

The centrality of the poor to the work of the kingdom of God in the 21st century West

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INTRODUCTION

This paper centres around three foci: incarnational hermeneutics, three generations of Holy Spirit outpouring and the cultivation of emerging new political space. Firstly, the implications of an incarnational or “Jesus” hermeneutic for reinstating the poor as the primary focus for theology are considered. This emphasises the centrality of the poor as a defining characteristic of the gospel of the kingdom of God and includes accounting for the tendency for Jesus’ focus on the poor to be displaced throughout the history of the church. Secondly, a personal and historical genealogy of the last three generations of Holy Spirit renewal is evaluated as testimony to the reinstatement of the poor as primary agents of the gospel. Thirdly, the attempt is made, drawing on the work of contemporary political theologians, to explain and delineate the new post-secular political space in the western world as exemplified by the inroads of Islamic extremism, Trump’s populism and the UK’s Brexit. Conceiving this space as a prophetic fulfilment of the consequences of empire, the poor are presented as a current political category and the role of the ecclesia as servants with the poor in cultivating the emerging space is configured as an expression of contemporary evangelism.

The paper draws on the findings of my own research into the subsumption of transcendence by sovereignty from the fourth century to the present in *Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011) and refers to the example of The Poverty Truth Commission, http://www.faithincommunityscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Poverty-Truth-Commission-8_opt.pdf and the current Commission for Morecambe Bay in the North West of England and the role of the ecclesia within it.

INCARNATIONAL OR “JESUS” HERMENEUTICS AND THE REINSTATEMENT OF THE POOR

An incarnational or Jesus hermeneutic argues from the Jesus of the gospel testimony to the character and intention of God and not the other way round.¹ This approach has significant implications for Pentecostal studies because the Holy Spirit who baptizes the believer, church and all flesh is to be understood as the God revealed in the gospel testimony to Jesus. It follows that other views of God within the Christian tradition will be the result of a secularised, subsumed or pre-Christian understanding of deity.

As a Pentecostal/Charismatic evangelist and theologian maturing in the UK inner cities in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, the application of a Jesus hermeneutic to scripture and life rapidly exposed the central focus of the poor for biblical mission in the Holy Spirit. The synoptic declaration of the good news of the kingdom of God unequivocally prioritised the poor as its intended recipients. Matthew's and Luke's account of Jesus' answer to John Baptist's question "are you the expected one or should we look for someone else?" emphasises that "the poor have the good news preached to them."² Luke's account of Jesus' introductory announcement in the synagogue in Nazareth begins with the words "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor"³ and continues in similar vein with the sermon on the plain "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God."⁴ This made the practical theology of social justice within British evangelical Anglicanism an obvious resource, from bishop David Shepherd's *Bias to the Poor*, (1983),⁵ right through to Bishop Laurie Green's *Blessed Are the Poor?* (2015).⁶ Boldly put, Jesus always headed for the poor, whereas the rich came to him if they came at all. From this perspective, any displacement of the poor from the central focus of the church's mission is indicative of a truncated or subsumed gospel. It was in pursuit of the roots and genealogy of this apparent subsumption that I returned to academic research at Lancaster University in 2005 and eventually published the results in *Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West*.⁷ The ramifications of this are huge for our assessment of the history of Western Christendom and its mission. Quite simply, the imperial claim of 'peace through the leadership of the rich and powerful,' was exchanged for the gospel testimony of the gift of 'peace through loving identification with

¹ For a broad treatment of this approach within the context of Christian ethics see for example Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003, Chapter 4, especially pp. 96-97).

² Mtt 11:5; Lk 7:22.

³ Lk 4:18.

⁴ Lk 6:20.

⁵ London: Hodder and Stoughton.

⁶ London: SCM Press.

⁷ Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011.

the poor and disempowered.’ The resultant genealogy of Western politics paved the way for the modern and now postmodern eras’ economic bondage to law, war and money to the ongoing disadvantage of the multitude of urban poor.

This subsumption has obscured the radical counterpolitical capacity of the gospel to challenge the powers of empire and their contemporary Western derivatives. Classic approaches such as Luther’s two kingdoms and the Western nation states’ supposed separation of powers have drawn on a misconstrued interpretation of Jesus’ “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” and Paul’s and Peter’s supposed obligation to the governing powers, and neglected the counterpolitical implications of the Jesus’ hermeneutic.⁸ Even otherwise apparently radical contemporary approaches such as James Paul Lusk *The Jesus Candidate: Political Religion in a Secular Age*,⁹ with its urgent critique of conservative Christian roles relating to the UK’s Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump, still propounds this approach. However, any doubt as to the clear counterpolitical impact of the gospel testimony to the kingdom of God has now been definitively established by the theological, archaeological and historical research of such as Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan, Jonathan L. Reed and Warren Carter.¹⁰ They demonstrate how terms such as “kingdom of God,” “Son of God” and “Saviour” were all applied in contemporary citations to the Roman emperors Augustus and Tiberius and that Herod in the north of Israel and the high priestly family of Annas and Caiaphas in the south were the official puppet representatives of the Roman occupation. It follows that the context of Jesus’ declaration of the kingdom of God and the messianic claims that culminated in his clearance of the temple courts was a primary subversion of both Jewish and Roman political authority. His subsequent submission was the more threatening and non-violently confrontational as a result. Both Peter and Paul were similarly subversive before ever they were submissive. When the Sanhedrin ordered the disciples “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus,” Peter and John answered “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”¹¹ Paul informed the High Priest “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in

⁸ Mk 12:17; Rom 13:1 1 Pet 2:13.

⁹ London: Ekklesia, 2017.

¹⁰ See Richard Horsley: *Jesus and Empire*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004); Warren Carter: *Matthew and Empire*. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2001).

¹¹ Acts 4:18-20.

violation of the Law order me to be struck?"¹² It follows that gospel faithfulness today still means that our submission to the authorities should likewise be in the context of the substantiation of our commitment to the centrality of the poor to the kingdom of God.

THREE GENERATIONS OF HOLY SPIRIT RENEWAL AND THE REINSTATEMENT OF THE POOR

I grew up in relative poverty and my parents in extreme poverty. They came to faith through the impact of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century revivals in the slums of London. The focus of the work of the kingdom of God on the poor was my own and my family's experience and had the effect of orientating us into ongoing identification with the poor. I grew up in the nineteen-fifties living hand to mouth 'by faith' in support of an orphanage where my parents worked. At the same time the positive impact of the post-war British Labour movement on my own life and discipleship and its roots in Christian socialism has meant that I've always regarded Marx as at least partly a prophet albeit one disaffected with institutional religion. My baptism in the Spirit in the nineteen-sixties was through association with Pentecostalism and the early Charismatic movement and its ministry among the poor. After university, together with my wife Sue, I was involved in founding the Ichthus Christian Fellowship in south east London and engaged in its ongoing mission to the urban poor in both London and the Middle East. This led me in due course to a recognition of the colonial roots to poverty both in inner city London and the ex- British and European colonial worlds.¹³ For me the beginning of the third wave of renewal in the nineteen-nineties was the dramatic impact of identificational repentance towards the oppressed poor in the intercession movement of the South Korean and Argentinean revivals and culminated in the outpouring associated with Toronto and the Mississauga of the Credit River. All of this has led me to the view that three generations of Holy Spirit renewal is recovering the multitude of the poor as the potential new humanity which is the focus of the church's mission.

The careful research of my friends the late Father Peter Hocken and Stephen Hepden into the originary Azusa Street Pentecostal outpouring affirm the centrality of the poor and its political implications.¹⁴ Accounts are unanimous that a countercultural, non-hierarchical unity of male and female, black and white, positioned the poor in the center of the embryonic movement. As I have indicated elsewhere, this is borne out in Bartleman's

¹² Acts 23:1-5.

¹³ See Brian Mills and Roger Mitchell. *Sins of the Fathers*. (Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World, 1999).

¹⁴ Peter Hocken. *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements*. (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington Vermont: Ashgate, 2009); Stephen Hepden. "The Impact of Racial Inclusivity in the Azusa Street Revival." (MTh diss., University of Manchester, 2008).

first hand account. “We had no priest class, nor priest craft ... We did not even have a platform or a pulpit in the beginning ... all were on a level.”¹⁵ This paralleled the developing labor movement, pre-dated women’s suffrage by more than a decade, and preceded racial equality by more than half a century. The overall political stance at the beginning was anti-state and anti-war. Charles Parham, one of the most universally recognized, although not the most radical of pentecostal leaders, who early on struggled with the social diversity of the Azusa street happenings, nonetheless “consistently resisted any hint of dual allegiance to the Kingdom of God and that of Caesar.” Long before the outbreak of war within Europe he berated all so-called Christian nation states, including the United States, for yielding themselves up to the “Moloch God, patriotism, whose doctrine was honour,” whose soldiers were “self-appointed murderers,” and whose governments were “imbecile.”¹⁶

As I’ve also set out elsewhere,¹⁷ while the racial make-up of the initial mid-century Charismatic visitation was admittedly more uniform, owing in part to the lost opportunities of the season that preceded it, the egalitarian nature and engagement of the poor remained. The trend was from the grassroots outwards, not from the top down. As popular accounts of the experiences, such as Dennis Bennett’s *Nine O’clock in the Morning*, make clear, the initial context was usually ordinary homes, not official church buildings. As W J Hollenweger underlines, the impact among the poor, particularly in the non-Western continents, is a defining characteristic.¹⁸ It is true that the third generation of outpouring was initiated by spiritual hunger among existing leaders, either among the laity or in the context of existing Charismatic churches and movements. However, it was as a participant in these more recent outpourings of the 1990s that I was first alerted to the initial egalitarian nature of divine grace and the focus on the poor in all three of these Pentecostal outpourings of the last century. However hard we tried to protect ourselves, the distinctive manifestations of these moves invariably targeted and humbled hierarchical positions, ranks, offices, and behaviours. What has been marked in the years that followed, is despite the admitted pragmatic adaptations by some, those of us most identified with the poor have generally been those most impacted by the extremes of manifestations and who got the most in trouble from the “authorities” at the time!

¹⁵ Frank Bartleman. *Azusa Street*. (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1980), 57.

¹⁶ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 218.

¹⁷ Roger Haydon Mitchell. *The Fall of the Church*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 70-71.

¹⁸ See “The Pentecostal Elites and the Pentecostal Poor” in Karla Poewe ed, *Charismatic Christianity as Global Culture*. (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

I suggest that turning the church into the wind of the Spirit of the God of the poor is the great theological and missional imperative of our time. Grant Wacker's distinction between primitive and pragmatic is very helpful here, as is Donald E Miller and Tetsunamo Yamamori's identification of a progressive stream within global Pentecostalism as a means of identifying and encouraging the ongoing progress of the work of the kingdom of God.¹⁹

NEW POLITICAL SPACE AS PROPHETIC FULFILMENT AND URGENT OPPORTUNITY

Ever since the near collapse of the Western banking system in 2008, the austerity policies of successive Western governments have heavily penalised the poor to the ongoing advantage of the rich.²⁰ The resultant retreat of central, regional and local government from social care has exposed the needs of the poor and shaken confidence in the capacity of Western democracies to deliver social justice. This has called into question the previously accepted assumptions of the Chicago school of neo-liberal economics, in the ascendancy since the days of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, that the benevolent hand of the market would trickle down economic prosperity for all. This in turn has challenged the accepted "new world order" spelt out by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and The Last Man*.²¹ From the perspective of the critics who saw contemporary late Western consumerism as the biopolitical outcome of the trajectory of empire such as Michel Foucault, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ellen Meiksins Wood, David Benjamin Blower, and myself to name but a few,²² this has increasingly uncovered the deep structural roots of the Western Christian story.

N. T Wright has explicated the relationship between the gospel of the kingdom and the Hebrew apocalyptic tradition.²³ Rather than simply aiming to provide a window on an unverifiable distant future, the intent was to provide a counterpolitical perspective from which to critique violent and threatening world systems from at least a measure of safety. If we continue to handle the Old Testament apocalyptic material with this in view, then rather than the various dispensational perspectives that have often characterised

¹⁹ See Donald E Miller and Tetsunamo Yamamori. *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2007.

²⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/meghabahree/2014/11/05/whos-to-blame-for-the-increasing-gap-between-the-rich-and-the-poor-market-economy-says-new-report/#2e4000372c77>

²¹ New York: Free Press, 1992.

²² See Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1. London: Penguin Books, 1990, Part Five; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000; Ellen Meiksins Wood. *Empire of Capital*. London and New York: Verso, 2003; David Benjamin Blower. *Kingdom vs. Empire*. Wrote Under Publishing Cooperative, 2013.

²³ See N T Wright. "The Hope of Israel" in *The New Testament and the People of God*. (London: SPCK, 1992).

Pentecostal/Charismatic eschatology, we have a prophetic pointer to the source of the emerging political space. We might well conclude that the current shaking of Western empire and the opening political space is the opportunity “to speak peace to the nations” and “when the kingdom and rulership, and the greatness of the kingdom under all the heavens, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High,” in ongoing fulfilment of the late OT prophets such as Daniel and Zechariah so integral to the gospel language of the kingdom of God.²⁴

I first became properly aware of the existing new political space from the titles of three UK academic theological conferences back in 2014, the Chester University conference *Missio Dei: Evangelicalism and the New Politics*, Manchester University’s Lincoln Theological Institute conference on *Postliberalism, Individualism and Society*, and the William Temple Foundation 70th anniversary event entitled *Reclaiming the Public Space*.

In preparing papers for those events I met beforehand with the convenors with the question “to what do these ‘new politics’ refer and what do they look like?” Professor Chris Baker, one of the convenors of the Chester event, described them to me as the space identified by “all the posts”: such as postmodern, post-Christendom and post-political. With reference to Professor Graham Ward we can add the post-secular.²⁵ So there are a lot of posts! By this account the new politics really refers to space for a new politics, rather than the content of such politics. This space is negatively framed by the ‘tame’ xenophobia of Britain’s UKIP and Brexit together with the populist politics of president Donald Trump on the one hand, and the brutality of ISIL/Da’esh and the Taliban on the other, which continue to hold a mirror to the covert roots of Western sovereignty. Maybe more hopeful signs are the progressive party political movements that champion the poor and challenge the accepted status quo such as Podemos in Spain, and Momentum within the UK Labour party. However, the problem remains the tendency of their party politics to carry the same sovereign approach to peace so endemic to the Western political system. We need a completely different kind of politics with which to cultivate the new territory. As the unexpected voice of the neo-Marxists declares “both God’s love of humanity and humanity’s love of God are expressed and incarnated in the common material political project of the multitude. We need to recover today this material and political sense of love, a love as strong as death.”²⁶ Their challenge identifies the new field of opportunity for ecclesia and gospel.

²⁴ Zech 9:10; Daniel 7:27.

²⁵ See Graham Ward. “Postsecularity? The New Visibility of Religion” in *The Politics of Discipleship*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009).

²⁶ Hardt and Negri. *Multitude*, 352.

Since 2012 a group of us in the UK have been deliberately experimenting with what it means to be the people of God with respect to this extraordinary moment. Together we have engaged in research into the theology of the kingdom of God, with particular attention to the agency of the poor and attempted to apply it in the localities in which we live and work both geographically and demographically. We have experimented with the vocabulary of kenarchy as a way to highlight the unsubsumed gospel.²⁷ Our aim has been to rediscover the gospel of the kingdom as a social movement able to change the culture of our localities and make way for the kingdom of God among the poor. At the heart of this has been the conviction that the task of the ecclesia is to reposition itself among the poor and to reinstate the poor as agents of social transformation and justice. One particular vehicle for this is the Poverty Truth Commission. While emphatically not a specifically church initiative it undoubtedly expresses the agency of the poor for social justice and as such provides an arena for cultivating new political space with the kingdom of love. The identifying characteristic is the initiative within it of a body of people motivated by Christ-like love to give themselves in order to promote those with first hand experience of poverty, so that their stories can be heard and they can come to play a transformative relational part within the wider community. Several rounds of these Commissions in Glasgow and Leeds have demonstrated their transformational capacity and now Morecambe Bay and thirteen other locations in the UK are following suit. Allied initiatives of CitizensUK and FaithAction have been tracked by Luke Bretherton and Daniel Singleton²⁸ and demonstrate similar success. Watch this space

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²⁷ See Roger Haydon Mitchell and Julie Tomlin Arram eds. *Discovering Kenarchy*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

²⁸ See Luke Bretherton. *Resurrecting Democracy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and Daniel Singleton ed. *Faith With Its Sleeves Rolled Up*. (Faith Action, 2013).

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