

The Social Outcast in Luke's Gospel

A stable . . . Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus . . . some barnyard animals . . . three persons in royal dress. All these are included in the Nativity scene that graces my family's home every Christmas season. The story that this traditional scene presents is so familiar to us that we sometimes fail to notice the irony of it.

Luke's description of Jesus' birth (2:1-20) provides the basis for our traditional Nativity scenes. But have you ever noticed that Luke tells us nothing about the three kings or wise men? Given the humble surroundings of Jesus' birth, these royal characters seem out of place. And if we read the entire Gospel of Luke, we find that the account of Jesus' humble birth is consistent with what we find described elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke. For the focus is on those who were least expected to be recipients of God's salvation: the powerless, the poor, the sinners, and the outcasts.

Comparing Luke and Matthew

When we compare Luke's Gospel to Matthew's Gospel, we see that the two accounts of Jesus' birth are different. In Matthew's Gospel the attention is placed on Joseph (1:18-25) and later on the magi who were looking for "the one who has been born king of the Jews" (2:2). When the magi found Jesus, He was a child living in a house in Bethlehem (2:11). There, they gave Him gifts appropriate for a king (2:11). However, in Luke's Gospel, the attention is on Mary (chap. 1) and it was the shepherds who received word of what had happened (2:8-14). Given both the role of women and the unflattering reputation of shepherds, the focus upon them would have surprised the reader of that day. There is a clear difference in emphasis between magi and shepherds greeting the Christ child!

One example of this special emphasis placed on the powerless and the social outcast in Luke's Gospel is found in contrasting Matthew's and Luke's version of the Beatitudes. In Matthew's Gospel we read, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3). However, in Luke's account we read, "Blessed are you who are poor" (6:20). Jesus' message of salvation in Luke is especially focused upon those who were economically and socially poor—those whom society typically considered to be outside the realm of God's saving work.

Inclusion of the Excluded

In the first century, the wealthy were typically regarded as recipients of divine blessing. One exception was the tax collector, who amassed wealth by collecting taxes for the Romans, the oppressive rulers of the Jewish people. Those with physical defects or illnesses were considered unclean. They were officially excluded from religious practices and social contact. The religious establishment characterized some people as "sinners" who were also considered unclean, "untouchable." In other words, those who were social outcasts were commonly perceived as being excluded from God's favor.

The Gospel of Luke goes against such a perception. Throughout Luke, Jesus *included* those whom society *excluded*. Luke begins Jesus' ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2. This quote states that Jesus' ministry would include the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). And Jesus did. He called a self-identified sinner to be His disciple (5:1-11). He touched

His society's untouchable people, including a leper and a paralytic (vv. 12-26). His association with hated tax collectors and despised sinners drew harsh criticism from others (vv. 27-39; 15:2). He offered salvation to those whom society numbered among the ones least likely to receive it: a sinful woman (7:36-50), Zaccheus the hated tax collector (19:1-10), even a criminal dying next to Him on a cross (23:40-43).

Jesus offered salvation to those who were outside the accepted religious and social categories of His day. His acts of inclusion and proclamation of the gospel were like the new wine in the parable of the wineskins—wine that would burst old wineskins of entrenched religious norms (5:37-38).

The Great Reversal

Luke's Gospel affirms a number of things that 1st-century readers would also have affirmed: generosity, kindness, and hospitality to all people among others. While Jesus in Luke's Gospel offered a new understanding of God's salvation, one would misunderstand this Gospel to mean that *all* social values and religious beliefs were rejected. The world of the 1st century, like the world of the 21st century, based its security on certain things: human commodities, social status, family and ethnic ties, power, and human accomplishment. What Jesus challenged was the human tendency to find ultimate security in such things.

Jesus' proclamation of salvation serves as a great reversal to such materialistic values and beliefs. His message was good news because it affirmed that humanity's genuine security comes only from God and not from human conditions or standards. Thus, wealth, power, and social position were not specifically rejected since human reliance on such things, not the things themselves, was the problem.

It needs to be pointed out that often the human condition was not reversed in Luke's Gospel. The economically poor did not become wealthy. The socially powerless did not become politically powerful. However, Jesus presents salvation in ways that transcend these human categories and distinctions. By emphasizing the inclusion of the socially excluded, Jesus reverses the tendency to exclude those who don't measure up to society's norm. Thus, the Gospel offers a fresh picture of God's grace, a grace that reaches out to all people.

Remove the Magi?

I have sometimes tried (without success) to remove the magi from my family's Nativity scene. My contention is that such characters do not seem to fit Luke's emphasis on the redemption of social outcasts. But Luke's emphasis on the poor and outcast does not imply that the wealthy or powerful are to be excluded from the people of God. Rather, Luke helps us shatter the prevalent social and religious categories on which people often rely for salvation. And that is what makes this message "good news" to all people—even to the magi.

BY RICHARD THOMPSON

professor of Greek and New Testament Studies, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Spring Arbor University, Spring Arbor, Michigan

ACTION GOAL FOR UNIT 2

Expressing the Compassion of Christ

January 28—February 25, 2007

Hunger Has Become an Epidemic

It is estimated that 1 billion people in the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition. Every day, 109,000 die from hunger and hunger-related causes. That means that the total of hunger-related deaths each year is 40 million. That figure is equivalent to more than 300 jumbo jet crashes a day for a year with no survivors, and with almost half of the passengers being children.

This tragedy is not limited to the third world. In America, hunger is a problem of epidemic proportions. While no one knows the precise number of hungry Americans, the best available evidence indicates that up to 35 million people—including 13 million children—are now suffering from hungry or malnutrition. Overall, 11.1 percent of households in the United States experience hunger.

The Skinny on Hunger

In the Northern Hemisphere, malnutrition takes the form of overconsumption of sugars, fats, and animal products, which results in obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. While one person in five is undernourished in developing countries, one in five is overweight or obese in the major industrialized countries. During his or her lifetime, the average person in the industrialized world will consume 20 to 40 times as much as a person in the developing world.

Certainly the problem of world hunger is not a simple matter. Neither is it so complicated that we should stand idly by and do nothing.

The Compassion of Christ

All of the Gospels tell of Christ's concern for the phys-

ical well-being of people. Day after day, He spent His time healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for those who were marginalized and poor. He trained His disciples and sent them out to minister to people's physical and spiritual needs. The Gospel writers were very specific in telling that it was Jesus' general custom to care for those with physical needs before He preached to them.

There are several times in the Gospels when we are told that Jesus looked on the people with compassion. It is telling that on each of those occasions, we are also told what compassion led Him to do: "He began teaching them" (Mark 6:34); He "reached out His hand and touched the man" and the leprosy was gone (1:41); He "healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14); He fed them (15:32); and He "touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight" (20:34).

What Would Jesus Do Now?

The time has come for 21st-century Christians to ask what Jesus would do about this epidemic and the 109,000 people who are dying of hunger every day. It's a no-brainer—He would feed them!

The Real Question: What Will We Do?

All who bear His name are called to reflect His compassion. During the 29 days of this unit of study, *A Mission on Earth*, each participant is challenged to pray daily about the plight of the hungry:

Lord, what would You have me do to help stop the epidemic of hunger?

Your assignment during the next 29 days is to do whatever He tells you to do.

Our Mission

1. We recognize the mutually supportive roles of the adult Sunday School, namely nurture, fellowship, and outreach.
Nurture: The personal and spiritual growth of the individual through ongoing encounters with God's Word within a community of believers.
Fellowship: Building caring and supportive relationships between adults.
Outreach: Reaching beyond the group-setting to others outside through evangelism, service, and personal application of session truths.
2. WordAction curriculum is committed to a twofold emphasis of both content learning (Word) and life change based on that encounter with the Word (Action).
3. WordAction curriculum is distinctly Wesleyan-Holiness in theological perspective in selection of scripture themes and presentation.
4. We seek to provide the tools and confidence for adults to read, understand, and live by God's Word.
5. This curriculum explores the Bible in its variety of scope, literature, and themes.
6. The Bible is lifted up as the fundamental, legitimate, and practical authority and guide for living today.
7. We desire to allow the powerful Word of God to speak for itself as adults discover its message, understanding its proper context and application.
8. These materials show that the Bible tells a unified and comprehensive story of God's gracious interaction with people throughout history.
9. Encouragement is given to provide an environment where emphasis is placed on discovering God's Word within a community of believers in contrast to an individual-only course of study.
10. Knowing that adults learn through a variety of learning styles, this curriculum encourages a variety of presentation methodologies.
11. We desire to assist the adult leader in personal spiritual growth and excellence in facilitating group growth.
12. The importance of daily individual study of God's Word through Scripture memorization and reading is emphasized each week.