

God's Will for the Wealthy and the Poor

by Gordon R. Doss

As the twenty-first century commences, the way the Adventist Church engages the world for Christ is strongly influenced by the relative wealth and poverty of its membership. About 85 percent of Adventism's 13 million members live in the poorer regions of the world, which is where membership growth is most rapid.¹ The North American Division, birthplace of the Church, accounts for only 8 percent of the membership but about two-thirds of its total income. One-third of the membership is in Central and South America and another third is in Africa.

How can the smaller group of richer Adventists and the larger group of poorer Adventists come together for unified action? Part of the answer to this question is found in really listening to each other—especially on issues of wealth and poverty.

I am a "missionary kid" who grew up and then worked in Malawi, Africa. In 2002, I returned to Lunjika Secondary School to conduct an ethnographic field research project titled, "Theology of Wealth and Poverty Among a Group of Malawian Seventh-day Adventists." This article briefly discusses some of its major findings.

Malawi is one of the ten poorest nations and forty-nine least developed countries in the world.² The HIV/AIDS epidemic is devastating the nation's already weak economy. The Lunjika area is beset by multiple factors of poverty that are interlinked and persistent. The area is isolated from public transportation and has few employment opportunities. Most local people depend on subsistence farming but the population has outgrown the available farmland and the soil is overcultivated. Expensive commercial fertilizer must be used to produce any

crops at all. Recent corn crops have been so poor that many people have suffered extended periods of hunger and malnutrition.

All the people I interviewed for my research project were in relative poverty, in which the resources to fulfill family aspirations or work expectations were inadequate even if life's necessities of food and shelter were present. Several were in extreme poverty, where daily life was a struggle just to find life's necessities and survive.

What I found in my interviews with these people is that they understand wealth and poverty differently from *typical* Americans. (There are Americans who agree with Malawians.) For instance, this group believes that God decides who will be wealthy or poor. Humans can cooperate with God through hard, intelligent work within the boundaries he sets. Some whom God wills to be wealthy may live in poverty through sin and sloth. Others whom God wills to be poor may become prosperous temporarily through evil means but eventually will return to poverty. The unavoidable conclusion is that God has decided that Africa will be poor, whereas America and other nations will be wealthy.

This finding raises a number of questions. Why do supposedly free-will, Wesleyan-Arminian Adventists subscribe to predestination of wealth and poverty? Does this view extend to soteriology—their understanding of salvation? Is there a gap in our theological education? If we deny that God wills Africa to live in perpetual poverty, what causes it and what responsibility do affluent Adventists have to alleviate Africa's pain and suffering?

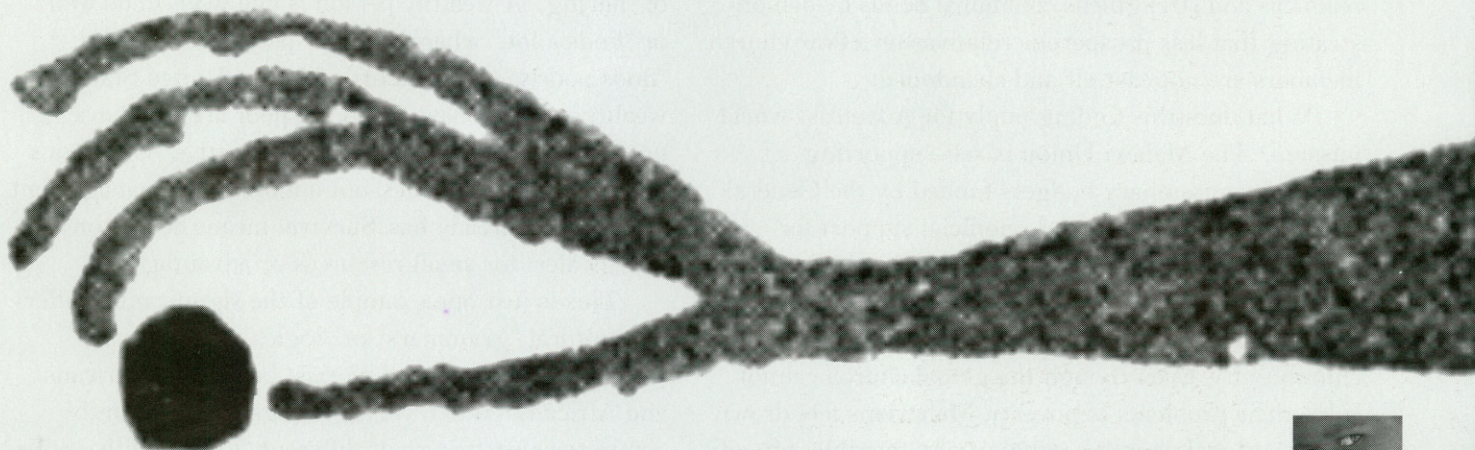
Past failures in development aid to Africa lead some Americans to say that we should withhold aid because poverty is the Africans' own fault or not to

worry about it because we can't solve the problem. Although the role of official corruption in perpetuating poverty needs to be acknowledged and addressed in the manner aid is given, abandoning Africa is neither ethically nor missiologically sound.

The Spectrum of Christian Wealth and Poverty Theories

Around the world, Christians look at wealth and poverty in many different ways. David T. Williams, a South African, has constructed a typology of these theories. Briefly, Williams identifies seven types:³

1. *Wealth to Be Restructured: Liberation Theology* is the view of the Christian "far left," where the "preferential option for the poor" and concern for addressing the structures of poverty are emphasized.
2. *Wealth to Be Created: Reconstructionism* is a Christian "far right" perspective. Capitalism is seen as closely reflecting God's will for the world as shown in the Bible. Poverty is seen as caused by disbelief, laziness, and heathenism. Aid to poor countries merely perpetuates poverty.
3. *Wealth to Be Claimed: Prosperity Teaching* is the "health and wealth Gospel." True piety and faith, obedience to God's commands, returning a faithful tithe, and claiming God's promises are sure pathways to prosperity. "ASK—Ask, Seek, Knock and ye shall be wealthy."
4. *Wealth to Be Ignored: Contentment* is a response to feeling overwhelmed by the scope and magnitude of poverty and the apparent futility of all attempts to eliminate it. Christians should opt out by simply ignoring poverty.



5. *Wealth to Be Denied: Self-Limitation.* Either through asceticism or simplicity, one's consumption of material resources (which are seen as good but limited in supply) should be limited for the sake of others.
6. *Wealth to Be Given: Charity.* Charity is making a material gift to an individual or organization without the expectation of reciprocity. Charity is usually not seen as a total solution to poverty but "doing my part" for those less fortunate.
7. *Wealth to Be Shared: Christian Community.* More ideological Christians seek to implement a variation of socialism in communal living. Less ideological Christians affirm and practice spontaneous sharing within warm Christian fellowship.

Among the people I interviewed I discovered an intriguing theological blend of two of Williams's types: "Wealth to be given: charity" and "Wealth to be shared: Christian community." First, Christians should always give something, however small, to those needing help. In recent times of dire hunger more prosperous members of the group had sometimes received multiple daily requests from people in surrounding villages who were near starvation. They always gave something, even if only a handful of corn.

Second, Christians should give special attention to the needs of both their biological and church families. Extended family obligations are traditionally taken seriously in Africa, but recent experiences with extreme poverty have sharpened the demand that every family member contribute responsibly. The group did not want to withhold charity from non-SDAs but rather to extend special help to needy people within the community of faith. People who suffer deprivation tend to feel cut off and inferior. Giving and sharing reaffirms and strengthens communal bonds by demonstrating that less prosperous relatives or fellow church members are not cast off and abandoned.

What does this finding imply for Adventist world mission? The Malawi Union is self-supporting except for missionary budgets funded by the General Conference and official and unofficial support for special projects, like church building. Continuing GC support of missionaries and project giving from outside of Malawi is a visible, tangible expression of global church unity. Even though the global church cannot solve their problems of poverty, Malawians feel drawn into the global church community by tangible gifts of love and compassion.



Thus, the global unity of the Church, which we see as vital to our mission, is enhanced by support from more affluent Adventists. The research group regretted the trend toward having fewer SDA missionaries in Malawi, while at the same time affirming the value of having indigenous leadership.

"Finding" versus "Having" Wealth

Cultural metaphors about wealth can be very revealing. In Malawi, the main cultural metaphor for resource management is "finding" (*kusanga* or *kupenza*). Finding stands in contrast to the dominant Western metaphor of "having." A wealthy person is one who "finds well," or "finds a lot," whereas a poor person is one who "finds poorly," or "finds little." In the United States, the wealthy are the "haves" and the poor are the "have nots." In Malawi, living involves an active, continuous searching for necessities, not a more static management of what one already has. Survival means being constantly alert for small resources or advantages.

This is just one example of the significantly differing cultural "grammars" or "logics" for material resource management that exist between Americans and Africans.⁴ When we serve together on church committees we bring our different "logics" with us. To understand how we think and act as we work together

will require a deeper mutual understanding of our cultural perspectives. African Adventists, with their personal experience of poverty, have a lot to teach the rest of us, and their input is a potential asset in making decisions that shape global mission.

Another cultural difference is the role and expression of envy as a general response to the relative wealth of other people. "Envy occurs when the superior qualities, achievements or possessions of another are perceived to reflect badly on self and are experienced as feelings of inferiority, longing, or ill will toward another."⁵ Helmut Schoeck and others discuss envy as a universal human emotion that is difficult to face because it elicits feelings of shame and guilt.⁶

Western capitalist societies ignore envy or act as if it does not matter. In poorer societies fear and control of envy are often dominant social themes. Malawi's national anthem includes the words, "O God bless our land of Malawi, ... Put down each and every enemy, Hunger, disease, *envy* (*nsanje*)..." The research group said that gossip is used extensively against wealthy people, who are seen stereotypically as being evil.

Prosperous people are often assumed to have excelled through evil means—notably, through the use of witchcraft. Extreme envy may lead to destruction of property or even murder. To avoid being envied, a person must be seen to prosper through intelligence and hard work, his prosperity must develop gradually, and he must be generous with his community. People work hard to avoid being objects of envy.

The factor of envy highlights a challenge to both the relatively poor majority and relatively wealthy minority of SDAs. Global mission will be hindered from both sides if mutual understanding is not achieved. Jonathon Bonk has suggested that prosperous Christians need to explore deeply the meaning and implications of "righteous wealth."⁷ His suggestion implies the need to be "righteously poor" as well. Both the wealthy and the poor experience a diminished personal spirituality that hinders their shared mission if wealth and poverty are handled unrighteously.

Available Wealth, Aspiration, and Christian Authenticity

The available supply of wealth in the area was seen as adequate for all to live well, if factors causing poverty were addressed. Participants did not clearly support either the theory of limited wealth (the "piggy bank"

theory) common in traditional societies or the theory of unlimited wealth (the "faucet" theory) of Western capitalist societies. Yet the pervasive envy of the local society suggests a worldview that assumes a limited supply of wealth. Thus, the view that anyone whose prosperity markedly exceeds that of his community does so at others' expense—"your gain is inevitably my loss."

The challenge to mutual understanding is clear in this finding. From their differing worldviews, Americans would tend to blame Africans for not making their economies ("faucets") work properly, whereas Africans would blame Americans for being selfish and keeping their "piggy banks" to themselves. This two-sided blame game hinders global mission.

The participants aspired to have enough wealth to provide the necessities of life. Only one person wanted to have as much wealth as possible. The majority view is in contrast to the ever-expanding, limitless acquisi-





tiveness common in Western society and suggests valuable lessons Americans could learn from Malawians. After listening to these people I came to believe that unless American Adventists are willing to be counter-cultural by placing a ceiling on acquisitiveness and thereby rediscovering the spirit of sacrifice, we will fail to make essential material contributions to the mission of our church.

Members of the group gave evidence of having an active, vibrant faith. Through them, I saw that authentic Christian faith and human nobility flourish in a context of real suffering. Human nobility shines through deprivation. Their experience offers a key to maintaining balance between evangelization and social action in our mission to the world.

We must neither abandon Africa to poverty nor believe that Africans are somehow lesser or incomplete Christians as long as they are poor. The biblical portrait of the last days is one of increased social chaos that includes the suffering of poverty. The Adventist Church does not command sufficient material resources to alleviate global poverty but we do proclaim the everlasting gospel that brings salvation to all who accept it—rich and poor alike. While we preach we

should also share our resources generously.

Wealth and poverty are sometimes left off the theological agenda—and the eschatological agenda, in particular. Because eschatology is essentially about mission and because the fulfillment of mission includes the stewardship of material resources, developing an Adventist theology of wealth and poverty needs to be high on our agenda. Both the giving and the spending of funds for mission are highly influenced by one's theology of wealth and poverty. Varying perspectives will persist but the goal should be consensus on major points.

The ecclesiological dimension—structuring and administering the SDA Church for mission—is particularly challenging. How do the estimated 15 percent of relatively affluent and the 85 percent of relatively poor members cooperate with each other for their shared mission to the world? The poorer majority includes Adventists with the zeal and skills to be effective cross-cultural missionaries, but their church organizations often lack resources to educate, send, and support them. How can the affluent minority empower the poorer majority while remaining fully engaged in global mission themselves? These are questions we must address until the Lord returns in glory.

Notes and References

1. Statistics are from General Conference Statistical Reports. The 15 percent/85 percent estimate is made by adding the North American Division's 8 percent to an estimated 7 percent that have a similar standard of living. There is, of course, a broad range between the wealthier and poorer groups of SDAs.
2. From United Nations Web site:
<http://r0.unctad.org/en/pub/ps11dc02.en.htm>.
3. David T. Williams, *Christian Approaches to Poverty* (San Jose, Calif.: Authors Choice, 2001), 79–348.
4. See David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters* (Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2001) for a discussion about the differences between cultures in resource management.
5. From unpublished paper by Jeff Fussner.
6. Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1966).
7. Jonathan Bonk, *Missions and Money* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 125.

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