

Preaching Stewardship: The Early Church and Ours

Justo L. Gonzalez

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

It is now more than thirty years since I began studying the history of Christian theology; yet, it has only been in the last few that I have paid any attention to a subject that now fascinates me, namely, what early Christians had to say about issues of faith and wealth. Led by a number of developments in contemporary theology and church life, I decided to ask new questions of ancient texts that I had read repeatedly. Earlier, I had been taught to ask questions such as, what does this text say about the Trinity? what does it say about communion? or, what does it say about the doctrine of the church? Now, I have reread those texts — and have read a number of other texts for the first time — asking a different set of questions: What does this text say about the origin and the proper use of wealth? What does it say about the reasons why some are poor and others rich? What does it say about property rights? About the use of the land?

What I have found has fascinated me, in part because it raises some very interesting contrasts and questions regarding our preaching and teaching on such issues today. In this article, I would like to summarize some of those findings which may be most helpful (or most disturbing) to preachers today. There are, however, a couple of remarks that are addressed to my readers, not primarily as preachers, but as historians and theologians.

As a historian, I am astounded by the number of passages in early Christian literature referring to these issues. In the first four centuries of the Christian church, there are literally thousands of passages on money, on property, and on the responsibilities of those who have them. There is hardly an early Christian writer who does not deal with such issues.

What is intriguing about this, however, is not the number of passages dealing with faith and wealth, but the scant attention that such passages have received in later centuries — and certainly among North Atlantic Protestant scholars. Why is it that we have been so interested in discovering what Ambrose had to say about creation, or about baptism, but not in what he had to say about money and about property?

Also as a historian, I am surprised by the emphasis in the early church on the commonality of property. Such an assertion needs to be refined, for what was meant by such commonality is different from much that is meant today by the same phrase. But even so, the notion of the commonality of property persisted as an ideal, and often as a practice, for much longer than we usually imagine. Even words that we today use in a different sense, such as *koinonia* — and especially the verb, *koinonéin* — have meanings and overtones relating to such commonality. Much could be said about this. But in the limited space

available here it should suffice to indicate that, when two people are *koinonói*, this does not mean that they have "fellowship" with each other, but rather that they are partners in a business venture, or that they own something in common. And *koinonéin* does not mean to have nice feelings towards each other, but to share with each other — which is also true of the Latin counterpart, *communicare*. In any case, what I find surprising is not all of this, but rather that, in spite of so much talk about *koinonía* — and perhaps because of it — , we have somehow managed to take out the teeth of what was a very radical understanding of the Christian community and of stewardship within it.

As a theologian, what I find most significant is the central role that issues of faith and wealth play in the theology of most early Christian writers. Many of us have been formed in an academic tradition in which there is a separate field of "social ethics," whose principles of action are largely drawn as corollaries from theology and doctrine. From this perspective, issues of wealth are an appendix to issues of faith. First we must clarify the faith, and then we discuss matters of wealth.

That is not what I find in most Christian writers of the first four centuries. On the contrary, to them issues of wealth are integral to issues of faith, to the point that a test of orthodoxy is how one deals with the widow, the orphan, and the poor. If one were to take as an example Ambrose's doctrine of creation, to which I have referred above, one would soon see that this doctrine is also an understanding of property rights and their limits.

The obvious question to theologians and Christian ethicists is, why have we been so inclined to sever questions of doctrine from matters of wealth? What interests have we been serving in so doing? What shape would our theology take if we were once again to place matters of wealth, its origin and use, at the very core of Christian dogmatics?

This, however, is a *Journal for Preachers*, and it is as a preacher that I list some of the reflections that this research has prompted in me.

As I read what those preachers of the first four centuries said from the pulpit, I am astounded at the harshness and the clarity of their preaching on such matters. These are a few of hundreds of texts that could be quoted:

Preaching in Rome, about the middle of the second century, Hermas spoke of a vision in which he saw the building of a great tower, the church. Among the stones that are brought to the construction are some that, although they look nice and white, do not fit the building because they are round. They are set aside, and Hermas asks his guide what these stones represent. The answer is that "These are those who have faith indeed, but they also have the riches of the world." Hermas then asks, "when will they be useful to the building?" And the answer is harsh:

When the riches that now seduce them have been circumscribed, then they will be of use to God. For as a round stone cannot become square unless portions be cut off and cast away, so also those who are rich cannot be useful to the Lord unless their riches be cut down.¹

Two centuries later, now in Milan, Ambrose spoke to a congregation which

included many of the rich in his city:

You strip people naked and dress up your walls. The naked poor cries before your door, and you do not even look at him. It is a naked human being that begs you, and you are considering what marbles to use for paving. . . . There is a human being seeking bread, and your horses chew gold in their bits. You rejoice in your precious adornments, while others have nothing to eat. A harsh judgement awaits you, oh rich!²

And, a few decades later, in another rich city halfway across the Roman Empire, John Chrysostom preached:

Tell me, then, whence thou art rich? . . . The root and origin of it must have been injustice. Why? Because God in the beginning made not one man rich, and another poor. Nor did he afterward take and show to one treasures of gold, and deny to the other the right of searching for it; but he left the earth free to all alike. Why, then, if it is common, have you so many acres of land, while your neighbor has not a portion of it?³

As long as you will not cease devouring and destroying the poor, I shall not cease accusing you of it . . . Leave my sheep alone. Let my flock be. Do not destroy it; and if you do, do not complain that I accuse you.⁴

I am not against the rich, but for them. Even though you may not think so, in speaking as I do I speak in your favor. How so? Because I free you from sin, I free you from a life of plunder, I make you a friend of all, and loved by all.⁵

This is a far cry from our modern “stewardship sermons,” whose typical outline begins with a first point, “all that you have, God has given to you.” What I have found these preachers doing, again and again, is precisely questioning whether all that we have is indeed God’s gift to us, or whether some of it is pure and simply the result of our greed and the unjust order in which we live and which as sinners we have created.

Then, there is another point at which early Christian preaching differs from much of our contemporary preaching on stewardship. There is hardly ever a mention of giving to the church per se. That is taken for granted. What these early Christian preachers stress is giving to the poor. Some even bewail the fact that, because so many people have given to the church, they now have to spend so much time managing those gifts. Instead of giving such endowments to the church, they say, give to the poor. Augustine did refuse endowments offered to the church, which would have entangled it in much administration, and suggested that the donor give the money to the poor instead. Ambrose sold the golden vases of the church in order to help the needy, and when criticized by some he responded:

He Who sent the apostles without gold also brought together the churches without gold. The church has gold, not to store up, but to lay out, and to spend on those in need.⁶

Basil did indeed receive the gifts intended for the poor, but then he

founded, just outside the city of Caesarea, an entire "city of the poor," in which he invested all that he received to that end, and where the poor were given shelter, clothes, food, and work. Augustine spoke of the tithe as a Christian's minimum obligation; but he was speaking of an obligation to the poor, rather than to the church.

All of this leads to a further reflection: Why were these early Christian preachers ready and able to preach in such a way? Clearly, the first requisite for such preaching is conviction. We must not think that such preaching was easy or did not involve a cost. It was precisely because of his preaching on matters such as this that Chrysostom died in exile. And for the same reasons Basil, Ambrose, and others clashed with bureaucrats, landowners, and emperors.

This conviction included a genuine pastoral concern for the rich in their congregations. Chrysostom's words to that effect were no mere rhetorical device. He was indeed convinced that, were he not to speak the truth to those among his flock who were rich, and show them the radical demands of the gospel, he would be leading them towards damnation. Furthermore, some who had the harshest words against the greed of the rich had themselves come from the richer classes: Ambrose, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa. They were not thundering against "the rich" in general. Many of "the rich" were their relatives and friends with whom they had grown up. It was out of concern for them that Basil said that those who withhold food from the hungry, or clothing from the naked, are nothing but "thieves." And for the same reason his brother Gregory of Nyssa bewails the fate of households whose wealth could relieve the misery of many, without themselves suffering from it.

Then, such preaching was possible because the preachers themselves had embraced a different way of life. Belonging themselves to a class where success in life was counted on the basis of the accumulation of wealth, they had refused to follow that path. All of them had given all or most of their own possessions to the poor, and lived very modestly. Indeed, this is a common theme in ancient Christian biography, to the point that it becomes the *sine que non* of holiness. Preachers such as Ambrose and Basil could show the folly of a societal system in which people were valued according to their possessions, precisely because they themselves had given up their possessions. They could speak of giving money to the poor rather than to the church and its treasury, because they saw themselves as pastors of an entire city, rich and poor, and not as managers and builders of the assets of an institution.

What does all of this mean for us? I do not really know. Or rather, I think I know . . . but I am afraid to find out! Perhaps one of the reasons why we do not hear much of this sort of preaching today is that we preachers have ourselves embraced a way of life in which our value and success are measured by our own income, which in turn is largely determined by the size of our churches and the class to which our membership belongs. Perhaps one of the reasons is that we are more concerned for the well-being of the church as an institution than we are for the well-being of the poor. Perhaps, over the years, we have grown accustomed to an interpretation of the gospel that is more amiable and less demanding. Perhaps we no longer consider the poor part of the

flock whom we must defend. Perhaps we no longer really consider ourselves shepherds of the rich, for whose souls we must answer. Perhaps

NOTES

¹ *Shepherd*, Vis. 3.6.5-6. Trans. ANF. Although the *Shepherd* has come to us as a series of visions, scholars are agreed that it is a collection of sermons collected in the form of a book.

² *De Nebuthe Jez.*, 56.

³ *Hom. in I Tim.*, 12.

⁴ *In Psalm.* 48.4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *De off.* 2.136-137. Trans. NPNF.