (King, Jr., 1998). For many centuries, there have been people around the world who have been lacking financially. However, poverty is more than not being financially stable. Instead, being poor implies that the individual has little or no positive community or close relationships (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Oftentimes, this can lead people to places they never anticipated to be: impoverished and alone. There has been a struggle in society to know how to handle these situations. Many churches across various dominations, cultures, and time periods have struggled with how to effectively respond the poor.

According to the history of Christianity, Jesus was known for being someone who made an effort to help the poor. In many of his teachings, he encourages his followers to take care of the impoverished. According to a historian, Richard Bauckham, Jesus did not teach others around him to simply take care of people who have had a bad season of life, deal with sickness, or other misfortunes. Instead, he taught them to take care of the destitute. "These were the people who had no reliable means of support, but had to depend largely on the charity of others" (Bauckham, 2011). Since the life of Jesus, the church has wrestled with this idea of taking care of the poor. In the modern day American church, the culture of society takes a toll on its response to the impoverished. Some responses of the modern day American church have been successful and well received. However, the American worldview of individualism has a negative impact on the church's response the poor and homeless (Bellah et al., 1985). The modern day American church has lost its heart for the impoverished. The American church has been

influenced by the culture of individualism; leading them to have lost the focus of Jesus' teachings and methodologies of how to serve the poor.

God's Compassion for the Poor: Old Testament and New Testament

Biblically, the idea of caring for the impoverished is not a New Testament idea. Instead, it is something that was written about in the Hebrew Bible, otherwise known as the Old Testament, first. A theme throughout the Old Testament is that the God of Israel, Yahweh, was a defender of the poor and needy (Pilgrim, 1981). In order to fully understand Yahweh's heart for the destitute, the people would have been reminded of how much they had been cared for by Yahweh. According to Jewish history, the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for many generations. The Egyptians treated the Israelites terribly. However, God had compassion on the Israelites and rescued them out of Egypt through miraculous powers (Barton & Bowden, 2005). Knowing their dramatic, hard history, God reminded the Israelites of the compassion He had on them. Therefore, God's motive for them to care the impoverished was apparent in the covenant He made with Israel: "Yahweh himself rescued his people when they were strangers and slaves in Egypt; hence his redeemed people should act in like manner toward the helpless in their midst" (Pilgrim, 1981). In other words, since the Israelites were well taken care of by God when they were helpless and needy, they were commanded to do the same for others. According to Barton and Bowden, this concept continues throughout the entire Old Testament, setting up the teachings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (Barton & Bowden, 2005).

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus lived a life revolving around the impoverished and marginalized. There are many instances where Jesus spends time eating and physically healing the poor. According to Bauckham, Jesus supported those who relied solely on charity from others. He focused on serving those who needed to be served the most: the poor

(Bauckham, 2011). In the midst of Jesus' ministry, He proclaimed what the Kingdom of God is like. One of the elements of the Kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is that the poor are made strong and the poor are more likely to enter the Kingdom than the rich (Christian, 1999). Because Jesus served the impoverished in His own life, He commissioned His followers to do the same.

According to Jayakumar Christian, author of *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power, and the Kingdom of God*, "the powerlessness of the poor is God's mission; he is the prime mover in this response, we [the church] only follow[s] him into his mission" (Christian, 1999). The goal of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus' life was not for that treatment of the impoverished would stop with Him, but that it would continue on with the Church. In Matthew 25, the author wrote about a parable that Jesus gave. He began His teaching with telling a story about a king. In the story, the king represented Jesus. The people who were blessed by the king, Jesus, were those who took care of Him when He was in need. Jesus continued the parable by saying:

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me'" (Matthew 25:37-40, New American Standard Bible).

Jesus was teaching a Kingdom principle in this parable. In the Kingdom of God, when people care for those in need, they are directly caring for Jesus as well (Christian, 1999). This passage is a direct commission to the Church to care for the poor.

Though Jesus taught people to help the destitute, He also was someone who understood the balance of caring for the destitute and concentrating on other areas of ministry as well. He did have a strong focus on the poor, it was not his full focus. This is seen in Mark 14. At this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus was at Bethany and was eating with a leper, Simon. Immediately, it is apparent that Jesus has a heart for the impoverished because He was fellowshiping and

eating with a leper. According to *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, leprosy was a skin disease and those who had it were completely excluded from society. They were outcasts. Therefore, they could not have an occupation and they did not have close relationships with people (Keener, 2014). It would have been contrary to normality for people to see Jesus eating with a leper. However, as the scene continues, there are more events. A woman, who Jesus knew from previous encounters, began pouring some very expensive perfume on Him. Those who were around to witness this ridiculed her because she could have given the money the perfume was worth to the poor. Jesus' response is profound. He says, "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me" (Mark 14:7, English Standard Version). In other words, Jesus explained that there will always be people who are impoverished but her opportunity to spend time with Him was short. Therefore, it is important to have a balance of caring for the destitute and serving Jesus in other areas of life as well.

First Church's Response to the Impoverished

The teachings of Jesus show that the Church is expected to help the needy. As a result, the Church over many centuries has struggled with the practicalities of serving in this way. This difficulty began with the First Church. Since they did not have a previous structural model to follow, the leaders and members of the First Church solely had Jesus' example. They believed they were directly following God as they modeled after Jesus (Hull, 1990). Through this, the First Church began to find the balance of caring for one another and taking care of the poor. In Luke's writing about the First Church, he said, "And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:45, English Standard Version). There were people within their immediate church family who were in need. At that

time, it was not uncommon to be needy in some way. According to Hull, the First Church caught the world's attention through selling their possessions in order to take care of one another and the world around them. "Through seeking nothing in return, they communicate sacrifice and interest in the weak and helpless" (Hull, 1990). The people in the First Church sacrificed their physical possessions and finances in order to help one another and other needy people in their community. This went a long way and through it, according to Acts 2, many people were added to the First Church's congregation daily (Acts 2:43-47, New American Standard Bible).

Modern Day American Church's Response to the Poor

The modern day American church has influential examples to follow through the person of Jesus and the First Church. However, the reality is that there are many other factors that play a role in the American Church's response to the impoverished. First, unlike the First Church, there are many dominations of churches across America who have different theological perspectives. In 2012, a yearbook was created that calculated the amount of United States citizens that attend church across several dominations. This article indicated that of the 217 church dominations in the United States, some of the largest dominations include the Catholic Church, the Baptist Church, and the Methodist Church (*Fast Facts about American Religion*, 2012). In these three dominations alone there have been different responses to the impoverished throughout their modern history.

One of the greatest examples for the modern day Catholic Church to follow is Mother Teresa. She was a missionary who primarily traveled in Calcutta and was known for living a life among the poor. She was convinced that God's love for the destitute was expressed through the person and work of Jesus. Therefore, Mother Teresa urged people to be like Jesus and do the same. Specifically, Mother Teresa challenged the Catholic Church to take care of the poor in the

community through entering into their lives. She said, “Do we know our neighbor, the poor of our own area? It is so easy for us to talk and talk about the poor of other places. Very often we have the suffering... they are near us and we don't even know them” (Mother Teresa, 2007). So, as she implies in this quote, Mother Teresa's mission was to know her poor neighbors. She did not simply talk about the impoverished around her or in other places. Instead, she became poor herself so that she could love this people group more deeply and genuinely. Mother Teresa believed that she, like Jesus, stepped into the lives of the impoverished through becoming poor herself instead of simply ignoring them (Vardey, 1995).

Today, the Catholic Church attempts to model after Mother Teresa in some ways through being present in taking care of the poor in the United States. During World War II, the Catholic Church was active in helping the government with aspects of the New Deal. As a result, the Catholic Church became more consistent in their help for the impoverished. The movement grew so rapidly that the government began to partner with the Catholic Church, in hopes to help the poor (Brown & McKeown, 1997). By 1990, the Catholic Church was so present in the government efforts, that an organization called Catholic Charities, U.S.A. was formed. The initial goal of this organization was to provide “private social provision in the nation” (Brown & McKeown, 1997). For the Catholic Church, there were many motivations that compelled them to serve the poor. However, the most impactful was that “Catholic providers believed caring for the poor was the true test of their own progress toward eternal salvation” (Brown & McKeown, 1997). In other words, the primary motivation, according to Brown and McKeown, was that a majority of Catholics believed that caring and advocating for the destitute will lead to their own, individual eternal benefits. This ideology continues in this denomination today (Brown & McKeown, 1997).

The Catholic Church has been quite successful in its efforts to help the poor. Looking solely at the year 1910, “445 Catholic institutions (not including day nurseries) cared for 88,860 dependent children” (Brown & McKeown, 1997). In 2013, Pope Francis was praised by Governor Frank Keating for living a life of humility and encouraging his church to live humbly. In the same article, the CEO of the American Bankers Association said, “In the United States, 50 percent of social services are provided by the Catholic church” (Jacobson, 2013). It is clear that the Catholic Church is responding to the impoverished in a positive way. However, there have been some consequences that have come from this. The main criticism of Catholic Charities, U.S.A. is that they only provide a temporary fix to deep-rooted problems of poverty. Due to the religious beliefs of the Catholic Church and the emphasis on doing good acts of service in order to have eternal life, they can be quick to help many people over a short period of time. Some scholars argue that helping a smaller amount of people over a longer period of time may make a lasting impact in helping the poor fully (Brown & McKeown, 1997).

The first Baptist Church was founded in 1612 in Holland. At that time, Holland was more accepting of religious freedom than England. So, many people in England went to Holland in order to have freedom to worship according to their beliefs (American Baptist Churches USA, 2016). Later on, the Baptist Church continued to develop in early America in Pennsylvania and New Jersey throughout the 17th century. Then, by 1790, the United States Baptist Church had grown so rapidly that there were 750 churches and 60,000 members (American Baptist Churches USA, 2016). The main goal of the Baptist Church has been to take the message of the Gospel into all places (Ammerman, 1990).

The Baptist Church is often known for being split in their theological perspectives in regards to caring for the poor. Much of this battle has to do with the difference in demographics.

There are differences of worldview “between people who grew up in white collar and professional families and those whose parents were farmers or blue collar workers” (Ammerman, 1990). Typically, the individuals who have grown up in upper-class or middle-class have less graciousness toward the impoverished. In contrast, those in the congregation who grew up in poorer families have a larger part in helping the destitute. These contrasts lead the people to disagreeing about how to respond to the poor (Ammerman, 1990).

This tension has led about 25 percent of Baptists to look toward the teachings of Jesus for the answer. This percentage of the congregation believes that Jesus’ goal was not to shun the poor but to offer them reconciliation. Thus, they choose to take care of the impoverished through offering them not only resources, but relationships, leading to reconciliation with others (Stricklin, 2015). Possibly the greatest example of this is the organization Habitat for Humanity. Though Habitat for Humanity is its own, non-religious, non-profit organization, Baptist churches across the United States have helped by partnering with this organization since its founding in 1976 (Habitat for Humanity, 2016). While this quarter of the congregation is serving the poor, another 25 percent of the Baptist Church does not believe the impoverished should be a priority. Some people who disagreed with the Church’s focus on the poor and said, “get your eyes off the troubles of the world and get them on Jesus, and tell sinners what will happen if they die of sin” (Stricklin, 2015). In other words, some Baptists believe that the priority is just eternal salvation and not worldly problems, such as poverty. However, the other 50 percent of the Baptist Church is indifferent toward the impoverished. Some scholars note that this 50 percent is notorious for believing that if they themselves are not poor, then the impoverished are not their problem to deal with (Stricklin, 2015). Therefore, statistically speaking, about 75 percent of the Baptist Church either does not believe the destitute should be cared for or they do not care to make them

a priority in ministry. The vast split in theological perspectives about priorities in ministry have led the Baptist Church to not making a significant, lasting impact in helping the poor, outside of their partnership with Habitat for Humanity (Ammerman, 1990).

The Methodist Church began with an 18th century movement by John Wesley. The movement began as a goal to reform the Church of England. Wesley, who was a deacon of the Church of England, sought to reform it from the inside. Wesley's ideas were brought to the United States through Irish immigrants who were influenced by him. One of the preachers that Wesley sent to the states was Francis Ashbury. He was the preacher who began the Methodist Church in America in 1771. Unlike Wesley, Ashbury had a strong conviction for the foundation of the United States. This gained him favor and leverage with the American people. Throughout its years of growth, the Methodist Church has had a large impact on American society and has become the largest Protestant Church in the United States (Davies, 2016).

Since the Methodist Church is an older denomination and it has been in America since the Revolutionary War, this congregation has developed strong beliefs about helping the impoverished. Throughout their history, the Methodist Church has had a passionate heart for the destitute. In John Wesley's teaching, he created a list of general rules for people to abide by in order to be a good person (Frank, 2006). In these general rules, Wesley paraphrased Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25: "giving food to the hungry... clothing to the naked... visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison" (Frank, 2006). The Methodist Church and a couple smaller church denominations worked together to serve the poor. In the process, they became heavy influencers on United States culture. Many of their beliefs about education for all people and provision for daily necessities, has led schools and hospitals to implement many of their ideas. The Methodist Church has led the United States to institutionalize some of their methods

in caring for the poor. Because of this, students across the United States and England now have an education that would be impossible for their families to afford without financial support (Frank, 2006). The Methodist Church's passion about these issues has had a positive impact on Western culture.

Though it may appear that the Methodist Church is doing well in their efforts to care for the impoverished, there are some problems on the inside. Due to the Methodist Church's response to slavery in the Civil War, they lost a large number of their African American or anti-slavery members (Frank, 2006). Because of this, the Methodist Church's demographics are not diverse and include little blue collar people within their denomination. This has caused them to have a disadvantage when taking care of the destitute. Impoverished people have accused the Methodist Church of marginalizing them or not understanding what they truly need (Frank, 2006). So, even as the Methodist Church tries to make an effort to provide housing or food to the impoverished, not many lasting relationships are being formed. Additionally, because of the Methodist Church's emphasis on doing good acts of service, people being cared for can often feel like a project instead of someone who is valued (Frank, 2006). The reality is, though actions to help the poor are beneficial in the short-term, people ultimately feel uncared for if they are not being drawn into a lasting friendship with the caregivers.

Individualism

When considering the Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist churches, it is valuable to dissect what has caused their help toward the poor to not always be successful. Though there are many factors that have an effect on this, American culture itself directly influences all of these denominations and the Church as a whole. In modern American culture, individualism has infiltrated the lives of citizens and the infrastructures throughout America. According to the

Merriam-Webster Dictionary, individualism is “the belief that the needs of each person are more important than the needs of the whole society or group” (Individualism, n.d.). In other words, individualism places a regard on self over others.

Individualism started in the foundation of America and is often a basic part of what it means to be an American. Even in the founding of America, the forefathers placed a high importance on the benefits of the individual. Now, Americans have a regard for the sacredness of individual rights and decisions. This was the original idea of individualism: all people having his or her own right to make decisions and live according to individual desires (Bellah et al, 2007). However, as American society has changed over time, individualism has evolved as well. Today, “individualism has come to mean so many things and [contains] such contradictions and paradoxes that even to defend it requires that we analyze it critically” (Bellah et al, 2007). The idea of placing a higher regard on oneself over others is at the core of modern individualism. This type of individualism is what is affecting society today.

Since individualism is a large part of the American culture, many scholars have begun to call it a cultural syndrome. According to Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, Ed Diener, a cultural syndrome is “a shared pattern of attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms, role definitions, values, and other subjective elements of culture that is organized around some theme” (Diener & Suh, 2000). Many countries around the globe would have a cultural syndrome of collectivism or thinking of self in regards to an entire group. The theme of collectivism is that there is little concentration on one individual. Instead, the group as a whole takes the utmost importance. However, Western culture, especially American culture, has a cultural syndrome of individualism. In a recent study conducted by Diener and his colleagues, he measured how high the Subjective Well-Being or happiness of someone was based on if they

had an individualist or a collectivist lifestyle. First, they noticed that the people who live collectively focused on relationships with others for their happiness. However, the individualists focused primarily on financial success for happiness. According to the results, people in collectivist cultures had a higher Subjective Well-Being because they were more aware of their interpersonal relationships. Though they typically are not as wealthy as those in individualist cultures, the happiness that came from relationships was much higher than the happiness that came from financial success (Diener and Suh, 2000). In addition to this study, the field of Positive Psychology has recently proven that people have more positive lives and emotions through relationships and serving others over achieving personal success (Lu & Shih, 1997). Many Americans believe that individualism and striving for financial success will lead to their happiness. However, according to Diener's study and Positive Psychology, someone attains more happiness in life through having regard for others instead of solely being self-focused.

In spite of how individualism makes someone feel, Americans continue to place a high regard on the importance of it. Thus, it has had an effect on infrastructures, including the Church. According to a book about the American Church, "[the] cultural captivity of the church has meant that the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture" (Rah, 2009). Individualism in the Church is slightly different than in American society. While most individualists focus on financial success, individualism in the Church places an emphasis on prioritizing a personal walk with God over a community walk with God (Rah, 2009). The healthy approach to a personal walk with God comes through individuation: allowing for a personal connection to faith while concentrating on the community as a whole as well. Individualism is different because it focuses solely on one's relationship with God or a good eternity as a result of individual works. An individualist mindset

says that one can work to be a good person in order to earn God's approval for themselves. This is contrary to what the Bible teaches about salvation and eternity with God. Thus, individualism leads the Church to believe more in the "American culture rather than the redemptive power of the gospel message" (Rah, 2009). Because of this, the Church becomes an expression of individualism rather than of the Gospel message.

Since the 1970s, the American Church has been blamed of becoming selfish in the midst of it adopting the individualistic mindset. Though people who are not Christians or outside of the Church accuse the Church of selfishness, there are members who do as well. According to Robert Wuthnow, individualism has led the Church to not be caring toward one another. Though people in the Church expected other members to support them in the midst of personal crisis of illness, financial instability, or personal loss, about 68 percent of the congregation admitted that they did not feel cared for by their fellow Church members in situations of tragedy (Wuthnow, 1991). If the Church does not care for its members, individualism has likely infiltrated their approaches to having regard for people outside of the congregation as well. Unfortunately, the impoverished are negatively impacted through the Church falling into individualism.

In 1976 a study was conducted at Princeton University in regards to the outreach the Church is making to the poor. A total of 8,000 people were interviewed for the study. The researchers strategically selected about an equal amount of church goers and non-religious people. The researchers began by exploring the charitable attitudes of the congregations in churches in Denmark, Ireland, Germany, and France. According to the results found through personal interviews, the poor were served more consistently and for a longer period of time 23 percent more often by people in the Church than by those who were religiously unaffiliated (Wuthnow, 1991). After their time in Europe, the researchers explored the same concept in the

United States. Through personal interviews, they discovered that those who were not a part of the Church served the impoverished more consistently and for a longer time period about 19 percent more than those in the American Church (Wuthnow, 1991). In summary, unlike the European Church, the American Church is not as dedicated to serving the poor as others in American society. Though Western culture as a whole is individualistic, the American Church specifically has been heavily influenced by individualism (Bellah et al, 1985).

Thinking back to the patterns of the Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist churches, there are self-focused thoughts in their service to the poor. In an individualist culture, these motivations can be easily masked. However, as the heart of individualism is exposed, the motivations are as well. In the Catholic Church, the primary drive in caring for the poor is “their own progress toward eternal salvation” (Brown & McKeown, 1997). In other words, the focus becomes more about serving as many people as possible for personal, eternal gain. In essence, the heart of individuals who believe this way is that their own personal gain is more important than helping a person in need (Brown & McKeown, 1997). The Baptist Church is split in its approach to caring for the impoverished. Due to the percentages showing the congregation’s perspectives in serving the destitute, about 75 percent of the Baptist Church either does not believe they should be cared for or they do not care to make them a priority in ministry. In other words, if the individuals in the congregation are not personally impacted by being impoverished, this people group does not take precedence (Ammerman, 1990). Lastly, the Methodist Church is unsuccessful in its care for the poor due to the individual concentration on being a good person, leading to quick fixes for the poor and not lasting relationships with them. This leaves the impoverished to feel uncared for by the Church (Frank, 2006). These responses toward the poor reveal the extent that individualism has seeped into the American Church. Thus, it is possible that individualism is a

cause of the American Church losing its heart for the impoverished. Therefore, the American Church must turn back to Jesus' methodologies in caring for the impoverished.

Jesus' Methodologies toward the Poor

Author of the book, *Barefoot Church: Serving the Least in a Consumer Culture*, Brandon Hatmaker tells his story of caring for the impoverished like Jesus. At one time, Hatmaker was the head pastor at a megachurch. Though his church had a very large congregation and was financially successful, Hatmaker claims that he lost joy in his pastoring position. He began to realize that he was becoming a consumeristic, individualistic Christian and that he was leading his congregation to do the same. In the story he tells, he says that God began to show him his self-centeredness through telling him to quit his position as a lead pastor and instead to go serve the poor. Hatmaker realized something: he did not know any poor people. So, his new journey began and he started to meet impoverished people. Shortly after, Hatmaker entered into the lives of the impoverished, forming relationships with them, and he began to develop a sincere heart to help them. Poverty had become personal to Hatmaker through his efforts to serve this people group. So, he and his wife felt compelled to begin a nonprofit organization called Legacy Collective. Today, the ultimate mission of Legacy Collective is to form genuine, lasting relationships with impoverished people and lead them to a place of strength and safety through having a community of people around them (Hatmaker, 2014). Hatmaker and his wife are modern day examples of what it looks like to live according to Jesus' methodologies toward the poor.

Jesus' ministry revolved around humility and serving. Jesus was selfless and focused on others. Jesus' primary mission was this: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, New American Standard Bible).

This service looked much different than how the American Church today tends to serve.

According to theologian, C. Gene Wilkes, Jesus' idea of leadership was to humble Himself (Wilkes, 1998). Further than that, Jesus understood that "If you want to be truly great, then the direction you must go is down... Greatness is not a measure of self-will, but rather self-abandonment. The more you lose, the more you gain" (Wilkes, 1998). In Jesus' life, this mentality is shown through Him humbling Himself and serving, even to the point of death (Philippians 2:5-8, English Standard Version). In other words, Jesus displayed that to make a true impact in people's lives and to achieve greatness, one must be humble. Through serving and valuing the other person over oneself, lives are changed (Wilkes, 1998). This is contrary to how the modern day American Church often acts.

According to the Christian faith, when Jesus came to Earth, He did so to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Therefore, His actions were in accordance to how He was seeking to describe the Kingdom. According to historian, Richard Bauckham, the Kingdom of God is a dynamic term that refers to "the activity of God" (Bauckham, 2011). Jesus practically represented the Kingdom of God. Through His teachings and actions, Jesus showed that the Kingdom of God heals people, eats with sinners, renews the people of God, and belongs to the poor. Due to Jesus' mission to bring the Kingdom of God everywhere He went, He not only spent time with the poor but He made them a priority (Bauckham, 2011).

Jesus' efforts to spend time with the destitute would have been radical in comparison to how the impoverished were normally treated in that culture. In New Testament times, the impoverished were often treated harshly and were marginalized. Because the destitute had no means of financial support outside of the charity of others, people did not respect them. Jesus chose to be contrary to the world to represent the Kingdom of God (Bauckham, 2011). Instead of

dismissing the poor because of their neediness, Jesus welcomed them into His life through spending time with them and eating meals with them. In other words, Jesus formed genuine relationships with the impoverished, in spite of others dismissing them. In Luke 14, Jesus tells a story of a great feast. He explained that when preparing a feast, the host should not invite his or her rich neighbors because they will make excuses. Instead, the host should “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13, English Standard Version). Jesus then explains that when the host invites the marginalized, that he or she will be blessed because his or her guests will not be able to repay him or her. In the minds of the culture, this would have made no sense. However, Jesus was inviting those He was teaching to see that “the kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace, and so their lack of status, wealth, or power does not exclude them” and so the marginalized, including the poor, are welcomed in (Chester & Timmis, 2008).

Once Jesus formed relationships with the impoverished, He spent time proclaiming the Kingdom of God or the Word of God to them. Of the Synoptic Gospels, Luke's Gospel includes the most about Jesus' interactions with the destitute. Throughout this Gospel, Luke is clear about the “centrality and sufficiency of God's word” to all people (Chester & Timmis, 2008). In all of Jesus' ministry, including His ministry to the impoverished, He proclaimed and taught the word of God. In His most famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' first statement is “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3, English Standard Version). According to Glen Stassen and David Gushee's commentary on this passage, Jesus was proclaiming hope specifically to the economically humble or the ones being oppressed by the powerful. Further, Jesus was implying that the poor understand their desperate need for God (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). This explains why Jesus spent so much time with the poor: they were quick to hear the Word of God He proclaimed because they understood their need for

redemption (Bauckham, 2011). Thus, a large part of Jesus' methods to help the impoverished was teaching them the Word of God.

Practical Implications for the Church

When considering Jesus' methodologies and humility when caring for the poor, it is apparent that the American Church has some areas to improve in regards to this area. Though the American Church is making some strides to help the impoverished, especially in short term ways, there are some practical steps that it could be taken order to be more clearly focused on what Jesus' original intent for the poor was. The first practical step the Church could take is to evaluate how individualism has changed the lens in which they view the scriptures' teaching about the impoverished. Since individualism is at the core of American culture, it changes the way in which people view the world (Bellah et al, 1985). This is no different for the Church. Often the compassion in which the Church displays comes from a mindset of helping others while benefitting oneself. The danger of this is that the emphasis goes away from Jesus' approach for helping the poor and toward personal gain (Wuthnow, 1991). Thus, the first step for the American Church is to examine its theological worldview while turning back to what the scriptures say about caring for the destitute.

Once the American Church examines its worldview, the next step in obtaining a heart for the poor is to examine God's compassion for the impoverished throughout the entire Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew God, Yahweh, rescued the people from slavery in Egypt. They were helpless, weak, and needed hope. God then rescued them from slavery and were taken care of by Him (Barton & Bowden, 2005). So, when God commanded the people to have compassion on the poor and helpless, it was not a surprise to them (Pilgrim, 1981). It is the same for the Church today. Christians believe that they were once helpless and broken. In the midst of their sinful

state, Jesus displayed gracious compassion toward them, rescuing them and taking care of them (Pilgrim, 1981). Ultimately, the compassion and love that Jesus has displayed for Christians should compel them to do the same for all people, including the impoverished (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, New American Standard Bible). Therefore, like the Israelites, it makes sense that God would expect the Church to extend compassion and grace to the helpless.

When considering Biblical teaching, it is not enough for the American Church to have this theological background of caring for the impoverished and not act. Knowing this, Jesus suggested some ways for the Christians to live in accordance to what they believe. Like Jesus displayed in His life, the Church is to invite the poor to the feasts and the celebrations (Luke 14:13, English Standard Version). So, if Jesus encouraged His people to invite the poor to the feasts they were having, there are a couple questions the American Church can consider: Who would Jesus invite to feasts? Are the impoverished being invited to celebrations and feasts in the Church? If everyone, including the destitute, were invited to feasts, people's perceptions of the Church would be transformed (Vanderstelt, 2015). As Jesus Himself displayed through eating with the marginalized, the Kingdom of God is one that welcomes in the outsiders. The American Church should act as a group who welcome in the marginalized in order to display what the Kingdom of God is like (Chester & Timmis, 2008). A simple way to demonstrate Jesus' heart for the poor is to invite them to celebrations and feasts.

A woman who had experience poverty throughout her life described her story like this: "In part it is about having no money, but there is more to poverty than that. It is about being isolated, unsupported, uneducated, and unwanted. Poor people want to be included and not just judged and rescued at times of crisis" (Chester & Timmis, 2008). The reality is that poverty goes deeper than simply lacking monetary resources. Instead, poverty implies that someone has

lost all social connections or community (Chester & Timmis, 2008). So, as the American Church gets to know the impoverished through inviting them to feasts, as Jesus suggested, the next step is a relationship. Since the poor feel marginalized much of the time, they need a community where they can replace that feeling with one of inclusion (Chester & Timmis, 2008). With this said, the American Church's ultimate goal should be to form lasting, genuine relationships with the poor and invite them into community. To have lasting impact in the lives of the destitute, genuine relationships with them are necessary (Brown & McKeown, 2009).

As the impoverished and other marginalized individuals spent time with Jesus, scripture shows that He proclaimed the Word of God to them. Jesus' heart for the impoverished was shown through His actions and proclamation of hope to them (Bauckham, 2011). Thus, another practical implication for the American Church is to proclaim the Word of God to the poor. Authors Glen Stassen and David Gushee explain possible dangers of this. Oftentimes, the Church is quick to proclaim the Bible without having a previous relationship with the individual. It is when the Word of God is partnered with action and relationship that it has a true impact on the impoverished (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). Thus, as the Word of God is combined with relationship and action, the poor are left with a sense of hope in their hopelessness. Therefore, the last practical step for the American Church's response toward the impoverished is to share hope with them.

Conclusion

Mother Teresa once said, "Love is not about patronizing and charity isn't about pity, it is about love. Charity and love are the same—with charity you give love, so don't just give money but reach out your hand instead" (Mother Teresa, 2007). There will always be impoverished people around the globe. The scriptures indicate that God has compassion for the poor and

marginalized. However, the modern day American Church has struggled for years about how to care for them. Due to American individualism having an influence on the culture of the Church, the congregation has become more self-focused, negatively impacting its outreach to the poor. However, the American Church has an opportunity to reexamine its theology and methodologies toward the impoverished. If the Church catches the vision that Jesus had toward the poor and form relationships with this people group, lives can be forever changed. Restoration and compassion can be given. The American Church has the opportunity to give hope and meaning to the lives of the impoverished through the hope they have in Jesus. It is just as a man who serves the destitute at a home for the dying in India once said, "The most important is to show them that they are loved, that they are not forgotten, that their life is precious, and that someone cares... there is a sweetness in taking their burdens away for a little bit. Because of this, my life has meaning" (Shadyac & Belic, 2011).

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