
Giving Yes; Income Sharing No

by Henry E. Felder

In a recent article ("Income-Sharing: A Plan for Economic Justice in the Local Church" *Spectrum*, vol. 13, no. 3), Joe Mesar justifies an ideal of economic equality among Christians by citing Judaic and early Christian precedents presented in Scripture. He proposes that local Christian congregations today translate that ideal into an income-sharing plan. The more affluent members would assist the poor in the congregation through a systematic system of cash payments. A major result of this proposal would be a redistribution of income such that extremes of great wealth and extreme poverty would not exist among Christian families.

The plan is based on three major premises:

1. That the economic systems of the early Hebrew era and the early Christian church are ideals for present economic functioning.
2. That economic equality is the biblical ideal, thus income and wealth inequality are unnatural and must be avoided.
3. That the church has an income maintenance responsibility for its poorer members.

Henry E. Felder is an associate deputy assistant secretary for Policy Development and Research with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. He graduated from Oakwood College and received his Ph.D. in economics from Stanford University.

There are many attractive features of this plan. I believe most Christians of good will are interested in lessening burdens on the poor while providing the affluent with a new avenue for sharing their wealth. However, it is my position that the social and cultural context in which biblical metaphors, stories, and illustrations are presented must be taken into account when they are used to define present Christian behavior. Hence, the realities of modern social and economic life in the United States must also be taken into account if Adventists structure an economic-sharing plan. The major weakness of the Mesar proposal is a failure to take these realities into account. In addition, I contend that the three premises on which the income-sharing plan is based makes questionable use of the biblical record. I examine each of the premises, then assess the economic structure in which this plan would operate.

Hebrew and Early Christian Precedents

Mesar's extensive examination of the Judaic economic system and his call that "it is time for us to join Jesus and the prophets,"

sets up the early Hebrew system as an ideal that can be recreated in the present. I suggest instead, that the major principles to be derived from these examples are that God requires a spirit of generosity to the less fortunate and that the tithes and offerings belong to him. The specific concepts of the Jubilee and the Sabbath year were part of the Hebrew approach to a particular economic need. They provide us with possible manifestation of the basic principles but tell us little about how we can ration scarce resources now.

“The specific concepts of the Jubilee and the Sabbath year provide us with the basic principles but tell us little about how we can ration scarce resources now.”

The Hebrew economy was overwhelmingly agrarian, in which an early means of caring for the poor was to leave portions of the agricultural produce for gleanings—a practical way to assure minimum subsistence to all (Deuteronomy 24:19, Leviticus 19:9,10). The Hebrew political system was a closed system, in that both religious and civil customs were incorporated under a single set of rulers—the priest and the judges/kings. Thus, the pronouncements made by the prophets regarding social justice and economic distribution were given as much to national leaders who had the power to tax and redistribute as to wealthy individuals. The various offerings of money and goods, including animals, were a means of providing for both civil and ecclesiastical needs until the later kings set up more formal taxing procedures.* Therefore, in contemplating how best to employ the Hebrew examples, we must consider the institutional structures within which they operated, extract the appropriate principles, and then convert them into present practices.

In examining the evidence from the New Testament, several factors must be kept in mind. First, many of Jesus’ parables were spoken to illustrate eternal truths, not economic principles. For example, the parable of the ruler and the workmen, in which each received equal pay for unequal work, was not a prescription for ideal labor-management relationships! Once again, it is necessary to extract the underlying principle, rather than seeking means of literally transferring that metaphor to contemporary life.

Next, it is certainly not clear that the New Testament teaches the complete relinquishment of all wealth. As an insightful observer of the human psyche, Jesus asked of each person he encountered to surrender any impediment that would separate the sinner from reconciliation with God. Thus, to the rich young ruler, and only to him, did Jesus say, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21, NIV) However, to Nicodemus, a wealthy Pharisee, Jesus said that he had to be born again; his wealth was never mentioned. Also, no income disbursal was required of Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector who readily acknowledged his ill-gotten gain. To Zacchaeus, Jesus said, “Today, salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and save the lost.” (Luke 19:9 KJV). This was hardly an indication that the rich could not be saved, nor was it an endorsement of wealth disposal. The clearest message that comes from these stories is spiritual, not economic.

The experiences of the early Christian church in income maintenance and income redistribution are often cited as the ideal for contemporary Christians. There is little doubt that the early church was attempting to carry out in its time the ideals of the Beatitudes. At issue, however, is whether

*(See the SDA Commentary on 1 Samuel 8:7)

the Bible specifically enjoins Christians to adopt today the economic system adopted by the early church. Once again, we must examine the social and economic context that prompted that system. The small band of Jerusalem-based Christians were responding to the immediate temporal needs of the newly emergent church—many members of whom were no longer part of the temple system. As the early church expanded outside of Jerusalem, the system of common holding of goods became one of individual giving (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8:2). The underlying concept of Christian liberality was maintained, but the structure of the giving system changed to meet the changing environment.

Economic Equality as an Ideal

In the Mesar paper, economic equality is spoken of as a biblical ideal. At the onset, we must recognize that economic equality may describe wealth equality, income equality, or some combination of the two. Wealth derives from the ownership of capital, both physical and financial; and from possessing items of value, such as land, goods and animals. Income derives from the returns from wealth, the increases from a natural process (such as farming), the value of the labor services provided by the worker, and gifts from individuals or institutions. Only in the most simple society can these factors interact to produce anything resembling economic equality. Contrary to the Mesar hypothesis, I suggest that the notion of the equality of these two aspects of economic value is not part of the biblical record—either as an actual or an ideal.

Beginning with the biblical record of Genesis 4, men and women have been endowed with unique gifts. Among these gifts is the God-given ability to acquire wealth (Deuteronomy 8:19). Throughout the Old Testament, the leading characters were overwhelmingly men of wealth. As an

indication of God's blessing, Job once again became a man of great wealth once his ordeal was over. In the instance of Solomon, God granted extraordinary wealth even when it was not specifically requested (2 Chronicles 1:12). In the latter history of the Jewish people, after they had established civil and religious bureaucracies, the wrath of the prophets was not directed towards wealth inequality, per se, but the inordinate disparity between the rich and the poor. The prophets railed against a disparity that left the poor without even a subsistence.

Economic inequality is also a reality in the New Testament, and there is no clear indication that Christians were to move towards absolute or relative economic equality. Instead, the New Testament writers tried to turn Christians away from accumulation of excessive wealth and towards the biblical ideal of sharing, liberality, and the avoidance of excesses. Most importantly the writers of the New Testament did not want Christians to allow any form of wealth to interfere with their relationship with God.

Income Maintenance Responsibility

Mesar is right that the Bible calls the Christian to respond differently from non-Christians to the needs of the poor. However, the essential question is, what should be the means of that response? Before answering that question, the social and economic environment in which the Seventh-day Adventist operates must be considered. Of necessity, my analysis focuses exclusively on the United States. Once other countries are included, the nature of the response must differ.

To begin with, an enormous income maintenance system is in place in this country—one to which all Christians have access. In fiscal year 1983, the federal government will spend almost \$300 billion dollars for a variety of income maintenance

and support programs that annually assist millions of the poor and the not so poor. (see the information in the box, taken from the Budget of the United States Government, fiscal year 1984, U.S. Government Printing Office, pages 5-113). The major programs assist the elderly, the widowed, the orphaned, the unemployed, the poor, and the infirm. For example, over 36 million Americans are helped by the Social Security system at a cost of over \$162 billion annually. More than 22 million Americans receive food stamps or other nutrition assistance (compare this with Old Testament glean-ing.) Additional millions are helped with medical bills through Medicare (those over 65 years of age) and Medicaid (those under 65 years of age).

These programs do not alleviate all aspects of want and deprivation, and are not to be viewed as absolving the Christian of the need for compassion. But any system of Christian charity in the United States must be developed with an awareness of the context of that which already exists.

Within the context of the U.S. social and economic system, there would be many difficulties in implementing the Mesar plan. Indeed, it is not clear that such an income-

sharing plan is really warranted—either on ethical or efficiency grounds. From an ethical perspective, the Christian response need not seek to duplicate the proper role played by the federal system. Instead, an ethical response requires complementing that system where needs continue to be unmet. And many needs remain unmet. It is estimated that about 30 percent of all American families have income that is less than the poverty standard. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level, 1980*, Table 1.)

A church system of the sort suggested by Mesar would encounter enormous problems in terms of efficiency: defining needs, establishing the ability-to-pay, and diverting funds from other church activities. The Mesar plan implicitly assumes that each church contains affluent as well as poor members. Yet, it is clear that most churches contain few, if any, who are truly affluent. Equity considerations would require equalization of benefits across churches—a dubious proposition at best. Even with complete income sharing, it is not clear that church members would indeed be better off, since many of the poorest members are presently part of the existing government income maintenance structure and would see some benefits reduced as additional income were received. (For example, food stamps, housing, and medical assistance are based on the amount of income received. These benefits would decline as income from the local church increased.)

If the income-sharing plan is not practical, how should the Christian respond to poverty in its midst? The responses can come from three levels: the individual, the local church, and the corporate church.

The individual response is at once the most important and includes all the ethical prescriptives of Scripture. Fundamental to this is the view that as individuals we are

THE INCOME MAINTENANCE ENVIRONMENT

PROGRAM	COSTS (MILLIONS)	PERSONS (THOUS)
Social Security	\$ 162,000	36,000
Widows and widowers		
Retirees		
Disabled		
Orphans		
Unemployment	30,000	10,000
Insurance		
Housing Assistance	5,000	2,500
Food and Nutrition	17,000	22,000
Assistance		
Other Welfare	20,000	
Medicare	47,000	
(65 and older)		
Medicaid	14,000	
TOTAL	295,000	

stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us. It also means that we are our brother's keeper. As Christians, we cannot be comfortable with our wealth, knowing that there are people we can help, but are not because of our selfishness. In practical terms, that means that the tithe and liberal offerings are returned to the Lord, and that we actively seek those we can help by sharing. This help can take the form of gifts, labor, or other forms of assistance. In addition, we must be sensitive to local and corporate efforts to assist the needy.

The local church also has an identifiable role to play, given the existing income maintenance structure. First, church officials must know what economic benefits are available from the appropriate government authorities, so this information can be conveyed to those in need. Most local churches have an emergency fund to provide special assistance to the needy, but in most instances, this amount should be systematically expanded. The church could provide immediate help when circumstances warranted, rather than forcing poor members to wait until government agencies had

completed their protracted eligibility processes. Next, the local church can, in conjunction with other churches, establish a financial management plan to assist families in managing their resources more prudently. (This is not to suggest that the only reason for a person's financial straits is an inability to manage money.) Finally, the local church can establish special programs, like education scholarships, for those who need cash assistance to attend to an Adventist school. The key notion is that the local church can become much more sensitized to the needs of the poor.

In summary, the Mesar plan addresses the need for a Christian response that exceeds that which non-Christians would be expected to make. There is a need for Christians, through their financial gifts to become involved in the needs of the poor. However, Mesar's plan relies far too much on a mechanism that is not warranted by biblical precedents. It is also subject to equity and efficiency problems, and fails to take into account the support system that is already in place. Instead, a less formal response may be needed.

Joe Mesar's Reply

Although I disagree with much of Henry Felder's response to my article on income sharing in the local church (*Spectrum*, vol. 13, no. 4), I appreciate the thoughtful nature of his approach to the issue. Hopefully, his critique of my position will stimulate further serious discussion of how to deal with problems of wealth and poverty in the church.

Felder's initial point seems to be that I am

improperly using the Year of Jubilee and the example of the early church as models for our economic behavior as Christians in the 20th century. He advises that we should extract principles from the biblical material rather than urging adoption of actual policies designed for simpler economic times. This is what I have tried to do, although I suspect Felder is unhappy because I see the biblical principles as more radical and far-reaching than he does. I have not

recommended Year of Jubilee or the common purse as solutions for the contemporary church. (I must say, however, that periodic redistribution of wealth among church members along the lines of Jubilee would be a dramatic demonstration of our commitment to the principle of justice.) I would simply caution Felder that the economic system that actually exists provides less of a model for humane economic behavior than the biblical methods.

Felder next argues that the Bible does not support economic equality as an ideal. He reasons that God gives us the ability to acquire wealth, therefore its accumulation furthers his will. While I agree with the first part of this statement, the conclusion does not necessarily follow. I believe the Bible says that God gives us the ability to obtain wealth, therefore we have a responsibility to distribute it fairly, to assist the poor. Jesus and the prophets do not mention economic equality in each encounter with well-to-do individuals, but the concern for justice and equality animates every discussion of Christian economic principle.

Felder urges that any plea for care of the poor must take into account existing government programs. I agree. But these programs are far less generous than Felder implies with his use of aggregate statistics. For example, in Pennsylvania a single adult without other income receives \$172 per month in welfare. If the recipient is "able-bodied," he or she can only receive this amount for three months out of the year. The other nine months the state provides nothing at all—despite 15 percent unemployment in the major urban areas. I challenge Felder or any other church member convinced of the generosity of the

government to live on \$516 per year. Moreover, I find it ironic that Adventists have traditionally opposed the expansion of the income maintenance programs on which Felder says the poor should primarily rely.

Finally, I find Felder's own recommendations for assistance to the poor distressing, albeit well intentioned. He advocates that churches maintain a fund to care for the poor as emergencies arise, that they advise low-income members about government programs and that congregations teach better management of financial resources. The first two suggestions are already commonly utilized in local churches and have proven wholly inadequate to meet the need since poverty and drastic inequality of wealth persists within Adventism. As for lessons in financial planning, I could support this idea only if it applied to more affluent members. It is my experience that the poor know how to ration their scarce resources, but that the wealthy pay little attention to biblical counsel on the use of their income and property.

My main problem with Felder's response is his skillful evasion of my central point that the Bible requires the prosperous believer to make regular and serious sacrifices to eliminate poverty in the church. My plan doubtless has numerous flaws, as any attempt to implement it would probably reveal. But the present inequality of wealth in the church is shameful and sinful. I believe that the only serious efforts to solve this problem must focus on the Bible's call for economic justice, not on the occasional good will of the affluent member.

Joe Mesar, a graduate of Atlantic Union College, is a staff attorney for Neighborhood Legal Services in Pittsburgh, Penn.