

## *The Incarnation and Economic Identity*

*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?*

MARK 6:3

### FACING THE "RADICAL JESUS"

Most of us who were brought up in the church learned something about the "person and works" of Jesus Christ. Our tradition teaches that Jesus was both human and God; that he died for our sins; that he was raised from the dead and will come again to judge the world. Also (with some help from picture books), many of us grew up imagining Jesus as a rather harmless person, a kind and gentle man who went around doing good. I recall wondering as a small boy at Easter services how such a person could have had any enemies at all, let alone have something as bad as the crucifixion happen to him. But theologians have recently unearthed some things about Jesus that have been eye-opening and even life-changing to people (like me) who were raised on the "gentle Jesus" of popular church convention.

In his book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Reformed Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff describes this discovery in autobiographical terms with which many of us will be able to identify:

I have learned of the radical origins of the tradition in which I was reared. Learning of those origins has given me a deepened appreciation

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of my own identity. It has also produced in me a profound discontent over my tradition's loss of its radicalism.<sup>1</sup>

Liberation theologians especially have shown that the Jesus of the Gospels was revolutionary and dangerous. Indeed, from one point of view, Jesus was a constant threat to the centers of power; he provoked their fury, and they rose up against him.

What was so revolutionary and dangerous about Jesus? To liberation theologians, the whole "Christ event" was like a concentrated form of the exodus. He was the exodus in human form. Jesus Christ identified himself with the poor and powerless of the earth and united with them against the rich and powerful people who oppressed them. Jesus' whole life and all his teachings expressed this revolutionary bond between God and the poor in their struggle against the vast, beastly power of this world. Indeed, Christians need to hear that Jesus unleashed revolution throughout the whole cosmos, in heaven and on earth.<sup>2</sup> This revolution comprehends all of life — our bodies, minds, and souls, the world and its systems. As theologian Abraham Kuyper liked to say, there is not a single square inch of the universe about which Christ does not say, "This is mine." And we do need to hear that Jesus had a special mission to the people whom the world wishes to forget. The Son of the Exodus will not let them be forgotten, and he will not let us forget them without also forgetting him.

But there is still much to debate. In many groups, it is a matter of "theological correctness" that Jesus identified with the poor in a very uncomplicated way. For instance, it passes without question that he was born and grew up in poverty, that his followers were mainly poor people, that together they adopted lives of poverty during their public mission, and that his primary audience was the poor multitudes. Coupled with this picture of his life is a radical interpretation of his teachings. We commonly hear it stressed that Jesus condemned the rich and that he blessed the poor in the very literal terms of economic class.

I have some sympathy with this picture of Jesus and his disposition toward rich and poor. For at least it begins to convey the radical nature of his person and work as a challenge to comfortable, wealthy congregations that

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. ix.

2. For a good treatment of the natural antagonism between Christ and the culture of power, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), pp. 11-29.

have grown passive. Nevertheless, in the light of the evidence, I have come to think that it greatly oversimplifies the social and economic nature of his life, and thus that it also causes very serious distortions and misjudgments in the Christian ethics that it shapes. For it is not that Christ in his earthly incarnation did not "identify" with the poor; clearly he did. It is just that he also in quite different ways identified with people in other social and economic classes, too. Moreover, the language of being "rich" and "poor" in terms of Jesus' identification is semantically slippery. For as we shall see especially in the next chapter, these terms often extend rather elastically as metaphors to describe spiritual states of affairs as well as (or instead of) material ones. And it is just not accurate to classify Jesus, in the context of his own society, as economically poor. His social and economic standing has to be understood more precisely, as we shall see, and this also needs to be stressed as we construct our framework for Christian spirituality and ethics.

In this first chapter on New Testament narratives, then, we shall consider the social and economic identity of the incarnate Jesus Christ, and also that of his followers. For it is widely understood (I believe correctly) that in this question of Jesus' social and economic identity there arises an identification claim that is very important to how we Christians are to think about economic life on that level. In the next chapter, we shall consider the economic identity of Jesus more narrowly, in the context of his public mission and the manner of life that he adopted in carrying it out. It is also widely accepted that his lifestyle during those years preceding his crucifixion is also in some way normative for all Christians. The deeper questions are about the precise nature of that lifestyle and, then, just how it is normative as a model for Christians.

#### THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WORLD OF JESUS

Before seeking to comprehend the economic identity of Jesus Christ, we must try to gain an accurate picture of the world in which he existed. Jesus was born into an unstable political climate, in which Israel was an unwilling member of the vast Roman Empire. By all accounts, the young Jesus grew to adulthood in a society that was highly stratified and marked by extremes of wealth and poverty.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies show that Israel had become

3. See Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 72-75.

a rumbling volcano that might erupt at any moment into violence. Mobs of peasants hungered and thirsted for justice.<sup>4</sup> Riots broke out without warning. The Romans reacted by stationing small armies throughout the land to help the Jewish authorities maintain order. To orthodox Jews this cooperation symbolized the worst possible form of compromise — very like what a Western presence in the Middle East means to certain zealous Arabs today.

The poor of Jesus' Palestine were numerous. Worst off were the thousands of homeless beggars who tried to survive on the streets. Often such people were disabled — blind, lame, riddled with disease, wretched in every physical respect. There were also street children — we do not know how many — orphaned and abandoned to the savaging chaos of life. These multitudes were not without some relief; the "poor tax" (Deut. 14:28ff.) was still in use, meaning that every third year the annual tithe was distributed among the needy. The gleaning laws were also in effect in Jesus' day.<sup>5</sup> Additional aid came from almsgiving, various charities, and a welfare system that grew from the synagogue. This last system may have influenced the early church as described in Acts.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this help was no more than a drop in the bucket. The poorest of the poor were horribly oppressed. As we shall see, the "multitudes" that flocked to Jesus came mainly from this downtrodden mass of suffering people.

A different kind of poverty afflicted the working poor. Among these were day laborers and slaves. The Roman Empire was full of slaves, and there were slaves in Israel, though perhaps fewer than there were in Gentile nations. Most were domestic servants in the wealthiest homes.<sup>7</sup> Jesus' parable of day laborers arriving in the marketplace to wait for work (Matt. 20:1-16) seems an accurate depiction of the situation.<sup>8</sup> Neither group earned much beyond its "daily bread." Day laborers depended entirely on day-to-day contracts. Often they had no real estate or inheritance to fall back on, and, even if they managed to get by, they certainly had little security in their lives. They were poor by any standard.

4. See Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

5. Walter Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), p. 45.

6. Pilgrim, *Good News*, p. 45.

7. Pilgrim, *Good News*, p. 43.

8. Pilgrim, *Good News*, p. 43.

Another group of working poor were the so-called *am haaretz*, "the people of the land."<sup>9</sup> Jewish peasants were in some respects the lifeblood of the economy. But research indicates that the system worked against them. In Israel, powerful families used land as a political weapon. This maneuvering naturally benefited the largest landholders and usually hurt the peasants. Sudden land liquidations or controlled changes in the markets could devastate smaller landowners.<sup>9</sup> It was not unusual for desperate peasants to sell what little land they owned to pay off debts. And to be landless in a landed economy was to be poor and powerless. It seems that the jubilee must not have been in force. The entire system, which the Romans had set up to maintain stability, guaranteed a high level of resentment among the people, and the option of joining a patriotic band of robbers or guerrilla fighters (sometimes called zealots) became attractive to more than a few.

Such was the world into which Jesus came preaching and teaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. No wonder so many mistakenly understood him to be speaking of an immediate political revolt against Rome and its collaborators.

At the other extreme were the rich, and in Palestine the rich were very often (though not always) people who had made a bargain with the devil Rome. To pious Jews, these epitomized the unrighteous rich as described in the Old Testament. Traitors to everything sacred, thus they prospered. At the top was the royal family of the despised Herod. His ruthlessness and political cunning was as legendary as it was profitable.<sup>10</sup> One of Herod's favorite ploys was to take land from the people whom he distrusted and give it to proven loyalists. To these belonged the holy priesthood and all the riches that went with it, including revenues from taxation and a corner on all sorts of markets connected with the religious life of the nation.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, they did not enjoy the love of the people. We will comprehend the New Testament more fully if we understand that financial advantage in Israel often implied direct involvement with political evil and injustice.

Tax collectors, too, rated high on the scale of unrighteousness and social scorn. There were at least three sorts. The most powerful, and most

9. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth*, p. 73.

10. Richard Horsley with J. S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 31-34.

11. Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits*, pp. 31-34.

hated, were the publicans. These were large scale tax farmers who were "infamous for their fortune and fraud in the late Republican period of Roman imperialism."<sup>12</sup> They can be pictured as supervisors atop a large pyramid system of toll collectors. In the Roman Empire tax collecting was a kind of multi-layered investment business done under contract with private citizens who agreed to pay the sum of the tax due from conquered territories to the government. They were then free to collect the money from the territories in any way they saw fit, and to do so at a profit.<sup>13</sup> They thus employed a staff of people whose job it was to exact as much money from the people as they could get away with to repay the investment at risk. In charge at the local level of this despised system were "chief tax collectors" such as Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2-9, powerful middlemen who really made the whole system work.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, their economic level was high, but their social status was near the bottom of the scale. Respectable Jewish people naturally hated them. Similar was the situation of the smaller collectors beneath them who set up tollbooths and operated as businesses in smaller localities. Jesus' disciple Levi (or Matthew, as he came to be called) was perhaps one of these third-level collectors.

No doubt some tax collectors were fairer, and hated less, than others.<sup>15</sup> But the New Testament claim that tax collectors were among the most active followers of Jesus, and that one of them even became a member of the Twelve, is truly astonishing if we think that Jesus was essentially a man who identified with the poor and opposed the rich. In fact, some critical scholars find it so unlikely that they judge this tradition about Jesus' behavior to be inauthentic rather than give up their assumptions about Jesus' social and political predilections.<sup>16</sup> (This judgment, of course, raises very complex questions about the nature of historical criticism itself, the depths of which we cannot plumb here. Suffice to say that sociological interpretations of this sort rest on an assumption that the thought and behavior of Jesus and the

12. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, p. 212.

13. See John Stambaugh and David Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), p. 77.

14. See Horsley, *The Spiral of Violence*, pp. 212-13. He contends that the tax collectors mentioned in the New Testament came from this category.

15. See the remarkable encounter between a group of tax collectors and John the Baptist in Luke 3:12-15. The normally rigorist John makes what seems a very modest demand upon them. "Collect no more than is appointed you."

16. So Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, pp. 212-17.

earliest Christians must conform to what we think we know about patterns in their society, and that they would not have gone against the tide on such issues.<sup>17</sup>) It seems clear, though, that if Jesus did associate as claimed with publicans, then, by inference, judgment that his identification was exclusively with the economically poor is already in doubt. For these tax collectors were among the richest people in Jesus' society (and also among the most nefarious, in terms of their basic vocation). In any event, no one doubts that the polarized political and economic situation made the moral extremes worse. It was difficult to be rich in that environment without being corrupt, and it was a natural path from integrity to rags.

On the other hand, the peasantry was not always on the losing end of things.<sup>18</sup> On a local level, success in the marketplace was naturally related to the quality of one's produce. Sometimes, too, manipulated inflation (price-fixing) by the rich actually created better prices for poorer landowners simply by artificially raising the prices for their commodities.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, between the extremes of wealth and poverty there was a kind of middle class, for lack of a better term, that was very important. As economic historian Stanley Applebaum shows, ancient Palestine "possessed all the craftsmen, specialized workers and performers of simple manual tasks possessed by any other normal economy of the ancient world."<sup>20</sup> Its economy was strong enough to be differentiated and to support a high degree of specialization. The abundance of crafts and special industries indicates a lively circulation of goods. Rural areas most typically produced pottery, silk, and goods and services connected with the fishing industry (particularly in Galilee).<sup>21</sup> Wine, oil, and perfumes were products of various other communities. Almost all the people's clothing was made in Palestine; commerce surrounding wool was vital to economic movement.

17. For a rigorous critique of "sociological" methods of New Testament interpretation, see Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.)

18. See the massive technical work by S. Safrai and M. Stern, in cooperation with D. Flusser and W. C. van Unnik, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, vol. 2 (Assen, Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1987), including the informative research essay by Stanley Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews in the Diaspora," pp. 662-65.

19. Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews," pp. 622-25.

20. Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews," pp. 622-25.

21. Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews," pp. 622-25.

Importantly, there were also craftsmen of all kinds throughout Israel. While the majority operated out of Jerusalem and other major cities, many also worked in the smaller towns and villages. The list of what they produced is long: handicrafts, leatherwork, rope, baskets, basalt millstones, special stones for burial, and mason stones for building (perhaps Jesus' trade).<sup>22</sup> There were also metalworkers, bakers (who had organized their own guild), butchers, cheese makers, weavers, wool combers, cobblers, specialists in incense, moneychangers, traders of various kinds, and bankers.<sup>23</sup> The Temple alone supported an economy that employed around twenty thousand people.

#### THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IDENTITY OF JESUS

This picture of ancient Palestine will serve to sharpen our picture of the social and economic identity of Jesus in the years before he embarked upon his public mission. For one thing, it helps us to see that people in Jesus' own society would not have looked upon him as poor on any level. Now, it is true that Jesus did not enter this world with great power and glory. As Paul wrote, he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:7). And "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9). There is indeed an awesome lowliness about the entire Incarnation. There is terrible downward movement from divine glory to human form, and in human form a descent through the cross into sufferings we cannot comprehend. As Mary's Magnificat in Luke's Gospel so poignantly expresses the matter, the true Lord of glory is a God who "has scattered the proud," who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." He is a God who has "filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). A young girl from Nazareth with no prestige and a young man who had only enough money

22. It has been suggested that Jesus worked as a "builder" (*tekton*) in stone and masonry rather than as a carpenter in woodworking. The reason for this is that most building in that region was done in brick, adobe, and stone because wood was expensive and in short supply by comparison. See Douglas Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Question of His Day* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1986), pp. 176-82. Oakman shows that a *tekton* was normally a "jack of all trades" in construction, more like a handyman in our terms. He believes that the village of Nazareth was a guild community, its special craft in all-purpose building.

23. Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews," p. 625.

at the time (perhaps because his wife's pregnancy appeared obviously illegitimate and the dowry was denied by Jewish law) to buy the poorest offering of sacrifice (two doves) to dedicate their son, were the mother and father of the king.

In this sense, there was certainly a poverty about Jesus. Nevertheless, radical Christians lose credibility by overstating the economic lowliness attending his birth. In his discussion of the nativity, Ron Sider appeals to the "insignificance" of Galilee, and stresses that the first visitors in Bethlehem were poor shepherds, and that the flight into Egypt made Jesus a refugee. As a Jewish rabbi, Sider continues, Jesus would have had "no income during his public ministry," and had no home of his own and sent his disciples out "with very little to sustain them."<sup>24</sup> As will be clear, every single one of these claims is stated imprecisely and is therefore misleading as a guide to ethical thought.

The breathtaking spiritual humility and lowliness attending the Incarnation is not an uncomplicated identification with economic poverty on God's part. Poor shepherds indeed attended Jesus' birth, but their visit was followed by that of the wealthy magi. Matthew's Gospel implies that Mary and Joseph had been living in Bethlehem for about two years when these improbable attendants arrived (2:16) and that they had at least the means to procure housing for themselves (2:11). Furthermore, the magi presented the family with precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh — items that were of no small value in Jesus' day and which certainly would have given the Holy Family some measure of affluence even if they had previously lacked it. These gifts might well have financed the Holy Family's flight into Egypt (I choose to ignore redactional issues and assume the veracity of Matthew's account) and eventual return (itself another exodus of kind). Nowhere does the text suggest that Jesus was a refugee in the sense in which we normally mean the term. And when at last they did go home to Galilee, they did so as residents who were in a position to become established in a family construction business. The narrative of Jesus' early life is thus anything but a straightforward affirmation of literal economic poverty, much less a repudiation of affluence.

Until he was about thirty, it is assumed, Jesus worked in Nazareth — perhaps he even inherited the family business, since there is no mention of

24. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 20th Anniversary Revision (Dallas: Word, 1997), p. 49.

Joseph in any narratives of his adult life. At any rate, that is how people identified him; he was known in his hometown as Jesus "the carpenter" (Mark 6:3).<sup>25</sup> For the greater part of his life, then, it seems that Jesus worked at this trade. That is mainly why New Testament scholars Walter Pilgrim and Martin Hengel and others judge that Jesus did not grow up in poverty but belonged to the lower middle class of his day. According to Pilgrim,

If the tradition that Joseph was a carpenter carries historical veracity, as we have no reason to doubt, then Jesus' family actually belonged to the middle structure of his society, to the small traders and artisans.<sup>26</sup>

Hengel concurs:

We should note first that Jesus himself did not come from the proletariat of day-laborers and landless tenants, but from the middle class of Galilee, the skilled workers. Like his father, he was an artisan, a *tekton*, a Greek word which means mason, carpenter, cartwright and joiner all rolled up into one (Mark 6:3).<sup>27</sup>

New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg affirms this point, too. He concedes that Jesus would not have been subjected to the grinding poverty that was the burden of so many people in his day.<sup>28</sup> He and others clearly dispel the fairly common notion that Jesus is to be identified with the day laborers, who generally were quite poor.<sup>29</sup> And so the interpretive premise for the argument that Jesus identified with the poor against the rich, at least on the grounds of his own economic background, is greatly weakened, if not refuted.

How well off were Jesus and his family? They were not members of the

25. For a thorough treatment of Jesus' vocation see John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (Sydney: St. Paul, 1981), pp. 99, 101. See also references in Barry Gordon, *The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), p. 47.

26. Pilgrim, *Good News*, p. 46.

27. Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), pp. 26-27. Later traditions say (they are striking for their mundaneness in a context where Christ was worshiped as divine) that he "made yokes and ploughs." On this see the reference to Justin Martyr. There are also reports that Jesus' grandnephews worked a small piece of land toward the end of the first century.

28. Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 106.

29. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 106-7.

landed peasantry, as Barry Gordon notes, and thus not subject to poverty typical of that group of Israelites.<sup>30</sup> Of course, we have no detailed ledger of their business, no yearly tax statements, and so on. We know nothing about Jesus' income or personal habits of investment, savings, or charity. All we can say, perhaps, is that a builder's son in Nazareth may not have been rich, but he would have had much to be thankful for compared to the majority of his countrymen.

Furthermore, very recent discoveries have shown that Galilee, where he lived, was by no means the cultural and economic backwater that academic tradition has, until now, supposed it was. This in turn has opened speculation that Jesus may have been a great deal better off in his trade than would have been the norm for builders. The main reason for this is excavation of the site of the ancient capital city of Galilee, Sepphoris.<sup>31</sup> This important city had been destroyed when a rebellion broke out there on the occasion of Herod's death in 4 B.C. His son, Herod Antipas, also a great builder, ordered the entire city rebuilt; he turned it into the "ornament of Galilee" and brought it into the orbit of Roman rule during Jesus' lifetime.<sup>32</sup> This huge stimulus to construction in the immediate vicinity of Nazareth makes plausible, on secure historical grounds, that Jesus' business was unusually prosperous; some have even argued that it probably was.<sup>33</sup> However, as with the use of social pictures (such as what "must" have been the case with Jesus and tax collectors) we must take care that we do not infer too much from historical settings, no matter how secure they are in the evidence. For as Blomberg rightly notes, like the other great Gentile city of the region, Tiberias, there is no mention of Sepphoris at all in the Gospels.<sup>34</sup> There is no description of how Jesus himself related to its flourishing construction industry. We have no way of knowing whether he took part in it or, perhaps for deliberate reasons of purity, did

30. Gordon writes in *The Economic Problem*, p. 47, that "the designation of Christ as 'a carpenter' is important in both theological and sociological terms. It indicates amongst other things, that Jesus did not own a part of the Land, and that he was not amongst the poorest of the poor."

31. See the recent book by Richard A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Also J. Stambaugh and D. Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians*, esp. pp. 92-94.

32. Stambaugh and Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians*, p. 90.

33. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City*, pp. 65-82.

34. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 106.

not.<sup>35</sup> What we do know is that Jesus was not born into and did not grow up in economic poverty.

From the Gospels we also know that he did not live in conditions of social poverty. He may not have been a prince or a member of society's elite. But as a boy Jesus did not grow up, as many children did, homeless and lost on the streets of the inner city.<sup>36</sup> As suggested above, Nazareth was no backwater. Trade routes connected it with the Greek cities of the coastal plain, and it was also linked geographically (by valley) to the Mediterranean Sea. The recent studies that show this region to have been more prosperous than once thought also prove the towns in Jesus' homeland were more sophisticated than we knew. All the cities of Galilee "were Greek-speaking and cosmopolitan, located on busy trade routes connected to Roman administrative centers."<sup>37</sup> This must have made Jesus comparatively well-aware of events taking place both within and outside his nation. And in his immediate environment, moreover, he would have had many enviable advantages. In a larger sense, it is true, he belonged by race and religion to an oppressed people. But on the other hand, within that context, he was the first-born son in a stable two-parent Jewish family with its own home and business. This guaranteed him an education, an inheritance, and many other privileges that most of his contemporaries did not have. He seems to have enjoyed good health, physical strength, possession of a keen intellect, and (until his last days) a good reputation (Luke 2:40). Luke's statement that the young Jesus "increased in divine and human favor" (2:52) comports with our image of him reading the sacred scroll in the synagogue. True, there may have been undertones of suspicion about his origins, as Mark records: "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (6:3). But surely their incredulosity was more due to their mundane familiarity with Jesus than to a long background of ostracism. Hometown carpenters do not quite conform to our image of the ideal messianic king. Nevertheless, in his economic and social conditions, growing up, there was much that others in his day could envy.

35. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 106-7.

36. On the hordes of homeless children, see Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City*.

37. Stambaugh and Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians*, p. 93.

## INCARNATION AND DIVINE IDENTIFICATION

Orthodox Christians believe that Jesus' life was not merely a human event. We believe it was an incarnation — *the* Incarnation, rather — of the divine Son of God in human flesh. If this is true, then (unlike ordinary human beings) his social and economic identity was a matter of deliberate choice and action on his part. In other words, Jesus made the decision beforehand to become just the sort of human being that he was. Among other things, then, liberation theologians are right in stressing that the Incarnation is about divine identification. It is about the kind of human condition and personhood within it that God himself identifies with. I do not mean, of course, to imply that the divine Son of God could not have become some other person, in some considerably different social and economic condition. Who can say, really, what the possible forms of the Incarnation might have been for him? But I do think, with others, that the form it 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 been born in the inner city of Jerusalem. He 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. But, contrary to liberation theologians' claims, he did not. Jesus grew up in circumstances that were, to a notable extent, those of some little affluence. They were quite unlike the ones that Israel enjoyed in the Promised Land, to be sure. His life was basic and simple compared to ours, and it is probably easier for moderately successful people in undeveloped nations to appreciate and identify with his experiences. Nevertheless, as we shall see, his circumstances did create the possibility of proper dominion and delight for him, a theme that we shall develop in the context of his public mission.

Thus it would not be true to say that in the Incarnation God did not in any sense identify with the non-poor. We shall later explore Jesus' life, ministry, and teachings, and discuss his commitment to the poor and to such issues as social justice. But for now, we should simply note that there is no

moral principle in the specifics of Jesus' Incarnation — at least in what little we can know of his early life — that gives warrant for making an identification with poverty the norm for every good Christian, or even for attributing to it a greater virtue. It seems that the Incarnation leaves the matter of what counts as virtue in our actions of social and economic identification open to quite a variety of possibilities and considerations.

Furthermore, there is a similar point to make about the closely related issues of work and vocation. For it seems that Jesus' chosen (given that we believe in the Incarnation) place in his society as a tradesman reflects very strongly upon the goodness of physicality and physical flourishing in and through the possession of property and by means of creative and productive work. As Greek Orthodox theologian Kenneth Paul Wesche has written, "the Incarnation has to do with redeeming and divinizing the world of materiality."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the Incarnation is the literal embodiment of the truth that God affirms human existence in its bodily condition. And (remembering the theology of creation we discussed earlier) it is more than just happenstance that Jesus was immersed to an extent in human culture, its commercial system included. The radical or prophetic Gospel of today would be more convincing had Jesus been a landed peasant, never set foot in a city, refused to use Roman coinage, and roundly condemned all businesspeople as traitors to their faith. But he was not, and he did not. Through Jesus' natural involvement in his trade and business, the Incarnation gives divine approval to and redeems human economic culture from all the powers of evil that seek to claim it. Just as the person of Christ as a truly human being redeems our human essence and the essence of creation (the thesis of Wesche's article), it also 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.

This by extension redeems the notion that Christians may be actively and affirmatively involved in human cultures, even when the extent of their being fallen is considerable. Today quite a few modern Christians are replaying in a limited way the perennial quandary that H. Richard Niebuhr made famous in his book *Christ and Culture*.<sup>39</sup> In the last three decades,

38. Kenneth Paul Wesche, "The Patristic Vision of Stewardship," in *The Consuming Passion*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), p. 119.

39. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

leading this radical enquiry, Ron Sider has rightly stressed the importance of being aware of structural evil as a phenomenon distinct from evil committed directly by individuals. He has (I believe rightly) stressed that we can sometimes be held morally responsible not just for our own actions, but for the actions embodied by the cultural systems from which we benefit. He has in view the very many instances of corporate injustice for the sake of profit — the sort that proffers material benefits to people who are removed and indifferently insulated from the unjust actions themselves (as the wives of Bashan in Amos).

In our discussion of the prophets, I have already indicated that this broad concept of moral responsibility and guilt by implication, under specific conditions, is quite biblical. But in my earlier book, *Godly Materialism*, I took strong exception to the way Sider stated in a previous edition of his book the conditions for such guilt: "If one is a member of privileged class that profits from structured evil, and if one does nothing to try to change things, he or she stands guilty before God."<sup>40</sup> My main objection to this way of stating the condition was that it makes engaged involvement in modern economic culture morally impossible. For in nearly any ordinary profession or line of work there are bound to be benefits that come (directly or indirectly) from structured evil. This is especially true of modern social economies, which consist of endless networks that are connected in so many ways that we cannot possibly comprehend them all. Some of the structures to which we will be connected are bound to be morally deficient or even evil, and we may not even know (or be able to know) about them. In that instance we would "do nothing to change" the evils, and so, on Sider's condition, we would be "guilty before God." Stated thus, guilt before God would be analogous to Original Sin, for it would become part of the condition of any human being working in the social economy at any level. It seems to me that this entails an Anabaptist view of culture, and that anyone who holds it ought not to promote involvement in the systems of the world, but separation from it.<sup>41</sup>

In his most recent edition of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Sider concedes part of my objection, and he grants that one's knowledge of a given evil is indeed essential to accruing moral responsibility for it, and

40. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 122.

41. A more thorough discussion of this idea can be found in *Godly Materialism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), pp. 113-14.

thereby guilt within the context of benefiting from it. He correctly adds the qualification that people exist (Mafia wives, for example) whose not knowing is itself deliberate in a way that makes it similarly immoral. I agree with him that the women of Bashan provide a good case in view.<sup>42</sup> He writes: "Do we sin personally when we participate in an evil system? That depends on our knowledge and response."<sup>43</sup> But what about the structured evil that we both benefit from and do know about? Sider also revises this part of the condition for avoiding guilt by implication. He tempers his earlier requirement that we must "try to change" the evil, writing instead that our obligation is to do "all God wants us to do to correct the injustice."<sup>44</sup> These changes are improvements. For now, at least, people are not held responsible and guilty for failing to correct evils they do not even know about. And, unlike the original requirement, this revised one leaves open the possibility that there may be injustices connected with our vocation that we are in one way or another aware of, but that God calls us to do little or nothing directly to correct them. This sort of limited possibility is tantamount to permission to work in the networks of the world, and so affirming it solves the problem I raised in my original objection. For a satisfactory principle, however, I believe we need to hear a great deal more on how we know which structured evils God calls us to correct and which ones he does not. I believe that the notion of "moral proximity" that I introduced earlier could be of great help in making this needed distinction in our doctrine of Christian vocation. But I must leave that application for another time.

At any rate, Sider also concedes (in part) my second objection, which was that by his standards not even Jesus satisfied the condition for avoiding guilt by implication. After all, it seems that Jesus did benefit from the structures of the Herodian-Roman economy (he used the roads, for instance, and enjoyed the relative peace that it brought), many of whose institutions and policies were morally evil (imperial conquest, tyranny, enslavement, and oppressive taxation being the most obvious areas of moral turpitude). He must have known about these evils (otherwise he was an ignorant fool) and he did nothing directly to change them (nothing the zealots of his day would have acknowledged as social action, anyway). If this

42. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 115.

43. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 115.

44. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 115.



principle is applied, then it follows that in his incarnate life Jesus must have been guilty of sin. But since Jesus was not guilty of any sin (according to orthodox Christian theology), it follows that this principle is false, and that just being in the world under these conditions is not sinful. I agree that there are conditions for guilt by implication, but not these conditions.

Sider now grants that Jesus' unique mission imposed limitations on the scope of his worldly social action, for "as the Jewish Messiah, he was called to live and minister among the Jews of Palestine, not to engage in direct action either to preach the Gospel in Rome or to correct Roman injustice."<sup>45</sup> He suggests that it is not necessarily so for contemporary Christians living in democracies and so forth. But surely Sider does not mean to suggest that God called Jesus to accomplish his mission in a manner that violated universal moral standards. If God called Jesus to a special mission that included his not devoting himself to causes of explicit social and political reform, what reason is there for thinking that God would not do likewise for any Christian, or even millions of them in our day? I can think of none, and thus I see no reason to believe that God does not do so.

In any event, I believe we can all agree that Jesus' entire life, teaching, and work was the spiritual, invisible, but still cosmic overturning of principalities and powers of this world.<sup>46</sup> In this deeper sense — one that almost breaks the bounds of irony — in his death Jesus indeed did do "all that God wanted" him to do about the evil in the dominion of Caesar and the other kingdoms of this world. In that light the words of the promise he made to his disciples ought to be encouragement for Christians now. From the Incarnation and perfection of Christ we learn that one can seek God and the good even in the midst of the social economy of Herod and Rome. If that is so, we ought to think of ourselves as being free to do likewise under the regime of modern democratic techno-capitalism, which, for all its problems, is vastly higher on the moral scale than was the economic culture of Jesus. What he said to his disciples, according to John, has enduring force in our time, "take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33).

45. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 115.

46. For a good discussion of the political dimension of Christ's work, see Richard J. Mouw, *Political Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973); also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

## THE IDENTITY OF JESUS' FOLLOWERS

When Jesus entered the public stage his keynote speech came in the synagogue at Nazareth. There he read the words of Isaiah 61:1-2 and stunned the congregation by applying it to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Scholars mostly agree that Jesus envisioned his mission as a cosmic jubilee and ultimate day of release for the poor.<sup>47</sup> Later, when the followers of John the Baptist asked him anxiously if he was indeed the Messiah, he implied that all the signs were visible: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22-23).<sup>48</sup>

The statements about "the poor" in these texts raise very difficult and important questions about economic life. As far back as the second century, Celsus used this understanding of Christianity as a critique of its intellectual legitimacy. The assumption that Christianity began as a movement among the rabble and social refuse of society gained credibility in the works of Nietzsche, Marx, and Edward Gibbon. Many theologians in our day believe with them that the original "Jesus movement" arose almost exclusively among the economic poor of his society.<sup>49</sup> But recent evidence has forced scholars to reconsider whether this commonplace, influential

47. See Pilgrim, *Good News*, pp. 64-72.

48. This text is clearly a reference to Isaiah 35, in which the prophet envisions the messianic age as a time when the blind, lame, deaf, and dumb will be released from their oppressions. Notably, Isaiah does not include the poor among those special beneficiaries of the coming kingdom. In Luke, significantly, Jesus has added this group to the list. It seems to be a summary term for "all the above" rather than limited to an economic class of people. On this debate, see Pilgrim, *Good News*, p. 67.

49. Celsus despised Christianity because it made sense only to "the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children." He was convinced that Christianity had always been a movement among the lower classes, because Jesus had won his converts from the dregs of society, "tax collectors and sailors." Cited in Wayne Meeke, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 51. In more modern times, Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx have seen this phenomenon as essential to the nature of Christianity itself. Nietzsche scorned Christianity for elevating the "pariah of society" to the top of the world-order and for emasculating the truly great and powerful, dropping them to the bottom of the moral scale. The great historian Edward Gibbon blamed the anti-elitism of Christianity for the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire. In contrast, see the fine discussion by D. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Question*, pp. 182-93.

assertion is true. For it seems clear that the social origins of Christianity were much more complex than it suggests they were. In his groundbreaking work *The First Urban Christians*, for instance, historian Wayne Meeks traces the social origins of the first urban Christians to the merchant classes of artisans and tradesmen who flourished in all the main cities. It is very difficult to account for such a strong urban middle-class following so early on if Christianity did indeed begin as essentially a proletarian movement, hostile to the merchant classes. As Meeks states, the supposition that the Pauline churches arose among the poor is groundless, "no matter how congenial it may be to Marxist historians and to those bourgeois writers who tended to romanticize poverty."<sup>50</sup> Quite the contrary, Christianity spread and triumphed in the Roman Empire largely because it penetrated and transformed social systems. It is true that some Christians did live in separation from the rest of society, as we have seen, but the majority did not. Meeks shows that the early congregations in the empire "generally reflected a fair cross-section of urban society."<sup>51</sup>

In fact, Meeks writes that "there is no specific evidence of people who are destitute — such as hired menials and dependent handworkers; the poorest of the poor, peasants, agricultural slaves, and hired agricultural day laborers, are absent."<sup>52</sup> Of course, this does not mean that such were not among the ranks of the early Christians — but it does imply that we should be wary of claims that they were a majority. For our purposes, Meeks's concluding judgment is more important. It is that the typical early Christian was "a free artisan or a small trader . . . [while] the wealthy provided housing, meeting places, and other services for individual Christians and for whole groups. In effect, they filled the roles of patrons."<sup>53</sup> While these findings may not comport with longstanding ideological assumptions, they do follow very naturally from the truths that we have suggested arise from the Incarnation itself.

And while Meeks's work focuses on the Pauline Christian community, the Gospels suggest a similar pattern among Jesus' followers. When we think of them, we should think of three distinct groups.<sup>54</sup> First were the

50. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p. 51.

51. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p. 73.

52. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p. 73.

53. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p. 73.

54. On this distinction of groups, see the useful discussion in Gerd Thiessen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

disciples, who left their homes, work, and families to travel with Jesus. They included the Twelve, the Seventy, and select others including Mary Magdalene and other women. The second was a network of sympathizers who "followed" Jesus by staying where they were. Among this group were Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, who lived in Bethany. Third were the multitudes who flocked to Jesus everywhere he went. As we have suggested, this group comprised a wide range of people who were miserable for various reasons. For the most part, these were the literal economic poor but also some wealthy people — tax collectors and prostitutes — whose poverty was spiritual, moral, and social. All were outcasts.

The twelve disciples who traveled with Jesus came from an interesting variety of social and economic backgrounds. We know most about Peter, James, John, and Andrew, who were Galilean fishermen. Sider imagines them as "poor fisherfolk," but his doing so is more than a little misleading. These men were hardly poor by the standards of the time, either in social respect or in economic security. They were good Jews who were self-employed in family businesses. We cannot say exactly how prosperous they were, but, as we saw earlier, research indicates that fishing on the lake in Galilee generated some wealth and a lively commercial industry, mainly because fish was the mainstay of the people's diet there. The Gospels record that these men had their own boats, nets, and even servants. Peter's mother-in-law owned a house in Capernaum that was large enough to serve as home base for Jesus and his disciples.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps most importantly, though, all the Gospels assert that they "left everything" to follow Jesus. This could not have been the act of courage and sacrifice that it apparently was unless what they left behind was considerable enough to make it so. (More on the issue of divestment of property in the next chapter.)

The background of Levi the tax collector is somewhat more complex. His name indicates that he was Jewish, but his profession shows that he had gone to work for the Roman tax system. This would have cost him both moral and social standing among his people — they would have considered him morally poor in a rather repugnant sense. But even if he was nothing more than the third-level manager of a tollbooth, as seems likely,

55. I believe that Blomberg somewhat understates their position when he writes in *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 107, "Zebedee and his sons, John and James, were perhaps better off than many." He fails to mention the description of their equipment and Peter's family by marriage.

he was not poor in material wealth. The Gospels note that he owned a house and that leaving everything behind was a momentous event for him. We know next to nothing about Jesus' other immediate disciples, and so I am not sure why Blomberg thinks that it "is a reasonable assumption that the remaining disciples were ordinary peasants, save perhaps Judas."<sup>56</sup> He really does not indicate why he does. In view of the circumstances of the ones we do know something about, it seems equally reasonable to think that the others came from comparable economic backgrounds. That would at least presuppose a more or less constant pattern of strategy on Jesus' part. But, again, we do not know.

The second group — those who followed Jesus from afar — appears also to have been above average economically. We think of Peter's mother-in-law; of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; of wealthy men like Joseph of Arimathea and the wealthy women who "provided for [Jesus and his disciples] out of their means" (Luke 8:3). As Meeks says of later Christians, these followers expressed their faith in Jesus by providing funds, bases of operation, and moral support in their towns and communities. Again, we find no stereotype of early Christian poverty in these texts. 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.<sup>57</sup> 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 missionary Twelve and Seventy.

Finally, there were the multitudes that came to hear Jesus and to be healed by him. This group was obviously marked by the severest signs of oppression. Sick, lame, blind, and dumb, they came to him to be healed and to hear his words of wisdom and hope. But even with them we must be careful with our economic terms. For while the majority of them were financially destitute, in later chapters we shall see that not all of them were. Some of the people who came to Jesus in the crowds were financially secure and even rich. The Roman centurion who begged Jesus to heal his servant was wealthy. The chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, was very rich. The

woman (no doubt a former prostitute) who poured a whole bottle of nard on Jesus' hair had money enough. What united them was their deep spiritual poverty. Marginalized in Israelite society for countless reasons, they were the ones to whom Jesus came especially with good news.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson provides very strong support for the assertion that the terms "poor" and "rich" in Luke's Gospel are not merely literal but in the prophetic contexts mentioned above deeply metaphorical.<sup>58</sup> "The use of the terms rich and poor," he writes, "go beyond the designation of economic circumstances to express conditions of powerlessness and power."<sup>59</sup> These conditions are not as straightforward as we might expect, for among the poor we find tax collectors and others who were often quite rich in material things. Thus Johnson judges that the "expressions rich and poor function within the story as metaphorical expressions for those rejected and accepted because of their responses to the prophet."<sup>60</sup>

As we will see in detail in the next chapter, Johnson and other scholars believe that Luke's narrative makes use of a literary typology that presents Jesus as a consummate prophet; thus his teachings on wealth distill the principles of prophetic tradition. This interpretation illumines the otherwise murky question of how Jesus could condemn the rich as a class on the one hand and bless the poor on the other, while at the same time affirm certain people who were rich. If Johnson is correct, these terms do not always describe economic circumstances; rather, they indicate positions in relation to God's word and to the corrupt values of the ruling powers of the world: the "poor" are those who need and are receptive to Jesus' message; the "rich" are those who reject it in favor of what the world has to offer (though they need it just as badly). Our discussion of the research on the social identity of Jesus and his disciples indirectly supports this more complex understanding of Luke's semantics and his prophetic narrative themes.

Thus neither the original circumstances of Jesus' life nor the thrust of his initial mission shows a peculiar identification with the economic poor, at least not of the sort that is commonly meant today. If anything, there is

56. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 107.

57. Hengel, *Property and Riches*, p. 27.

58. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977), pp. 132-44.

59. Johnson, *Possessions in Luke-Acts*, p. 140.

60. Johnson, *Possessions in Luke-Acts*, p. 140.

an unromantic and not very spectacular identification with the ordinary, the uncomplicated, the hardworking, the productive, the humble, and the meek. But there is also a predilection for the unpredictable and the extraordinary. The tax collectors, centurions, and whores were rich in goods but abysmally poor in social standing and in moral fiber, and they too were the recipients of the good news. And there is finally that moment of truth in liberation theology — we have seen it throughout the Old Testament, and now we see it in the face of Jesus. It is the eye of the king of this universe upon the innocent ones who suffer most in his world. Their poverty does not ensure their righteousness, but his righteousness ensures that justice will be done for them.

Perhaps it is possible to think of Jesus' life and economic identity thus: he led relatively privileged people into new lives of economic redemption and redemptiveness. As he pulled them out of their safe worlds of social and economic stability, he placed them in contact with the very soul of the suffering world — the poor in economic, social, and spiritual senses. By bringing them together, the rich (in all relevant senses) and the poor (likewise in all relevant senses), he created a new community that was electrified by grace and liberation for everyone in different ways. In a strange way the rich became poor and the poor became rich. At bottom, this was the expression of poverty or lowering of spirit by one group in order to free and empower the spirits of the other one. And the economic expression of this was not some form of leveling or egalitarianism but something very like the order of the exodus people of Israel under the laws of Moses. The rich did not so much enter into economic poverty for the sake of the poor as they did into a new life of economic dynamism, of power born of renewed compassion, and they went on a way that they could never have imagined before Jesus called them to follow him.

## *The Radical Jesus as the Lord of Delight*

*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*

MATTHEW 8:20

*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"*

MATTHEW 11:19

### TWO IDENTITIES OF CHRIST

Jesus left his family, home, and work to begin his fateful public mission at about the age of thirty. Early on, he called twelve men and a larger mixed group of others to follow him as disciples. They ate, drank, slept, learned, and worked together in a common life until Jesus' death by crucifixion.

We have explored the basic social and economic origins of Jesus and his followers, and we have seen that they came from a broad range of backgrounds. This supports the interpretation that the poor to whom he brought the blessed good news were not always from the poverty-stricken classes. In fact, some of them had a great deal of money, such as the chief tax collector Zacchaeus. As we mentioned briefly in the last chapter, the