

### THE EMERGENT NEED FOR JAMES

The New York Times recently ran an article entitled “Evangelicals Fear the Loss of Their Teenagers.”<sup>1</sup> It begins, “Despite their packed megachurches, their political clout and their increasing visibility on the national stage, evangelical Christian leaders are warning one another that their teenagers are abandoning the faith in droves... Their alarm has been stoked by a highly suspect claim that if current trends continue, only 4 percent of teenagers will be ‘Bible-believing Christians’ as adults. That would be a sharp decline compared with 35 percent of the current generation of baby boomers, and before that, 65 percent of the World War II generation.” While many authorities rightly criticize the four percent statistic, Evangelical churches are noticing a trend in which youth are leaving the church or denomination in which they were raised, as well as evangelicalism more broadly, upon leaving for college. Many feel that they no longer need the church, that the concerns of the evangelical church are irrelevant to the problems of the world, or that their faith is just more “real” outside of the church. While many classify themselves as “Christian,” they see no need to attend a formal church they think disconnected from the world they are inheriting.

The reason for the disillusionment many in this younger generation feel is what they perceive as the church’s social “irrelevance.” The indictments come freely: “conservative” churches focus on the issue of moral purity and try to avoid any contact with anything “worldly,” thereby becoming isolated communities indifferent to the needs of our world. Lee Adams in *Relevant Magazine* describes youth ministry thus:

the expectation for many student ministries [is to] train the students to be “good,” to avoid sin at all costs. Don’t have sex. Don’t use bad language. For God’s sake, don’t get tattoos. Many train their students to do nothing unusual, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to rock the boat. Many train them to do nothing, and frankly, they become quite good at it. They learn it from their parents, and unfortunately, they learn it from their youth pastors.<sup>2</sup>

His indictment is that by this concern with a specific type of moral purity, namely passive purity, the church is modeling to our youth that good Christians do nothing. As these youth head into college and the working world, a “do-nothing” faith seems pointless and so they leave it behind.

On the other hand, many more “liberal” churches have focused on issues of social justice to the neglect of purity, and young people look at these churches as mere social action clubs. They ask why they should attend church when there are plenty of other organizations that work toward social justice in their schools and in the world at large. Church, without following God’s

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/06/us/06evangelical.html?ex=1161144000&en=1fdb6bdbbeacdecc9&ei=5070>, Accessed 16 October, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life\\_article.php?id=7289](http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life_article.php?id=7289), Accessed 15 October 2006.

command to “be holy as I am holy,” devolves into just another club or social event no different than the world, even if their goals of helping society improve are admirable. Between these two extremes there are many good and healthy churches that seek to emphasize both moral purity and social justice.

Karl Barth understands the dichotomy of moral purity and social activism as a theological failure to understand the unity of justification and sanctification. This leads to two corresponding errors in practice: to the idea of a God who works in isolation, and His ‘cheap grace’ (D. Bonhoeffer), and therefore an indolent quietism, where the relationship of justification to sanctification is neglected; and to that of a favoured man who works in isolation, and therefore to an illusory activism, where the relationship of sanctification to justification is forgotten... What is faith without obedience? And conversely: What is liberation for new action which does not rest from the very outset and continually on the forgiveness of sins?<sup>3</sup>

We can see that Barth picked up the same two tendencies which he labeled as “indolent quietism” on the one hand, and “illusory activism” on the other. Francis Schaeffer, in *How Should We Then Live*, charges American culture as having adopted

impoverished values: personal peace and affluence. Personal peace means just to be let alone, not to be troubled by the troubles of other people, whether across the world or across the city—to live one’s life with minimal possibilities of being personally disturbed. Personal peace means wanting to have my personal life pattern undisturbed in my lifetime, regardless of what the result will be in the lifetimes of my children and grandchildren. Affluence means an overwhelming and ever-increasing prosperity—a life made up of things, things, and more things—a success judged by an ever-higher level of material abundance.<sup>4</sup>

James comments in 1:27, “Religion that God the Father accepts as pure and holy is this: to care for the widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” It seems that in many ways the church in America reflects the values of our culture, and as a result has lost both what James calls “concern for the widows and orphans” as well as its “unstained-ness,” or moral purity. It is only by keeping both of these in tension that the Evangelical church will regain its ability to speak into the world and transform our culture by overcoming the apathy of “personal peace” and the selfishness of affluence. Taking James’ twofold command seriously, I suggest, would help correct many of the problems within the Church as a whole.

First, James lists caring for the “widows and orphans in their distress” as essential to God’s will for his people. The concept of “widows and orphans” was a simple way to signify the helpless, the hopeless, those without resources. In a patriarchal society, a child without a father

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Volume IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 2*. Eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 505.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *How Then Shall We Live* (In *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview: Volume 5, A Christian View of the West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Winchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1990), 211.

was considered an orphan, even if the mother still lived. With no man to represent them, they had limited access to the resources of their community. From early on we can see the concern for these groups in the church's praxis, as described by the struggle to care for them fairly in Acts 6:1-7. Here, those in the social group that were more familiar (the Hebraic Jewish widows) received more of the resources than the group that were the less known (the Grecian Jewish widows). The church proactively responded to pleas for fairness and sought how best to distribute supplies equitably to all in its care. Thus, although the text had already stated, "they had everything in common," the text still follows this with special mention of the early church's concern for the most helpless of their society.

Throughout the epistle of James there is likewise special concern for the poor as issues of wealth and poverty form one of the three main themes of James.<sup>5</sup> The concern begins most clearly in 1:9, though arguably poverty may be included among the "trials" of verse 2. In verses 9-11, James declares the transience of riches and the lofty position of the poor. Johnson notes that James does not use this passage for any sort of direct exhortation. Rather, this passage functions as "*the stating of basic principles concerning the human condition before God,*"<sup>6</sup> which, given James' subsequent allusion to Isaiah 40:8, reminds us that it is only God's perspective that matters. If God sees fit to honor the poor to an as yet unseen high position, having a godly perspective means holding this view now *within* our current reality.

The discussion of favoritism in 2:1-7 clearly argues against currying favor with the rich at the expense of the poor. James declares that God's standard for judgment is different than our natural one when he states in 2:5: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those loving him?" The rhetorical implication is that the readers already knew God's standard and should have adopted it, but have failed. People from the 2/3s world challenge readings of this text that understand the term "poor" as referring to piety or humility rather than financial poverty. Maynard-Reid argues that "for [James] the rich are outside the sphere of salvation and faith."<sup>7</sup> Unlike Maynard-Reid, I do not think God's preferential option for the poor demands that no rich person could be saved, for James is discussing those who have become rich by oppression and injustice. Likewise, the poor who inherit the kingdom are qualified as those "loving" God.<sup>8</sup> His challenge, however, that "we must read James rigorously without imposing contemporary concerns upon the book and its

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<sup>5</sup> Davids, *James*, 29; Martin, *James*, lxxxiv; Mußner, *Jakobusbrief*, 80; Moo, *James*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *James*, 191.

<sup>7</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Wealth and Poverty*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> See Moo, *James*, 107.

author,” however, is quite fair.<sup>9</sup> James’ statement in 2:5 mandates that Christians honor the poor as God does, rather than following the world’s lead and favoring the wealthy, as already forbidden in 2:1.<sup>10</sup> James’ reference to the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” originating in Leviticus 19:18 and reissued by Jesus, creates a legal and gospel normative for our actions.

In an interesting redaction of the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of the Nazaraeans expands the story of the rich young ruler by adding an explanation for Jesus’ command to the man to sell his possessions. The story runs: “[Jesus] said to him: Go and sell all that thou possessest and distribute it among the poor, and then come and follow me. But the rich man then began to scratch his head and it pleased him not. And the Lord said to him: How canst thou say, I have fulfilled the law and the prophets? For it stands written in the law: Love thy neighbour as thyself; and behold, many of thy brethren, sons of Abraham, are begrimed with dirt and die of hunger—and thy house is full of many good things and nothing at all comes forth from it to them!”<sup>11</sup> While this shows the editor’s desire to explain an uncomfortable saying of Jesus, it also helps contextualize our understanding of the command “love your neighbor as yourself.” This command cannot be adequately fulfilled as long as there is economic disparity and the ones with means fail to address the problem. As the rich keep getting richer,<sup>12</sup> Christian leaders and teachers have a responsibility to speak the prophetic message of the God who has a special concern for the poor, the message of social equity and responsibility in a culture that favors the rich. One aspect of staying “unstained by the world” includes not accepting the world’s preference for the wealthy but living according to God’s compassion for the poor. Hartin comments, “James shows that the religion of Jesus and of the prophets is one that puts concern for the poor at the heart of its message.”<sup>13</sup>

James concludes this pericope: “so speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom.” To this, Johnson notes, “the law of freedom can liberate those who fulfill it but

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<sup>9</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Wealth and Poverty*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> It seems reasonable to distinguish between honoring and favoring, for the latter is not encouraged either toward the wealthy or the poor since chapter 2 starts out by explicitly stating “do not hold the faith... in favoritism.” While the subsequent example shows favoritism toward the wealthy, perhaps that is because favoritism generally goes that way, but James might well condemn scholars like Maynard-Reid who go to the other extreme.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Com. on Mt.* 15.14 on 19:16ff. in the Latin rendering, in Craig A. Evans, “Images of Christ in the Canonical and Apocryphal Gospels” (*Images of Christ: Ancient and Modern*. Eds. Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes, and David Tombs. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 34-72.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.forbes.com/free\\_forbes/2006/0327/111.html](http://www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2006/0327/111.html), Accessed 17 October 2006. They comment: “In its inaugural ranking of the world’s richest people 20 years ago FORBES uncovered some 140 billionaires. Just three years ago we found 476. This year the list is a record 793, up 102 from last year. They’re worth a combined \$2.6 trillion, up 18% since last March. Their average net worth: \$3.3 billion.”

<sup>13</sup> Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 159.

it also serves ... as a solemn threat of eschatological wrath to those who transgress it.”<sup>14</sup> This “law of freedom” refers to the Torah as moderated through the New Covenant of Christ’s life, death and resurrection,<sup>15</sup> and provides the normative base for our actions, as in 1:22-25. James makes it clear that this law is one of *freedom* for the one practicing it, echoing the covenantal laws of Deuteronomy where obedience promised life and freedom. James does not promote a post-Lutheran concept of impossibly demanding works-righteousness, but rather, as he graphically depicts in 1:13-18, he views us as subject either to sin or to God. Sin’s law is death brought about by our own desires; God’s law is freedom brought about by our obedience. This is also depicted in the contrast of wisdoms in 3:13-18. James does not seek to promote a negatively conceived “legalism,” for his use of νόμος refers to the Law of God as revealed through Moses, the prophets, and Jesus himself, something now made internal and possible through the implanting of the word. To be subject to God, in James’ thought-world, means covenanting obedience to his commands as revealed in Scripture and the Son.

Contextually James makes clear that part of fulfilling this law of freedom is showing mercy to the poor. To this, James offers both a warning and a promise when he says, “Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” Martin warns that, “the severity of this verse must not then be diminished,” since failure to show mercy indicates a dead faith useless for salvation.<sup>16</sup> Both halves of 2:12, however, are important: the warning of stern judgment to any who fail to keep the law of love toward their neighbor, but also the promise of mercy triumphant to those who live out mercy according to the law of freedom. Linguistically, James leaves it open to question whether it is our acts of mercy, or God’s response of mercy to our actions, that triumphs over God’s strict justice. Perhaps that was intentional on the part of the author: our feeble acts of mercy bring about God’s greater response of mercy.<sup>17</sup>

This discussion of judgment and mercy leads into the debate of faith and works. In 2:14-26, the very first example of the dichotomy, or rather, the logical impossibility of any dichotomy between faith and works, is a failure to show practical mercy to a person in need. James illustrates clearly that mere words are useless to a person in need. Secondly, he demonstrates that he views practical caring for the poor as an essential indication and outworking of a faith that saves. Ultimately in 5:1-6 James enters a final prophetic diatribe against those who are

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<sup>14</sup> Martin, *James*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Moo, *James*, 32; Bauckham, *James*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, *James*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> This is most likely an allusion to Matthew 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” See also Matthew 18:4. Rabbinic material also speaks of God’s two measures – mercy and judgment/justice – by which he will judge the world.

wealthy but who live solely for themselves and their own pleasures and in the process create more pain for the poor under them. His description, “you have lived in luxury and self-indulgence,” censures those who feel they deserve and have a right to their own personal peace and affluence regardless of the cost to or needs of others. This text also parallels the words of Jesus in the Gospel of the Nazareans.<sup>18</sup> The point of 5:1-6 is most likely to encourage the helpless concerning God’s justice in this situation, but it paints a very ugly picture of what indifference to the plight of the poor looks like to God. Since we now read James as what Elsa Tamez calls an “intercepted letter,”<sup>19</sup> in the West we bear the responsibility for communicating a text that calls for judgment on the very people who fit into James’ understanding of wealthy. It is an uncomfortable place to sit.

On the other hand, while it is not as obviously a dominant a theme throughout the book, James also states that God desires moral purity on the side of his people. He describes this as “keeping oneself unstained by the world” in 1:27. At first glance, this might well sound like justification for Christians to attempt to isolate themselves into communities formed solely of other Christians, but in truth, this is not how James defines being “unstained.” For one, he has already indicated a need for caring for the poor and helpless of society. But even more, according to his theology what stains a person is to be “double-minded,” loving the world and then attempting to also follow God.<sup>20</sup> It is the one who is rich but who does not “glory in his low position” (1:10), the one who is tempted and blames God for the temptation (1:13), the one who discriminates in favor of the wealthy (2:4), the one who envies and seeks to fulfill selfish ambition (3:14-16, 4:1-3), the one who lives in luxury and ignores the needs of the poor (5:1-6): these are the ones condemned throughout the book as having been “stained” by the world.

The passage that perhaps gives the clearest explanation of what it means to be actually stained by the world is 4:4-10. In 4:4, James indicts: “you adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” It is friendship with the world that causes us to be considered adulterers to our relationship with God, taints us and makes our purity a mockery. Like a bride who wishes to claim her status as rightly married and yet also wants to hold on to other relationships, Christians who have accepted the world’s standard and goals for life are tainted and can no longer claim moral purity. A friend from seminary who pastors in rural Ohio

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<sup>18</sup> See also Evans, “Images,” 67.

<sup>19</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Didache 4:3-4 links favoritism (λήψη πρόσωπον) to being double-minded (διψυχήσεις), potentially within context of a legal setting. Audet, quoted in Niederwimmer, believes this to be “the situation of a judge who, in the presence of the parties, begins to weigh the consequence that his judgment will have for himself” (Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998], 107 f.n. 40). Again the desire to show favoritism to the wealthy for financial gain is condemned.

commented on his blog, “Bekah and I strive to live a simple life... It's hard, especially in our community, which is marked by two very evident qualities: 'churched' and 'affluent'. These two qualities have meshed into a way of life that, in our community, is never questioned. Second homes, huge fancy SUV's, lavish vacations to escape either the oppressive heat/humidity of the summer, or the long, cold winters; all are considered completely sensible and appropriate uses of money.”<sup>21</sup> How is it that Christian culture, at least in America, has reached the point that Drew can observe that “churched” and “affluent” have utterly meshed and yet it still claims to announce the message of the Kingdom of God? Perhaps it is because the church has adopted without question the values of our surrounding culture, what Schaeffer called impoverished values, making “personal peace” and “affluence” the signs of God’s favor. Over a century ago, Henry Ward Beecher, the abolitionist and clergyman, warned against this personal comfort mentality, cautioning his audience to “Watch lest prosperity destroy generosity.”<sup>22</sup> This warning proven remarkably apt for the American church, given Ron Sider’s observation that America is last in percentage of charitable giving for our gross national product.<sup>23</sup> In light of our cultural syncretism, James’ call to repentance in 4:7-10 provides a fitting response to our failure both to maintain moral purity as differentiated from our culture, and to truly honor the poor with God’s mercy.

Consistently throughout Scripture there are texts that counteract the prosperity gospel, but for the sake of our comfort we rarely teach these difficult passages. Thus, even though we may, in areas of sexuality or tattoos, look like we have maintained moral purity, in terms of one of the Bible’s most dominant themes – concern for the poor – we are stained. While James does indicate several other areas involved in moral purity, namely, controlling one’s tongue, not breaking the Torah in areas such as murder or adultery, not being selfish or self-serving, I have focused here on the ethics of social justice because it is both a major theme of James and one of the major indictments against the American church by the Emergent movement. Moral purity cannot exist independently of an active concern for the poor; likewise, concern for the poor without attendant moral purity in other areas of corruption by the world does not satisfy God. The two must be held in balance in the church, and by balance I mean 100% of each, for when

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<sup>21</sup> <http://drewmoser.blogspot.com/2006/10/thoughts-on-simplicity.html>, Accessed 10 October 2006. Compare this with C. S. Lewis, who argued for a generosity that is unreasonable on worldly grounds. “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditures excludes them.” (found at <http://www.generousgiving.org/page.asp?sec=80&page=348>, Accessed 31 October, 2006.)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/authors/henry\\_ward\\_beecher\\_a009.htm](http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/authors/henry_ward_beecher_a009.htm), Accessed 31 October, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*,

one or the other takes predominance, then we lose hold of true religion as defined by the prophetic voice of James.

The world is in dire need of a Church that takes this call to religion seriously. Currently the youth who fill the so-titled Emergent church indict the traditional church for failing to care for the needs of an ever-more-global culture. People in their twenties are reevaluating and questioning the validity of the traditions they were given by the church. For example, they were taught that morality was important, but see that current divorce statistics within the church match those without, that desire for wealth appears as strong within the church as without, and that religious leaders are as tainted by scandals and lust for power as political ones. As a result, they fail to see the importance of the morality they have been taught. They see the imbalance of a church that fought vehemently against abortion but failed to fight as vocally against the issue of AIDS orphans and poverty not only in the rest of the world but also in our own country, cities, and slums. Because of such inconsistencies, they accuse the existing church, fairly or not, of failure to be God's hands and feet to the world. Tragically, many also decide that Christianity itself must be the failure point. Of those that remain within the faith, many opt to start over within the Emergent movement, where social justice is in the forefront as an essential element of faith. The danger for the Emergent movement is in swinging the pendulum too far and failing to retain moral purity, thus still failing to attain to "true religion."

I used the term "Emergent" in the title of this paper partly to allude to this new movement of churches and the criticisms they bring to the ecumenical dialogue, fair or not. The Emergent movement needs to be wary of falling into the trap that Schaeffer saw happen to previous movements seeking to change the American culture: "As the young people revolted against their parents, they came around in a big circle—and often ended an inch lower—with only the same two impoverished values: their own kind of personal peace and their own kind of affluence."<sup>24</sup> I also intended, however, the pun that James' message of faith that works *needs* to emerge from the shadow Luther cast over it. I am not arguing for a religion of social justice, for any actions separated from the good news of the Gospel are futile, but rather a return to the prophetic role of the church in the world as the outworkers of God's vision of feeding the poor, housing the homeless, visiting the sick, clothing the naked. There are many organizations within the broader community of faith working toward these goals, and perhaps part of the role of Evangelical leaders may be to make them more accessible, emphasizing the issues they deal with and encouraging people to put their faith into action by working alongside these organizations. Even better would be if the church itself made these organizations redundant! As teachers and

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<sup>24</sup> Schaeffer, *How Then Should We Live*, 215.

leaders, we are responsible (see James 3:1) to help move believers beyond Barth's dichotomy of "indolent quietism" and "illusory activism" into a process of true sanctification.

However we go about embodying the message of James, the church in America must recognize where the influence of the world has made its way into the church, leading us to prize our comfort above the uncomfortable message that "the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower." The Church as a whole needs to remember that in God's eyes, moral purity does not exist apart from a deep and practical concern for the poor, and conversely that apart from a holy life, social justice corrupts into futile works. Where we have allowed the moral stain of greed into our churches and lives, where we have accepted the world's values as our own, we must repent. The God who by his grace gave birth to his people by the word of truth and whose mercy triumphs over judgment requires of his people an active purity paired with an active mercy. Through this mission, the Church, whether Evangelical, Emergent, or of any denomination, would provide a purpose and a hope to disillusioned Christians and non-Christians of all ages, such that the light of God's grace and mercy would pour through the Church to the needy world. As Mayor said in his influential commentary over 100 years ago, "The only religion which is of value in the sight of God is that which influences the whole life and activity (i. 27. 4, 22-25, ii. 12-26, iii. 13, 17, iv. 11, 17). Faith, love, wisdom, religion—all alike are spurious if they fail to produce the fruit of good works."<sup>25</sup> Truly, if faith without works is dead, so also is the Church.

*(Thesis – the church in America reflects the American culture, and as a result has lost both what James calls "concern for the widows and orphans" as well as "unstained-ness". It is by keeping these in tension that the Evangelical church will regain its ability to speak into the world and transform our culture.)*

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<sup>25</sup> Mayor, *James*, cvii.