

# Aspects of the Effects of Wealth on the Church's Mission

Delivered at the  
Conference on the Inequitable Distribution  
Of Wealth and Power:  
Problems and Principles

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## *Foreword*

In 1975, Classis or District Lake Erie of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) submitted a proposal to the Synod of the denomination to study the problems of the global inequitable distribution of wealth and power. They gave the following grounds for their proposal:

1. The extreme inequities in the distribution of wealth and power... demand attention and corrective action....
2. The teachings of the Bible on this subject have not been adequately related to the Christian's duty in the present world.
3. The complexity of the problem and the intense pressures and powerful influences which militate against its honest and open consideration, calls for carefully study and courageous thinking by Christian experts with a forceful mandate from the Church and highly sensitive Christian consciences.<sup>1</sup>

Though Synod did not accept the proposal, it encouraged Classis (District) Lake Erie to convene a conference on this issue. That's how this conference came to be. They invited known experts in the fields of economics, justice, ethics, church and mission. I was proud to be counted amongst them. It was during the 1970s, the time I was working on my dissertation.<sup>2</sup>

Although almost 45 years have elapsed since that conference was held, I include this paper because the issues have not changed all that much. Most churches and their members still major in charity versus justice. Where they do work on justice issues, it is usually at the local micro level, while the macro seems too gigantic to tackle. Besides, they invest in these macro structures of the corporations. Thus their thinking is subtly

<sup>1</sup> See Agenda for the 1975 CRC Synod, pp. 107-108.

<sup>2</sup> For some more details, see Jan H. Boer & Frances A. Boer-Prins, *Every Square Inch—A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 2, pp. 134, 156. E-book from [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) where it is available free of charge, 2014.

guided by vested interests and pocket book enough so as not to tackle that front too seriously.

This edition is a slightly edited and updated version. You will find that a couple of times I have imported information that was published after the date of the conference, particularly my own published writings.

You are invited to enjoy the read, but, even more, to be disturbed by it enough to start taking action.

### *The Lecture*

This paper is presented by a foreign missionary and it is in that capacity that I make my contribution. The general topic assigned to me is too comprehensive for the few pages allotted. I have thus taken the liberty to highlight only a few aspects of the problem in the hope that others will touch upon different ones. Even those aspects treated are so only summarily and without sufficient documentation.

Though at the time of writing I had not been informed as to the identity of other contributors to this conference, in view of the circumstances that have given rise to this event, I feel free to make three assumptions without which this paper would have to be expanded into a tome.

- (1) The main contributors have been chosen not only because they have some expertise in their respective areas, but also because they agree that the present world order needs political and economic revision, if not revolution, in the name of Christ.
- (2) Some contributors will clearly demonstrate that western wealth has been obtained not merely by a combination of hard work and divine blessing, as popular myth has it. There have been and continue to be structures of gross exploitation in our western society, including the Christian community, of other classes, nations and races.
- (3) Other contributors will provide the conference with the necessary technical data for us to end up with realistic Christian proposals for change. By “realistic” I do not mean such as must be framed within the terms of the present economic order, but such that take full consideration of all the hard facts of life.

Wealth tends to stupefy a people, to make them insensitive. When an entire class becomes wealthy, it gradually drifts away from life’s primary bread-and-butter concerns; secondary or even tertiary matters begin to take priority. In a prolonged situation where a succeeding generation inherits such wealth and cannot even remember an earlier period

of primary concerns, matters such as cottages, extensive vacations, an array of household and hobby gadgets, etc., become necessary items. We have then arrived at what I like to call the “frivolous society,” where every fashion and idea has its day, including those of revolution and reformation—usually a maximum of two years.

Scripture never condemns wealth, but it is quite clear that wealth is recognized as a great danger to a person’s spiritual health. Numerous passages constitute strong warnings to the rich because they have fallen into the power trap and exploit the poor. The strange fact is that during the last century the western Christian community has been peculiarly deaf to that warning, but has, instead, tended to assume that poverty must somehow be the result of laziness and immorality. If anything, this assumption is the reverse of the overall biblical picture.

Industrial and commercial developments, from the 1800’s on, provide a clear example of the insensitivity of Christians to poverty, suffering and their causes. These developments, while creating riches for the middle classes, including the vast majority of church attenders, produced slums and all the evils associated with them. Alcoholism began to take on alarming proportions, but the churches, instead of seeking the root of such development, engaged in temperance crusades. The social life of the slums was interpreted, again, as evidence of the inferior morality of their inhabitants.

There were Christian social critics, prophets, who attacked not the phenomena but the very structures that brought them about. They were found in most western countries, scattered throughout the denominations. Though these denominations engaged in fierce doctrinal harangues and tried to solve social problems by charity that did nothing to the basic problems, they were in implicit agreement with each other with respect to the prevalent economic theories and practices of the age, laissez-faire in economics, and liberal in politics. Their prophets, on the other hand, largely ignored these doctrinal disputes and attacked the industrial and commercial structures and theories of the day in the name of Christ. Though prolific writers some of them, they had little effect. Even Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* was in effect nullified in 1910 by Pius X.

Whenever the churches did respond to these early prophets, it was usually in the terms that led Marx to declare religion opium. However, the origin of this charge was not Marx but the liberal Anglican clergyman, Charles Kingsley, who said, “We have used the Bible as if it were a mere special constable’s handbook, an opium dose for keeping beasts of burden patient while they are being overloaded.”<sup>3</sup> Regardless of these prophets and the doctrinal differences, the churches tended in unison to uphold all the classic capitalistic tenets. They insensitively rationalized the social problems away so that they could with clear conscience continue their comfortable style of living, while stoutly defending an individualistic morality.

This same Christian community cooperated energetically in the western expansion throughout the world and helped create another working class consisting largely of

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<sup>3</sup> E. R. Norman, *Church & Society in England 1770-1970: A Historical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, pp. 3-4. J. Boer, 1979, p. 37.

southerners.<sup>4</sup> I refer to colonialism and its offspring neo-colonialism. Though today Christians try to disassociate themselves from these movements, until World War I churches were enthusiastically supporting them, especially missionaries. Missions and other Christians continued to closely associate with these regimes until their very end. Monuments of mission participation and pioneering in this regard are numerous.<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean that missionaries were in favor of exploitation in the negative sense of the word. Missionaries often found themselves in the midst of hostile crosscurrents of events that forced them to choose, for example, between helping the British gain control or letting a tribe or nation in the hands of Arab slavers. Sometimes the choice was between supporting one European colonizer or another, but a choice could not be avoided. In such cases patriotism was frequently the determinative factor.

But even where they were not forced to make such choices, missionaries usually welcomed the colonial powers in the belief that they represented liberating forces. Current popular missiological terms such as “liberation” and “justice” were equally popular, from the 1850’s on, in mission circles. They west was believed to be introducing peace, liberty and justice by means of its political and economic intrusion in southern cultures. The non-official but practical definition of colonialism of the Sudan United Mission, with which the Christian Reformed church effort in Nigeria remains closely associated, was that

colonialism is a form of imperialism based on a divine mandate and designed to bring liberation—spiritual, cultural, economic and political—by sharing the blessings of the Christ-inspired civilization of the West with a people suffering under the satanic forces of oppression, ignorance, and disease, effected by a combination of political, economic and religious forces cooperating under a regime seeking the benefit of both peoples involved.<sup>6</sup>

Western economics were expected to introduce something close to the Kingdom of God. A speaker at the annual meeting of the SUM said, “The natives of the Sudan have come under our rule, so that we, in turn, might bring them under the rule of the Kingdom of God. So shall ‘the Kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.’”<sup>7</sup> These notions were entertained by the entire evangelical community throughout most of the first quarter of the present century.

In view of the frame of reference of the sending community on the home front, such missionary expectations ought not to surprise one. Missionary contact with southern

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper the term “south” and its derivatives are used to refer to the so-called Third World and its peoples.

<sup>5</sup> J.S. Dennis, *Christian Missions and Social Progress*, esp. Vol. III Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1899. World Missionary Conference, 1910. Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Terrier, n.d. *The Lightbearer*, the official publication of the Sudan United Mission, the earlier volumes from 1904 until about World War I.

<sup>6</sup> J.H. Boer, *The Gospel of Liberation in a Colonial Context: a Partial and Introductory Case Study of the Sudan United Mission (1904-1918)*. An unpublished *doctorandus* thesis written for the Free University, Amsterdam, 1974, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> *The Lightbearer*, Aug./Sept., 1910, p. 163.

cultures confirmed the smugness of the Christian community in the west. They found Africa in a terrible state of disarray, one of the main causes of which was almost certainly the effect of European and Arab slave trading.<sup>8</sup> Contact with Animism and Islam in Africa also served to confirm missionary affirmation of western society. As members of a comparatively affluent class at home that had already developed serious blindness with respect to the true state of affairs in their own society, it did not take much for them to come to the conclusion of a divine mandate in the south not only for Christians, but for the entire west. And so we hear Livingstone openly pioneering the way for “legitimate commerce” of the west (i.e., capitalistic commerce in the classic sense) to rehabilitate Africa. If missionaries did not recognize the inherent non-Christian trends in the situation at home, one could hardly expect them to recognize them in the colonial situation, for the latter was a mere extension of the home front. When they did recognize problems in western conduct abroad, as in the case of the liquor trade in West Africa and forced labour in East Africa, they would ascribe these as abnormalities not inherent in the system.

In the meantime, African voices arose in protest, first against certain aspects of colonialism, then against colonialism itself.<sup>9</sup> At the very time missionaries were supporting colonialism in terms of peace and justice in Africa, West African nationalists were using the same terms to mean the very opposite—and both parties were basically Christian! Missionary publications paid scant attention to these expressions in much the same fashion as the home front tended to ignore the prophets. When they did discuss this emerging nationalism, they treated it like the home front treated the emerging labour movements: with deep distrust and suspicion. Already at the turn of our century southerners began frequently to quote the *locus classicus* of the theology of liberation, Luke 4:18-19, but missionaries as true members of their class could not fathom the significance of the passage in this context.

Today we reap the harvest of such class blindness. The liberty and justice of western design so earnestly advocated by missions have turned out to be instruments of new forms of oppression. Though colonialism has had its positive spinoffs, the basic goals were hardly in conformity with the Christian message.<sup>10</sup> The record of colonial oppression is not to be denied. The undercutting of local trades and industries in favour of western imports was openly supported by missions not understanding the deepest motivations of their own countrymen. Developments took place only where the west needed to penetrate for its own economic ends. Monocultures were established and left as

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<sup>8</sup> I do not wish to enter the controversy as to whether this slave trade is the *exclusive* cause of African disarray at the time. The discussion is beclouded by much subjective nationalist emotion.

<sup>9</sup> Ayandele, E. A. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: a Political and Social Analysis*. (Ibadan History Series. Ed. K.O. Dike.) London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1966. Also Coleman, J.S. *Nigeria Background to Nationalism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963. Also Mobkey, H.W. *The Ghanian's Image of the Missionary: An Analysis of the Published Critiques of Christian Missionaries by Ghanians, 1897-1965*. (Studies on Religion; Supplement to the *Journal of Religion in Africa*.) Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. John E. Flint's *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria*. (West African History Series. Ed. G.S. Graham.) London: Oxford Press, 1960. This study represents an in-depth expose of the Royal Niger Co. with which the S.U.M. had close relations. See also my subsequent dissertation, John H. Boer, 1979, throughout.

such. Africa, more than ever, was frozen into units that were not free to relate to each other, but mainly to the colonizing country. Kumm, the founder of the S.U.M. and holder of a Ph.D. in political economy, wrote, "If, instead of the thin, cheap cotton material, heavy and durable cotton could be introduced into the country, most of the hands that are now employed in spinning, weaving and dyeing native cloth would be set free for the cultivation of raw cotton."<sup>11</sup>

Till this day missionaries tend to be surprised and annoyed at the readiness of southerners to associate Christian missions with forces of oppression.<sup>12</sup> In view of our record and regardless of our intentions, we should be surprised if they were not so ready. Personally, I am amazed that so many governments remain hospitable to missions. We are the heirs of an era of colonialism, of its alleged beneficial aspects (for us westerners) as well as its unpleasant aspects. To the extent that we continue to enjoy the fruits of colonialism and neocolonialism (our wealth), to that extent we will continue to bear also the unpleasantness of the charge of oppression and collusion. Recent *Banner* articles denying any such sinister intentions<sup>13</sup> cannot do away with the facts of rather recent history.

Another rather amazing facet of this entire history is that missions constantly and seriously have denied any involvement or interest in politics! This assertion, repeated time and again, is, of course, utterly false, even though it was not intended as deception. These missions actually thought of themselves thus, regardless of their very deep involvement. This is another result of their political and economic innocence, an innocence that does them and their churches no credit.

I wish to briefly point out yet another result of the blindness missions have suffered on account of the stupefying effect of wealth. Missions have contributed to the materialism of the Christian communities in many countries. Having grown accustomed to a high standard of living at home—high, that is, in terms of finance—they tend to live at a standard quite beyond the reach of local folk. True, for a missionary family it is indeed almost impossible to live along local patterns, for these patterns presuppose not only certain economic and climatic conditions, but also a psychological frame of mind the missionary, try as he will, does not share. However, that is not saying that missionaries should feel free to live as ostentatiously and with as many modern gadgets as they can somehow manage to organize.

Missionaries may object that they have already sacrificed much, but the local only believes what he sees and that is something far removed from the Scriptural warning against love of possessions. The message that comes across is that collecting many materials and living as comfortably as possible is quite in tune with the Gospel. The

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<sup>11</sup> (*The Sudan: a Short Compendium of Facts and Figures About the Land of Darkness*. London: Marshall Brothers Ltd., 1907, p. 171.) Again, this is a typical statement of the period.

<sup>12</sup> I have on file several newspaper articles relating missions to western exploitation activities in the south. The most recent ones relate to the Government of Nigeria decision to oust Wycliffe Bible Translators from the country for their alleged relations with the American C.I.A. At the time of writing, it appears that the decision is being re-considered.

<sup>13</sup>Eg. Eugene Rubingh, "Missions & Imperialism" (Feb. 27, 1976) and Roger S. Greenway, "Our Missionaries are Not Spies" (April 2, 1976).

missionary is hardly in a position to warn against the encroaching materialism in his local area in view of his own collection of goods. I remember eating breakfast with a colleague, surrounded by as many modern conveniences as he had been able to arrange within his locality—and they were considerable. Watching people, mostly walking or biking on their way to the market, he observed, “My, these people are so terribly materialistic!” I was too dumbfounded to reply. I have since come to the conclusion that we can easily afford our brand of “spirituality” because of our wealth.

The above remarks are not all one can say about missions and wealth. Western wealth has made missions possible with all their educational and medical facilities in places where none would have been available for decades to come. Churches have been formed that are increasingly free to pursue their own course of action. I should not wish anyone to draw the conclusion from the above discussion that missions have been total failures. Far from that. If one can speak of failure, it is a failure on the part of the sending churches, not of the missionaries. It is a partial failure, but a failure at a very crucial point that will continue to bedevil the church’s mission for a long time to come.

Paradoxically, the greatest blessing of our wealth is that, once having come to new understanding of the social message of the Gospel and a renewed appreciation of certain aspects of the Reformed tradition,<sup>14</sup> we are among those in a position to bring about the necessary changes. This will call for costly discipleship and for prophetic courage and vision. We, the Christian church in the west, *can* bring about changes if we *seriously* wish, for we have much wealth and that means political clout.

One final warning is in order. We have seen the long-range effects of the church having fallen victim to the spirit of the age. In seeking solutions to our present difficulties, we must not fall into the same trap by simply joining the bandwagon of various current social philosophies, whether they be socialist or capitalist or any other. This danger can only be avoided by much prayer, Bible study, continued self-criticism and, not to be deprecated, deep understanding of economics and politics.

## A PROPOSAL

The Christian Reformed Church has not behaved differently from other churches in these matters. And even though the denomination has stressed that the Bible is to guide us in all our endeavours, that we may not restrict its application to one or two realms of life, it is quite clear that, regardless of her doctrines, the church has similarly fallen into worship of the economic idols of the day. One has only to observe the lifestyle of the membership and of the denomination herself; both have done exceedingly well in the system. In order to make her regain a prophetic stance I propose that a suggestion be channeled to Synod for the establishment of a standing committee to deal with the matter at hand.

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<sup>14</sup> The “Joint Committee CRC/RCA for Study of Theology of Evangelism” advocates a renewed emphasis on the Biblical and historic Reformed doctrine of the Kingdom of God as providing us with an important key to renewal of our efforts. (*1975 Acts of Synod*, Report 41, pp. 434-438). A close study of this report reveals a potentially close relationship between the concerns of that committee and this conference, one that might well be explored further.

- 1) Inviting qualified southern Christians into our pulpits and classrooms at all levels and to have them write in our magazines.
- 2) Evaluating the work of individual Christians and of Christian groups concerned with the same issues in our magazines.
- 3) Organizing conferences in various classes to bring these concerns closer to the churches.
- 4) Presenting annual reports to synod, including proposals for specific actions.

This committee ought to include a broad spectrum of people, both academics and others: economists and businessmen, politicians and political scientists, members of the labour community, and theologians.

Possibly one of the first things that should be studied is that of denominational investments in our present economic order to discover to what extent we are as a denomination supporting and deriving benefit from corporations engaging in doubtful practices.

The goal of all these activities would be to change the denomination from that of a typical, comfortable, middle-class church to that of a prophetic body known for its Kingdom interests above all. *Only* then will Christian Reformed missionaries be in a position to assert themselves as agents of none but Christ and His Kingdom.