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."[45] 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.[46] 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.[47] 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).[48]

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.[49] 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 Meeks, *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."[50] 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."[51]

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."[52] 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."[53] 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.[54] 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.[55] 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."[56] 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.[57] 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

56. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 107.
57. Hengel, *Property and Riches*, p. 27.

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.[58] "The use of the terms rich and poor," he writes, "go beyond the designation of economic circumstances to express conditions of powerlessness and power."[59] 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."[60]

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

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.

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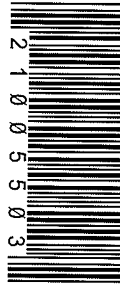

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