

**Discussion Questions on Schneider,
The Good of Affluence,
Chapter 5**

1. Despite popular long-standing belief that Jesus was poor, Sider in his chapter 3 notes that Jesus did not grow up in a poor family. Raymond Brown summarizes what seems to be the academic consensus as follows:

Wealth/poverty and the class society found in cities of the Roman Empire created their own problems for early Christians, and both need to be discussed lest they be misunderstood in the light of modern experience. There was many references in the NT to the 'poor'; and readers might envision their poverty as similar to that of the Third World today where people have no place to live or even scraps to eat and so are in constant danger of perishing. In the Gospels, however, which in part reflect Jesus' own life situation in Galilee, the poor were small farmers with inadequate or barren land, or serfs on large estates; in the cities without the assistance of produce from the land the poor were somewhat worse off. Yet the situation of both groups of NT poor was economically better than that of the desperately poor of the modern world. As for Jesus himself who is remembered as showing an affection for the poor, according to Mark 6:3 he was a *tekton*, i.e., a 'wood-worker' who made doors or furniture for the stone or mud-brick houses and plows and yokes for farmers. As a craftsman in a village he might be compared to 'a blue collar worker in lower-middle-class America.'¹ (*NT Intro*, 67)

So much for Jesus' pre-ministry years. Itinerant rabbis did not generally draw a salary. Regarding ministerial support, Blomberg writes,

They depended on the gifts and provisions of others, but there is no indication that they have sold or permanently abandoned what material resources they had at home. In Jn 21:3, Peter can return to his fishing practice. Throughout the Gospels his family retains a house in Capernaum that becomes Jesus' home-base for later ministry (Mk 1:29-31; 2:1; 9:33; Mt 4:13; 17:24).

Jesus may not have been a pauper, but neither was he rich or powerful. Discuss the meaning/implications of a) Jesus not being poor, b) Jesus not being rich/powerful. How does this change your view of Jesus?

2. We have discussed in this group before a central notion of the incarnation: "That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved" (Gregory of Nazianzus). Schneider appeals to something like this principle in discussing the implications of Jesus' being incarnated in the middle class:

...I do think, with others, that the form [the incarnation] did take implies a very strong identification on God's part with the sort of human personhood that it was. For one thing, it suggests that there is something right and good about growing up in a healthy environment. If God had used the moral reasoning of some theologians today, Jesus would have... grown up among the hordes of beggars, prostitutes, street children, criminals and worse. He would have been the (probably female) child of a single-parent household. Or he may have been a land-poor peasant, bred on social rage and resentment toward authority and power. Then he would truly and literally have identified himself, in the Incarnation, with the poor.

¹ Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 67. See also Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 106-7.

Schneider goes on to argue that Jesus' life as a non-poor artisan "redeems the essence of human work and business in cultural economic form. Being a builder and a businessman was apparently part of what expressed his true perfection as a human being."

Schneider touches here on the "scandal of particularity", that Jesus could not be incarnated in all walks of life or all classes and genders of people. Does Jesus' choice really mean what Schneider asserts it does? Could it have been a means to an end for his ministry?

3. Schneider debates Sider's position regarding institutional evil, namely that participation in a corrupt system (e.g., purchasing goods made by companies who oppress majority-world workers), while not always avoidable, compels a response. Schneider responds by pointing out that if we aren't careful we will condemn Jesus in the process.

To what degree can we use Jesus as a model for our engagement with the fallen economic and political structures of our day?

4. Schneider rightly points out that the age-old caricature of Jesus' followers as only among the poor and, depending on the source, the ignorant, needs revision:

Again, we find no stereotype of early Christian poverty... Martin Hengel has thus written that Jesus' closest followers were not poor, but came mainly from a social and economic background similar to his own—that is, from the middle class of their day. This seems correct. These followers are not prominent in the Gospel narratives, but they must have been extremely important to the entire operation of Jesus' ministry. Their more ordinary sort of discipleship ought to be kept in view as we consider our subject, for their situation parallels that of affluent Christians in our day far more closely than do those of the mission 12 and 70. (136)

We are made aware by Sider and others that we are, from a global perspective, the very rich of our world. Is Schneider right in proposing we take our cues from Jesus' affluent followers? What of the "rich young ruler"?

5. Schneider writes,

I certainly do agree with liberation theologians, and with Ron Sider and others, who stress that the God of Scripture has a particular interest in setting the poor free from poverty. There is no doubt that in the Exodus God liberates a poor and oppressed people, and this is an essential part of what the Exodus narratives reveal about the nature and will of God generally. My disagreement with liberation theologians is not about the centrality of this liberation, but about the form that this liberation takes . . . [I] stress the prominent biblical theme (downplayed by liberation theologians) that divine liberation in the Exodus takes the form of material delight (pp. 66-67).

Schneider seems to be stating that liberation theologians (and, implicitly, Sider as well) overemphasize one aspect of the Exodus, the removing the poor and the oppressed from their poverty and oppression. It is also important, he would argue, to attend to what God is seeking to bring them into, which is a more materially bountiful life. This material bountiful life is the desired state for all. Do you think Sider's (over?)emphasis is OK and even needed to help capture the attention of affluent Christians or do you think there is a downside to this approach? Is Schneider's dual-emphasis on both "out of" and "into" better, or does it come with risks as well? If the Exodus was deliverance from oppression into abundance, we may feel God has done the same for us, given our first-world wealth. How can we celebrate our crossing the Jordan when so many are trapped on the other side, without the resources to cross as well?

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Fun Fact: Westerners have, to varying degrees, a fear of the poor. This has not always been so. In fact, this dates to the 14th century, when lack of fertile land and overpopulation changed European society:

The result of all these factors, even when there was not famine, was a general level of malnutrition in the fourteenth c. Very few people always had enough to eat, and in the first great famine many peasants were forced to start selling off their land. Soon many had no choice but to wander from town to town, begging for enough food to keep themselves alive, and scavenging chickens out of backyards or bread out of bakeries if given the chance. The arrival in town of the beggars, carrying their bowls and staffs, became a cause of real trepidation. 'The poor', who had been a group to be pitied and helped in the high Middle Ages, became a group to be feared in the fourteenth century. Although the worst of the overpopulation problem was grimly solved in the middle of the fourteenth century by the loss of a third of the population to the Black Death...

It is interesting to note that by the year 1300 the European idea of 'the poor' was quite similar to ours, or for that matter to that of the Roman Empire: that is, people living at the edge of starvation, caught in a desperate cycle with no clear way to escape, relying on the generosity of others just to stay alive. In the middle of the 12th century, by contrast, 'poverty' had been something different, something that a person might seek out voluntarily, usually for religious reasons, rather than something from which one would urgently want to escape. The wandering beggars of the 12th century were usually not the desperately poor but rather pilgrims who had deliberately put off their fine clothes for a trip of penitence. Peasant families going through difficult times could hope that their situation would improve in a year or two, rather than knowing they were permanently trapped in poverty. Plenty of people in the high Middle Ages had had little property, but there were opportunities in the 12th century for anyone willing to work hard and usually enough food to go around. These opportunities were gone in the 14th century.

—*Life and Society in the West: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Constance Bouchard, pp. 284-5.