

7. Remembering the Poor: Transforming Christian Practice

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They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor. . . .

Galatians 2:10

This chapter is a critical inquiry, from the standpoint of a practical theologian and Christian educator, into *remembering the poor* as a “practice” constitutive of Christian faith and life; more specifically, it is inquiry into the contemporary church’s engagement in that practice. The chapter is laid out in four parts. In section one I set forth a way to understand the notion of “practice,” especially as related to the Christian practice of remembering the poor. In section two, I offer some critical observation of how our prevailing economic choices as a nation are institutionalizing gross inequities between the rich and the poor, and perpetuating unprecedented levels of poverty and suffering — despite touts of economic progress and development in the U.S. and around the globe. In section three I explore the contemporary church’s conventional response to the poor — a *service paradigm* — finding it to be inadequate, both in terms of the demands of the gospel and the demands of contemporary socioeconomic realities. Folded into this section I also name, in a variety of ways, theological grounds of our hope and freedom as believers to resist injustice, and to make choices more in keeping with our own distinctive Christian Story and Vision. In section four, in skeletal fashion I briefly outline a *faith-based community revitalization paradigm*, an approach I consider to be especially fitting to the church’s call, and privilege, to participate in God’s own missionary activity in the world in remembering the poor and renewing all things in Christ Jesus.

Because there exists an appalling and ever-widening gap between the have-nots and have-lots in the U.S. and around the globe, and because *remembering the poor* is one of the practices most fundamentally constitutive of the

Christian witness of faith, there is tremendous need today for a radical rethinking of its nature as such, and its potential impact on the shape and scope both of practical theology and Christian education in the twenty-first century. In light of the virtual stampede toward urban ministry and the fevered academic interest in *economic globalization* sweeping through theological education today, the need is all the greater for a fresh consideration of the ancient practice of remembering the poor, and for an articulation of its connection to the contemporary theological agenda. What is the real impetus for urban ministry anyway? And why should we concern ourselves with a topic that seems so remote and removed as economic globalization? We need a renewed theological vision and conceptualization that brings these disparate but related dynamics into clearer connection and perspective, affording us the possibility of more faithful, creative participation in, and public witness to, God's own missionary work in the world, and God's own special concern for remembering the poor.

The Christian Faith: A Rich Tapestry of Practices

Among a growing number of scholars today, there is an emerging consensus that — in terms of its lived expression — the Christian faith can best be understood as a rich tapestry of practices that form a dynamic Way of living in the world. Speaking of faith in these terms serves as a reminder that faith is not so much something we *have* as it is something we *do*. Faith is a verb, not a noun.

Some theorists of human development posit faith as an innate construct of the human personality — a genetic endowment — thus interpreting faith as the “organ” by and through which human beings make meaning. Rather than construing faith as an innate, developmental competency of the human ego — as the structural school of thought contends — in *The Logic of the Spirit* James Loder rightly claims that faith is best understood biblically as a dynamic, active participation in the power and purposes of God in and for the sake of the world. Faith arises or comes forth in, and depends on, relational encounters with witnesses of faith, preeminently an encounter with Jesus. There is an “event” quality to faith as it is always played out — *practiced* — in historical, concrete situations where repeatedly it proves and authenticates itself as faithfulness to God's own creative and transformative work in the world.¹

It is the perspective on faith as a participation in the power and purposes of

God for the life of the world that I assume in this chapter. Having both a divine and human side — on the human, subjective side, faith is something we human beings *do*. Faith is something we *practice* in light of and in response to our discernment of God's active presence in and for the sake of the whole created order.

Much of the recent work on the notion of Christian faith practice is informed by Alasdair MacIntyre's influential book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*.² Rather than the more familiar and traditional language of spiritual disciplines or means of grace, the terminology of “practice” is widely used today in hopes of helping believers think in fresh new ways about older traditions in the church. In this present chapter, I use practice in MacIntyre's sense to refer to a coherent and complex form of socially established human activity that addresses some particular, fundamental human need, and that includes an ongoing tradition and designated practitioners.

Given our individualistic approach to Christian faith and spirituality, when we talk about Christian practice we likely call to mind images such as an individual actor off alone somewhere engaged in meditation and prayer. But notice that “practice” as defined here embraces activity shared by and within communities; it is a *cooperative* human enterprise. The actions of persons become “practice” only when engaged in as participation in the larger practice of a community into which the “practitioners” have been initiated, and by which they are held accountable according to standards internal to the practice. Law, medicine, and social work, for example, reflect this understanding of practice.

Communities shape their practices in distinctive ways. But practices also shape communities and individual members therein particular ways, giving practices epistemological and moral weight. Through lifelong engagement in practices we come into awareness of certain realities — we come *to see* and *to know* and even *to be* things — that apart from such participation would otherwise remain beyond our ken. There are certain goods, values, and virtues internal to particular practices that can be acquired only from the inside out, through sustained participation in practicing communities. Through cooperative engagement over time, intersubjectively and communally we form a *habitus*, understood as a predisposition to be a particular kind of community, and a particular kind of person within the community. Formation of a distinctly Christian, therefore also a theological, *habitus* involves sustained, lifelong communal participation in practices constitutive to the Christian faith and life. Though we are prone to view our engagement in certain practices — such as remembering the poor — as the *consequence* of our faith in God, scrip-

1. James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), pp. 257-258. Loder acknowledges his indebtedness to Gerhard Ebeling for many of his insights regarding faith.

2. Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

tures often reverse this logic, claiming some practices as the *precondition* for authentic worship, praise, and participation in the life of God. According to Gospel writers Luke and Matthew, remembering the poor is precisely such a practice. In these gospels, remembering the poor is seen as the precondition for our capacity to recognize and respond to our living Lord: the Spirit of Jesus who *today* is present with the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the least and last.

Christian practice, thus, can be understood as a rich tapestry of historically mediated, identity-forming, patterned actions through which the church itself attempts faithful witness to and participation in God's own active presence in and for the sake of the world. These inherited actions should be seen in dynamic not static ways because, as they are handed on from one generation to the next, practices are continuously shaped and reshaped through the ongoing dialogue we orchestrate between present sociocultural circumstances and the historic Christian witness of faith.

Christian practices are the patterned, cooperative, and informed ways that our lives as Christians are caught up into the things that God is doing in the world *already*. Appreciation for God's prior initiative is a reminder that, ultimately, the focus or referent of any Christian practice is not on what we humans are doing to change ourselves (spiritual formation) or to change the world (social justice) — these are misleading distinctions in the first place. Instead, through our engagement in given practices, we pay, or at least try to pay, unyielding attention to *what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ to transform all the created order*.

Hence, rather than referring to the church's mission in the world, we speak instead of *missio Dei*, God's own mission in the world in and through Jesus Christ. By so doing we avoid the specter of works righteousness, or trying to earn our way into salvation. Because salvation is already given to us *proleptically* as a free gift of grace through Jesus Christ, God sets us free to actualize the effects of grace and salvation into the total matrix of life in all its interrelated, contingent dimensions: personal, interpersonal, social, economic, and political.

Speaking from within this general framework for understanding Christian practice, my contention is that the historic practice *most* in need of fresh consideration by practical theologians and Christian educators today — precisely because too many people are disappearing into the underside of history, caught in the undertow of unfettered free market forces — is the very practice receiving the *least* amount of attention: that of *remembering the poor*. By this biblical phrase (Gal. 2:10) obviously I do not mean some sort of sentimental feeling or existential angst that the poor are in fact poor. Remembering the poor is a concrete, historical practice with a long, varied and rich tradition,

grounded in and shaped by faith communities across many centuries.³ As Christian *practice*, remembering the poor is bodily, concrete, experiential, relational, communal, even political; and as *Christian practice*, is biblical, liturgical, theological, and sacramental.

Canaries Have Stopped Singing

September 11, 2001, will long be remembered as a day of horrific national tragedy in the U.S., sending shock waves around the globe. America is still reeling at the magnitude of loss. September 11 will long be remembered as a *day of death*.

For some 30,000 children around the globe under the age of five, *every* day is a day of death.⁴ This is the number of children who die *daily* of starvation or from preventable infectious diseases that we have both the money and the know-how but not the moral compunction to prevent.⁵ This is the number of children who die daily from direct consequences of being raised — forlorn and forgotten — in abject poverty.

On the day following the unspeakable slaughter of innocents, President Bush declared war on terrorism, and since then has repeatedly reminded the American public that “such a campaign will be long and difficult, will require time and resolve, and may take years to root out. We will rally the world. We will be patient. We will be focused. And we will be steadfast in our determination,” he said. Over time, public leaders have cobbled together sentiments such as these and stylized them into a national liturgy of sorts, that both expresses and that shapes, on a tacit yet daily basis, our sense of the world and our place in it.

What if, in this living liturgy — along with our laments for the 3,000 who died on 9/11 — we were to include lamentation for the some 30,000 who die daily of poverty-related causes? What if we were to echo the indelible wails that

3. In her book *The Gospel in History: Portrait of a Teaching Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), Marianne Sawicki names and traces three major ways the church proclaims and communicates the reign of God in the world. One of the three is “ministries of service,” a notion similar to what I mean by *remembering the poor*. Ministries of service consist, she says, of “efforts to secure the physical, economic, social, and psychological welfare of disadvantaged people; and whatever is done in Jesus’ name to relieve the suffering of his sisters and brothers.” See Sawicki, *The Gospel in History*, p. 36.

4. So began Joerg Rieger in his chapel sermon on Tuesday morning, September 12, 2001.

5. For further information see: *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, United Nations Development Programme. <http://www.undp.org/hdr2002>.

"thousands of lives have been ended by evil" and "the pictures of suffering fill us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger"? What if we were to "rally the world's attention" on the pain and suffering of those excluded from the technological and economic progress of the twenty-first century? What if we were to become "steadfast in our determination" to promote the full flourishing of all God's creatures and creation? What if the deaths of the masses "living below" were to be equally horrific to us as the deaths of the elites "living above" on the top floors of this world?

In his book, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*, James Garbarino decries how the socioeconomic context in which we raise children and youth today — in the U.S. and around the globe — poisons their development and puts them at great developmental risk.⁶ Garbarino recalls that in the days before coal mining became high tech, it was customary for miners to bring caged canaries into the mines with them. They hung the caged birds from the roof beams of the tunnels. When the canaries stopped singing and died, the miners were warned that the caverns were filling up with toxic, deadly gasses. Similarly, Garbarino suggests, our most vulnerable youth serve as weather vanes and indicators of what is going on in our world today; they are our canaries.

Coal miners paid very close attention when their canaries stopped singing and died. They heeded the warning. But how about us? To what do we pay close attention? What does the daily death of 30,000 children around the globe tell us? That "caverns" elsewhere are toxic, but not ours? To my mind, these deaths are nothing less than clear signals of toxic wastes — social, economic, environmental, political — being left behind by corporate-driven capitalism as it wafts its way around the world like a traveling Chernobyl. The specters that daily sneak around and snatch away 30,000 vulnerable children are the selfsame ones putting at risk *all* women, men, and children in the U.S. and abroad, whether they live on the upper or lower decks of our Earth Home. Even our Home itself is at risk. While the toxins kill some people outright, they kill others of us in slow motion; but all the same — they snuff out the life God intends for us and for the entire created order.

According to Loder's *interactional* perspective on human development, children and youth grow up in an ecology where systems remote to them nonetheless have a direct impact on them and their families. A child's development is the result of a complex interplay among immediate family systems and the wider social, political, and economic systems within which children and families negotiate their lives. *All* these systems are now co-opted and compromised

6. James Garbarino, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999).

by consumer-oriented corporate-driven capitalism and the quasi-religious way of life promoted by it. In and through his writings, Loder consistently decried the propensity of American culture to construct, to perpetuate, and to lavishly reward as "normal" a prototypical lifestyle that is, in fact, killing us right and left. For all its economic achievements, the United States has *more poverty* and *lower life expectancy* than any other major advanced nation. Males in Costa Rica have a longer life expectancy than males in the U.S.! On nearly every index or indicator of well-being, such as infant mortality, child poverty, homelessness, health care, nutrition, education, teen pregnancy, life expectancy, child care, family income, rates of imprisonment, the U.S. comes off worse than most other industrialized nations.

We live in a society predicated on the assumption that normative human development — and the socioeconomic environment required to optimize and sustain it — is best driven forward by ever-escalating competition, consumption, ambition, addiction, achievement, and acquisition. For free-market forces to do what economic theory suggests they must do in order to float all boats, these must be the driving forces. This precisely is why Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street* could say without guile "greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works." Loder repeatedly said that the attitudes and behaviors considered "normal" and "normative" in American society actually should be seen as socially constructed, mutually reinforced, culturally applauded, historically accelerated *patterns of human self-destruction*.

In light of Loder's voice, along with a growing chorus of scholars, the underlying thesis of this chapter seems, in some respects, not entirely new, yet bears repeating nonetheless. That is to say, in our ordinary daily existence, both as persons and congregations, we mainline Christians in North America are much more profoundly influenced and shaped by values of the "free market model" of neo-liberal economic thought than we are by our own distinctive set of faith practices and beliefs. The most potent and persuasive initiation of our children and youth today is not into a countercultural vision of flourishing for all creatures and creation, but rather is into a culture born and bred by free-market, consumer-oriented, corporate-driven capitalism that advantages the few at the expense of the many. *Children and youth know early in life whether they've been assigned to the few or to the many*, and they begin equally as early to score their whole lives accordingly.

The effort of the church to initiate believers into a distinctive set of countercultural practices does not take place in a vacuum; there is no clean slate anywhere. Anything and everything we do is culturally compromised because we ourselves are compromised by a culture of consumer and corporate capitalism. Whatever we think we can see of this actually is only the proverbial

tip of the iceberg. My additional thesis here is that we cannot fully appreciate the sheer magnitude of what is happening unless and until we begin to keep company with those grassroots communities where families are clinging to life in the undertow of globalized economic forces — and hear firsthand from them their history and their story, their pain, and their hopes and dreams for the world and for the future of their children in it.

On these points, Joyce Ann Mercer and I share similar perspectives: “With Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass, and others focusing on participation in the practices of faith as the way young people take on Christian identity and vocation,” she says, “I can affirm in a general sense that this faith and this calling are probably ‘more caught than taught.’”⁷ Notwithstanding, she observes there to be a certain naiveté in the movement. Discussion proceeds, Mercer laments, “as if none of these communities or theologies exists in captivity to the cultures through which they are expressed; as if these communities are all equally well equipped to be adequate mentors of Christian faith practices; as if the needs and interests of marginalized persons will be automatically protected by communities rather than subsumed into them.”⁸

Christian Practice in a Gilded Age

Paul Krugman is right when he asserts that we “can’t understand what’s happening in America today without understanding the extent, causes and consequences of the vast increase in economic and political inequality that has taken place over the last three decades, and in particular the astonishing concentration of income and wealth in just a few hands.”⁹ Although America has *higher per capita income* than other advanced countries, it turns out that that’s mainly because our rich are much richer. We have spawned a capitalism wherein the wealth of the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans exceeds what 95 percent of other Americans have to live on, and a globalized economy where the world’s 200 richest people own assets greater than the combined income of the world’s 2.5 billion poorest people. *Economic globalization* is better seen as *corporate-driven capitalism*: the top 200 multinationals have total annual sales greater than the annual output of the United States economy. Of the 100 largest econo-

7. Joyce Ann Mercer, “Call Forwarding: Putting Vocation in the Present Tense with Youth,” *Compass Points: Navigating Vocation: The 2002 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* (Princeton: The Institute for Youth Ministry, 2002), p. 37.

8. Mercer, “Call Forwarding,” pp. 37-38.

9. Paul Krugman, “For Richer: How the Permissive Capitalism of the Boom Destroyed American Equality,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 20, 2002, p. 64.

mies in the world 51 percent are corporations, only 49 are countries. Mitsubishi is larger than Indonesia; Toyota is bigger than Norway.¹⁰

“We are now living in a new Gilded Age, as extravagant as the original,” says Krugman.¹¹ Income inequality in America has returned to the levels of the 1920s, when 12 percent of all American families controlled close to 86 percent of the nation’s wealth.¹² The economic reality Krugman talks about as the *new Gilded Age*, other writers dub as a *plutocracy* (rule by the rich) or *kleptocracy* (rich steal from the poor — unconsciously, compulsively, obsessively).

The Invisible Guiding Hand: Leading Us Where?

We are all members of a society and a culture, now global in scope, whose very fabric is knit together by neo-liberal tenets of market capitalism, today the most influential ideology in the world. Capitalism, as an economic paradigm, is rooted in neo-liberal economic theory dating back to the eighteenth-century Scottish economist Adam Smith who, in 1776, published his classic *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. This work represents the emergence of economic liberalism. Smith believed that free trade, without government intervention, promises the best path to economic growth for a nation. Now known as *neo-liberalism*, the model is based on the principle that pursuit of private or individual self-interests in an unfettered, unregulated market is the most efficient means to produce economic growth which eventually will benefit all members and institutions in a given society.

Because people today understand the market to be neutral or value-free, beyond categories of good and evil, they thereby believe individuals should pursue private interests according to their own particular values and purposes. What individuals will achieve depends on what they bring to and invest in the market, such as individual effort, hard work, diligence, perseverance, intelligence, personal ambition, competitiveness, a spirit of risk, single-minded pursuit of individual rights, self-interests, and achievement. The more these characteristics are present, the more the market will thrive; within this framework, indeed “greed is good.” Greed motivates. Under the guidance of the “invisible hand” of the market, over the long haul outcomes will be produced that are beneficial not only to individuals *qua* individuals, but also to the common

10. For further information see: <http://www.just-international.org>.

11. Krugman, “For Richer,” p. 63.

12. Robert D. Kaplan, “Was Democracy Just a Moment?” *The Atlantic Monthly* 280, 6 (Dec. 1997): 55-80.

good. Therefore the market is best left to follow its own internal logic even if nations or groups must go through untoward periods of economic adjustment and readjustment.

Perhaps the more fundamental problem today should not be located in the market *per se*, but rather in the fact that the American public (and the church) has allowed free-market philosophy — in unbridled fashion — to pervade more and more sectors of public life and public policy and, worse yet, to jump out of the public sphere and into private life where its logic *was never intended to belong*. As Duncan Forrester points out, according to classical economic thought the market and its procedures and processes were to be associated with only one part of life. The health of a society could not totally revolve around the market, but was to depend fundamentally on a moral and social order (civil society) in which it was situated and on which it depended for vitality. Each sphere of the social order was understood to operate according to different and sometimes even contrasting principles.¹³

But today, by some measures, free-market capitalism and the globalized economy it spawns have, for countless numbers of people, become like a religion. In his classic essay "Religion as a Cultural System," Clifford Geertz defined religion in *cultural-linguistic* terms as a system of symbols formulating a picture of the way things *are* — with such an aura of authority and facticity that it instills in people pervasive, powerful, and long-lasting moods and motivations.¹⁴ According to Geertz's definition, a religion provides and induces in adherents both a *model of* and a *model for* living according to a conception of "the really real." In other words, religion not only *expresses* one's sense of reality, it also *shapes* it, thereby forming in persons and groups a distinctive style of life in ordinary, everyday comings and goings, and in habitual dispositions and behaviors (a *habitus*).

There is a major difference, however, between this "religion" and the religious traditions to which believers become conscious adherents. While believers today — whether attending a mosque, a church, a temple, or other house of worship — have at least *some* opportunity consciously to think about the vision and values promoted by their tradition, the worldview promoted by the market model gathers its force by the very fact that we are never asked to examine and explore its features. It simply exists as an invisible fact of life — like the air we breathe — and so we dwell in it as fish in water never knowing anything differ-

13. Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 159-160.

14. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Religious Situation*, ed. Donald R. Culter (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 664.

ent even exists. Insofar as we dwell in this system even as this system dwells in us without notice, our engagement in Christian practices is influenced in unknown and unseen ways.

What currently is happening, laments William Coats, is the creation of a *world society* dominated by large capitalists in which inequality and exploitation are now institutionalized via free market mechanisms, even as widespread human misery increases. Coats worries that while the working class feels too overwhelmed and powerless, the middle class feels too comfortable and complacent to mount up any significant protest against present economic arrangements. From a Christian standpoint, writes Coats, one can hardly think of "an uglier configuration" than the institutionalization of inequality and a world dominated by a small capitalist class.¹⁵

Congregations: America's Hidden "Safety Net" of Services?

According to H. Richard Niebuhr, it is crucial — before one proceeds to ask *what shall we do?* — first to ask *what is going on?* While in the previous section we explored some of what is going on, there is yet another aspect: this has to do with what the church presently is doing to remember the poor, based on perceptions, past and present, of "what is going on." That question is the focus of this section.

To bolster the case that U.S. churches are in a position to expand their role in caring for poor children and families — in light of welfare reform (1996) and the Bush administration "faith-based" initiatives — several major studies attempted to gauge the church's present and historical involvement in social services. On the basis of research findings, Ram Cnaan, professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania, now celebrates the mainline church in North America as our national "hidden safety net." The studies reveal that at least the simple majority of the 353,000 congregations in the U.S. are involved, directly or indirectly, in addressing one or more immediate, emergency needs of persons and families for food, clothing, or shelter.

Cnaan, along with the vast majority of mainline congregations in North America, apparently accepts as pre-given a *service-delivery paradigm* as the primary, normative strategy for how the church should go about remembering the poor. I wish to make the case, however, that the so-called *servanthood* model — translated into *service delivery* regarding ministry with the poor — is grounded

15. William R. Coats, *God in Public: Political Theology Beyond Niebuhr* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 82.

neither in solid biblical-theological foundations nor in a perceptive analysis (and spiritual discernment) of how best to be *stewards* (housekeepers and managers) of our manifold God-given resources.

In this section, in order better to understand the servanthood model — or at least one version of it — I shall reflect on the hermeneutic of service propounded by Craig Dykstra in his book *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg*.¹⁶ In his critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental theory of moral development, Dykstra proposes *Christian service* as an alternative pathway to Christian moral growth. As I examine his model, it may begin to appear to readers that my aim is to offer "a Christian educator's alternative to Dykstra's alternative to Kohlberg," but that is not my primary concern. Dykstra's book warrants lengthy exploration precisely because it makes explicit the otherwise implicit model of ministry operative in the majority of mainline congregations in the U.S. today. When the covers are pulled back, the model he explicates appears to be virtually the same one mainline congregations use when they give an account of *why* and *how* they go about remembering the poor — namely, the Bible says that we Christians are called to "serve" the needy (and we can do it without hauling in "politics"). By getting inside Dykstra's proposed logic of Christian service, we are able to see from the inside-out how many mainline, middle-class congregations go about construing their praxis with the poor.

Having reflected at great length on Dykstra's proposed model of Christian service, I am convinced — I regret having to acknowledge — that to a great extent it mirrors mainline, middle-class piety which itself is riddled with unseen, unacknowledged class interests, ideologies, and distorted views of power and authority. Upon close analysis of Dykstra's project, it becomes apparent that he merely moves from a conventional conception of justice (dominated by the mechanics of structural-developmental theory) to a conventional conception of service (dominated by the mechanics of psychodynamic theory). Juridical ethics (Kohlberg) depends on *cognitive* processes while visional ethics (Dykstra) depends on *imaginal* and intuitive processes. Other scholars fortunately, such as Carol Gilligan, have found ways to overcome such binary thinking — but that is not my focus here. My concern is that in his fascination with the mechanics of *how we see* (he depends heavily on the conflict-creativity paradigm of James Loder, as well as on the philosophy of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch) he forgets the overriding concern of biblical writers for *what we see*. H. Richard Niebuhr, one of Dykstra's resources, noticed it makes all the differ-

16. Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist, 1981).

ence in the world whether, as Christians, we seek *to be loving* or whether we seek *to love our neighbor*. By the same token, it matters a great deal — at least biblically speaking it does — as to whether we attempt in some generic way to *see reality* or whether we attempt *to see the reality of the poor from the perspective of the poor*. Dykstra never considers this viewpoint.

Though Dykstra does not demonstrate for the reader his exegesis of the texts on which he rests his claims about Christian service, there is evidence that he de-historicizes and de-contextualizes them to the point that he removes their theological bite and eschatological sting. For this reason, in his explication of "service" he lapses into the conventional morality of the white middle-class church in America. As we will see, his approach puts the emphasis on service as *interpersonal*, ignoring socioeconomic and political dimensions of how we address (and also how we locate) human pain and suffering. Though in a footnote he acknowledges that "service has a political and prophetic dimension" he says he chose not to deal with these dimensions because space did not permit (odd, given the brevity of the book at only 143 pages). This demurral is problematic for at least five reasons. First, it assumes we can understand and give proper care to persons apart from their specific socioeconomic or political context. In today's globalized, pluralistic world, we can do no such thing. Second, it assumes (actually, he outright asserts) that later on we can "add and stir" *structural, institutional, or political* dimensions without having to reconstruct or rethink his current definitions. This is peculiar given that his definition of service requires denunciation of power from the outset. Third — and this is most troublesome — his methodology *privileges service over justice*, which is exactly what the white, mainline, middle-class church in North America has done all along and continues to do. Fourth, it ignores the fact that injustices embedded in contexts where service is given undercut and distort Christian service from the outset. Fifth, it fails to explain why a book that sets out to critique a notion of justice instead replaces it with a notion of service — rather than with a revised notion of justice.¹⁷

In *Vision and Character*, Dykstra's stated purpose is to critique Lawrence Kohlberg's structural-developmental theory of justice (juridical ethics) that puts individual rights, along with principles of fairness, at center stage. Dykstra proposes an alternative quasi-developmental model of "visional ethics." According to Dykstra's critique, Kohlberg depicts *character* essentially as a "disconnected bag of virtues." Dykstra wants to claim, to the contrary, that character is a coher-

17. Though this book appears early in Dykstra's career, there is little in later writings to suggest that his theological framework overall, or important constructs related to it, have altered in any significant ways.

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ent dynamic that gains unity based on "what we see" rather than "what we do." In ethics, he maintains, vision has (or should have) primacy over action. Vision, he says, occasions conduct. True vision occasions true conduct. Particular actions, virtues, decisions, and choices, therefore, are not the first and foremost consideration in visional ethics. The uppermost concern, rather, is with *what we see*, and *what enables us to see*. "For visional ethics, action follows vision; and vision depends on character."¹⁸ And character, in turn, does not merely "develop" according to genetically-given stages (Kohlberg). Rather, character is instilled by and through communities that provide us with a moral compass, owing to the vocabulary, the narratives and discourses, and all the actions and rituals that influence our perceptions, values, and ways of being in the world.

However, "visional ethics" *per se* does not set Christian formation apart from formation by and in other communities. Distinctive communities instill distinctive ethics. The distinguishing element for Christians lies in three core disciplines: service, repentance, prayer. Christian service, along with interrelated disciplines of repentance and prayer, provides for Christians an alternative to Kohlberg's conception of the moral life: we must make service the prominent practice of the Christian moral life. In constructing his alternative model, Dykstra here makes his decisive methodological turn, for there is nothing in the unfolding logic of his argument that would have prevented him from proposing justice, biblically defined — rather than service — as the prominent practice of the Christian moral life. Precisely at this point is where hidden ideologies of class and white privilege come into play. Let us see how this is so.

Dykstra defines Christian service as "a discipline through which care, concern, and aid are given by one person to another in a particular way, in a way that is shaped by presence — vulnerable, just, compassionate, and committed."¹⁹ Dykstra's argument for the centrality of service is rooted in a selection of biblical passages that mention service and allude to servanthood. Whenever the disciples argued about who would be nearest to Jesus in the coming Reign, for example, Jesus answered by saying it would be "servants." An even more powerful image of service and servanthood in the Bible, however, says Dykstra, is Jesus bending over to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-17).

In order for our service to be authentically biblical and Christian, Dykstra avers, we must avoid two common tendencies found in the ordinary practice of service: one is making "effectiveness" a primary goal, and the second is garnering power in order to make service effective. Service has to do with the "foolishness" of the Christian gospel, Dykstra says, because it means "renouncing power

in order to be present with others in vulnerability, equality, and compassion."²⁰ In place of *effectiveness* or *power*, at the heart of a biblical model of service is the dynamic of *personal presence*.

From this point on, Dykstra directs attention to *interpersonal* and *intersubjective* relationships — diverting attention away from how systems and ideologies (such as white privilege and class bias) often play a profound role in shaping and structuring, allowing and disallowing, certain relationships in the first place. The way Dykstra defends his intersubjective bent reveals the binary way he sees the world. For him, ethics is based *either* on "objective and publicly articulable needs of persons" (Kohlberg) *or* on "the realm of intersubjective relationships where it matters who in particular is making the claim, who in particular the claim is being made of"²¹ (visional ethics). He chooses the latter because he believes that "a very great portion of the situations that make up our moral lives are of the intersubjective rather than the objective kind."²² How we negotiate our everyday lives "has a great deal to do with who we are as moral beings," he says.²³ What we learn, what we do, how we think, how we feel within the context of our ordinary, everyday, intersubjective world determine how we will face and deal with dilemmas of a more public nature.²⁴ This sounds wonderful until you consider how much time we spend in our class-ridden enclaves. Does this model mean that people on top floors of our society are being morally equipped in ways similar to those who live in the middle or on the lowest floors? In "visional ethics" does it matter whether one views a moral dilemma from the bottom of the heap rather than from the top?

In rendering Christian service, according to Dykstra, we should *renounce power*, but not because power is evil in and of itself. Rather, when we deliberately collect power in order to be "effective" in our service, Dykstra assumes that *we ourselves must predetermine* the criteria of effectiveness and decide what will become of needy people when our service has accomplished its purposes. Whenever we seek to make our service "effective," he believes, we only end up defining for others what health and strength should look like. It never occurs to him that this could be done as a collaborative, cooperative endeavor, carried out interpersonally (and better yet, collectively). It never occurs to him that there are many uses to which power can be put, even in interpersonal situations, other than aiming to be "effective."

Dykstra worries that we might unduly run the risk of accumulating

20. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 103.

21. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, pp. 14-15.

22. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 15.

23. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 15.

24. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 15.

18. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 59.

19. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 59.

power simply for the sake of *having* power rather than for the sake of serving others with and through the use of power. Certainly, to gather and use power is to run risks — *big* ones. But should the Christian moral life be predicated on neuroses about — and worse yet, avoidance of — taking risks? I challenge Dykstra's assumption that the only way to avoid abusing power is to renounce power. And I especially challenge his assumption that Jesus himself calls followers to renounce power. And finally, I challenge his lack of self-awareness regarding the impact of social location on perceptions of power. It strikes me that only an individual (white male) born into and living an entire lifetime in the upper echelons of white privilege — a hidden hierarchy that *daily* and *from the outset* confers unequal power and advantage — could be so disingenuous about the need for *and divine gift* of power in order to contribute to and participate in human flourishing. *Only persons already over-privileged by power can pretend its unimportance.* Persons like myself (white female) — born into a poor working-class family located on the lower socioeconomic rungs of a class-ridden society — can ill afford the luxury of such pretense.

As I read scriptures, I hear Jesus asking us to denounce power *used abusively* — in ways that are self-referential, repressive, imperialistic, and unilateral. This has been the unfortunate legacy of American expansionism and colonialism carried out under the guise of Christian missionary witness. Dykstra's comments imply that his one and only conception of power is a picture or model of power used in this way. But there's another option. Jesus asks us to embrace "the other" and — in mutuality and partnership with "the other" — to exercise power in collaborative, creative, communal, relational, constructive ways in order to build up the common good and to promote human flourishing. As people "called out" *to be stewards* of God's own household (the created order itself, not simply the church), we cannot afford to repudiate an essential dimension of our moral agency as Christian persons: the capacity to use power judiciously and creatively (on all levels: interpersonal, social, political) to resist and restrain evil, to reduce institutionalized forms of injustice, and to promote the full flourishing of all God's creatures and creation.

The Bible Tells Us So?

To my mind, Dykstra's alternative construction of the Christian moral life depends, in part, on the veracity of his claim that "the theme of service is a prominent one in the Bible, and particularly in the Gospels."²⁵ The five biblical pas-

25. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 98.

sages — which, in Dykstra's estimation, commend a service-oriented model for ministry and for Christian moral life overall — deserve a fresh reading. We will begin with Mark 10:35-44. In this story — which occurs on the journey toward Jerusalem — the disciples James and John approach Jesus, imploring him to *privilege* them in a particular way. Upon hearing about this incident, the other disciples get angry, and so Jesus calls them all together to discuss the matter. He points out to them how the prevailing Gentile rulers were using power (actually *force*) to lord it over others, and how leaders considered great were acting in oppressive, abusive ways. "It will not be so among you," Jesus insists.

In Mark 10:35-44, as in the other passages to which Dykstra refers, Jesus does not explicitly use the word "power" which, in and of itself, is a neutral notion. The word for power in Spanish is *poder*, meaning "to be able." Because we are beings created in the image and likeness of a triune God — bestowing to us a relational and communal nature, and giving to us a generous participation in who God is and what God does — *we are able*, that is, we have God-given power, to create conditions (including economic, social, political, religious) under which "the other" (and we ourselves) may flourish in ways that contribute to, rather than detract from, the flourishing of all creatures and creation. The only condition under which we do not or cannot use power to influence reality is called *death*.

While it is true that — as beings prone to distort our image and likeness to God — we sometimes use power abusively, it is also true that under the impress of ongoing healing and transformation — grounded in who God is and what God is doing — relatively we are *freed from* self-serving use of power and relatively *freed for* self-giving (but not self-abnegating) use of it. One of the definitive aspects of *metanoia* — an ongoing dimension of the Christian moral life — is our turn from power used destructively to power used creatively and constructively — in order to contribute to and participate in human flourishing (understood as grounded in God's active presence in and for the world). This is core to "living in the Spirit."

Luke (22:24-27) locates the interchange about greatness as part of the fellowship and dialogue among disciples shared around the table following the Last Supper — giving Jesus' comments an eschatological perspective. During this conversation, Jesus insists that — in contrast to Gentile leaders who use power and authority to abuse or to exclude — among his followers the greatest must become *like the youngest*, and the leader *like ones who serve*. In the same breath, Jesus says: "I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table" (Luke 22:29-30). Ordinarily, *slaves* — bought, sold, traded on the auction block (or even home-grown) — are ones who serve the table; and so Jesus here calls attention to two

of the most excluded, non-person groups in that social context, the *children* (the youngest) and the slaves. What's more, he identifies himself with these excluded groups! "I am among you as one who serves" (as one of the excluded slaves) (verse 27). Even further, he confers on the excluded groups a kingdom, so that they may eat and drink "at the table." In contrast to the dominant status quo, where authority is located among those *already* at the table, in his allusion to the eschatological reversal, Jesus relocates authority, along with dignity and respect, among and within persons presently excluded — now *they* "may eat and drink at my table" (verse 30).

As in Mark, the Gospel of Matthew locates the incident with James and John on the journey toward Jerusalem (their mother is now in the picture) (Matt. 20:20-28). The stories between which Matthew situates the "greatness" incident add potential new insights into it. Immediately prior to the story about James and John, Matthew recalls an incident in which Peter points out to Jesus that because he and others had given up all their possessions — unlike the rich young ruler — they should reap extra rewards. Jesus answers by telling a parable about day laborers who all receive the same wages, though some worked all day while others worked only one hour. Among the early-birds there arises bitter resentment that the ones who arrived last *were made equal* to those who were there first.

Jesus uses this occasion to talk about the sheer generosity of God, and about God's completely gratuitous love. Because of the generous character of God, in the inbreaking reign (Matthew says "at the renewal of all things") there are great reversals as to who counts and who does not, who is first and who is last. God remembers and is generous to those silenced at the margins, to those ignored at the front gate, to those excluded from the table, to those beaten up and tossed to the side of the road, to those who suffer pain and poverty, to those born on the bottom rungs, to those who show up last — whether "deserving" or not — simply and only because God is God.

Another biblical text identified by Dykstra is Matthew 23:11: "the greatest among you will be your servant." The context here is extremely important (because the statement may, in fact, be an eschatological indicative rather than an ethical imperative). Speaking to the masses of the working poor, Jesus directs their attention to "mainline" religious leaders (like us), humming along in their capacity as authority figures, interpreting and teaching the theological tradition. Jesus commends the crowds and the disciples to follow these teachings. In terms of their financial giving, Jesus points out that leaders were lavishly generous and set extraordinarily high standards by what they gave (Matt. 23:23). But Jesus suddenly unleashes seven harsh woes on those very leaders. So what is the problem? *Jesus names and criticizes what was being concealed by and underneath*

mainline piety. Widows, for instance, were being evicted from their homes, and the mainline leaders were not lifting a finger to help them (Matt. 23:4, 14). Jesus told the masses that because their religious leaders do, in fact, handle the theological traditions of Moses, they should pay attention to *those* teachings but those teachings *only* (Matt. 23:3). The working class people, otherwise, should be wary, Jesus warned, of *all* the other practices of the mainline leaders, because those practices are laden with economic, political, social, and spiritual neglect and abuse.

Within the wider (and proper) setting of the text (Matt. 23:1-39) — and not simply Dykstra's decontextualized verse (23:11) — we see how Jesus educates and sensitizes masses of working poor people to a system that exploits and disadvantages them, while it overprivileges an elite few (Matt. 23:1-11). Jesus intimates to the poor: though this society — in social, economic, political, and even religious ways — treats you as non-persons, in terms of the Reign of God you are already great. (*This* radical grace is the real foolishness of the gospel — *not*, as Dykstra would have it, the renunciation of power.) In verses 7-8, Jesus points out how the incumbent religious leaders bask in the deference paid to them, both in the "secular" marketplace and in their seats of religious authority. These leaders loved the power and status conferred by the title "Master." "Do not ever allow anyone to call you that," says Jesus, "*for all of you are on the same level . . .*" (Matt. 23:7-10). Aside from the implied eschatology, Jesus teaches resistance to imposed inequality. He teaches poor people how to spot and to resist those systems that overprivilege the few at the expense of the many. This resistance has a twofold dynamic: resistance against *being dominated*, and resistance against *dominating others*. In other words, Jesus teaches the proper uses of power and authority. He does not blip these issues off the radar screen.

Jesus has a different set of warnings (seven woes!) for those advantaged by systems at the expense of those who are disadvantaged (Matt. 23:13-39). The spiritual foofaraw of the elites made it possible for them to conceal their neglect of *what matters most*: the practices of justice, and of faith, and of mercy (Matt. 23:23). These things you ought to be doing, says Jesus to the leaders, while not neglecting other routine ministries, like teaching, giving money, and conducting rituals. Jesus makes it clear that it does not matter to what extent or how well a congregation is practicing other forms of piety (like "service"?). *If they do not practice justice they are about as life-giving as a mausoleum* (Matt. 23:27).

The final passage to which Dykstra appeals is Mark 9:33-35. Dykstra chops off the text right after Jesus says to the twelve, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." It is important to notice that the full pericope includes two other verses *key* to its meaning (9:36-37). Jesus places a little child in the disciples' midst, then takes the child into his own arms, saying: "Whoever

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welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). The scholarly consensus, according to James Bailey, is that Mark 9:33-37 and Mark 10:13-16 must be understood in light of each other, and that both passages must be understood in light of the historical frame of reference out of which Jesus spoke: *the extremely marginalized social status of children in the first-century world*.²⁶ When Jesus places the child in the disciples' midst, and then takes the child into his own embrace, he introduces the child as among "the least ones" in the society who need actively to be sought, received, and embraced. So far, the disciples have been too dense to understand that being drawn near to Jesus means being drawn near to the excluded, to the least and last. *To show respect for the poor and the excluded is to show respect for God!*

The implications of all these various passages cannot be distilled into only one narrow message — written, as they were, by different authors speaking to different audiences. A fresh reading of the texts reveals a rich mosaic of motifs, metaphors, and images. Many of these are concerned not so much with a denunciation of power as with an *alternative construction of power* (to be used relationally, communally, collaboratively) and a *relocation of power and authority* (to be distributed among and between ordinary persons, including "the least ones"). By no stretch can these texts be boiled down to the theme of *service or servanthood*. To claim or even imply that the flow of logic here is predominantly about the middle-class "serving the needy" is to take the world-altering, cosmos-changing eschatological power of Jesus' message and squeeze it into a conventional, class-bound cultural container.

Within the rich mosaic rendered by these texts, there are *many* practices relevant to Christian moral agency — some of which require our engagement on simultaneous levels (interpersonal, social, structural) — such as resisting, renewing, reversing, respecting, reciprocating, recognizing, restructuring, restraining, including, critiquing, discerning, deconstructing, dismantling. Jesus recommended, modeled, and implied our engagement in such practices as a way of life that stands over against a life shaped by coercing, concealing, oppressing, co-opting, controlling, lording, excluding, abusing, and dominating. To boil down the richness of these texts to the theme of "service" is an exercise in reductionism.

According to Dykstra's Christology, Jesus did not come to bring an end to suffering but rather to be with us in our suffering; this is the meaning of the incarnation, he believes. Jesus himself practiced *service as presence*; so should we.

26. James L. Bailey, "Experiencing the Kingdom as a Little Child: A Rereading of Mark 10:13-16," *Word and World* 15, 1 (Winter 1995): 58-67.

Besides, says Dykstra, "when we are suffering, our deepest need is *not* the alleviation of our suffering but the knowledge that our suffering does not annihilate us."²⁷ Aside from the misleading binary thinking here — not to mention the insensitivity to inscrutable forms of suffering and pain in our world today — to my mind Dykstra proposes a Christology *sans* eschatology. A more perceptive theological view is that "the gospel of God's suffering love in Christ is inseparable from the gospel of hope."²⁸ According to Christiaan Beker, the predominant claim of scriptural writers is that faith offers us "a meaningful integration of suffering and hope" and so *both* "must be embodied and concretized by the 'hopeful' suffering of the church at the hands of the powers of injustice."²⁹ As persons who are grounded in eschatological hope, we know our suffering ultimately will not annihilate us, for we are given reassurance of this, says James Loder, through the Spirit, in whom "the flow of time is from the future into the present to change, heal, restore, or transform the past for the sake of the coming future."³⁰ Hence, "the church, the new creation of God in the midst of the old creation, is called not only to *endure suffering* but also to *engage suffering*, to *relieve* the suffering caused by the world's injustice and idolatry."³¹

We still suffer and we still die, to be sure. But God is overthrowing not only the power suffering has over us existentially, but also the sources of suffering (physical, emotional, spiritual, economic, social, environmental, political). "God's final triumph is already casting its rays into our present, however opaque those rays often are and however much they seem contradicted by the empirical reality of our present world."³² At every turn, around every corner, on every page of the Gospels, in and through the person and work of Jesus we see suffering *actively* being defeated by God: the lame are made to walk; lepers are cleansed; deaf are given hearing; the dead are raised; oppressed are freed; sinners are forgiven; broken-hearted are healed; the entombed are unbound; captives are released; the blind are given sight; prisoners are visited; the downcast

27. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 103.

28. J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision of the Human Predicament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 97. Beker is a clear example of how autobiography and social location influence the doing of theology. His theology of suffering and of hope is deeply rooted in the dehumanizing experience of being carted off to a Berlin forced labor camp by the German occupation, where all around him he saw innocent people tortured, gassed, murdered, and slaughtered. Perhaps this is a reason why his work offers a nuanced analysis of how suffering and hope creatively can be intertwined in the life of Christian believers.

29. Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, p. 89.

30. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit*, p. 110.

31. Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, p. 86.

32. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 58.

are given hope; enemies are embraced; strangers are welcomed; women are made socially equal; the lost are found; the hungry are fed; the thirsty are given drink; the naked are clothed; the homeless are taken in; the bent over are straightened; the tyrants are toppled; the excluded are included. Not only then — but also *now*.

The possibility of fullness of life in all its varied expressions (and institutional forms), lived in praise of God through mutuality with, and equal regard for, all that God creates and loves, is the good news Jesus brought and still brings. And nothing, in the final analysis, can destroy this possibility and this news, though many human beings are giving it a good heave-ho, the cross being the symbol of the ugliest attempts to do so. Through the proleptic reality of God's eschatological triumph, we not only can embrace and endure our own suffering, and be compassionate to the suffering of others, we also can participate — provisionally, partially, in ways appropriate to our finitude — in the power and purposes of God in human history to overthrow evil, to alleviate human misery and suffering, and to renew and restore human flourishing. *Not* to so participate is to refuse our human call and vocation.

In his suspicion of power and his claim that we humans have too high a view of our power, Dykstra is reminiscent of the long line of theologians, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, who associate sin with self-pride, with humans claiming too much, grasping too much, thinking too highly of themselves. While this may be the case for many people — especially those who are most privileged and advantaged by their society — it is not a theologically accurate description of what constitutes sin for all people in all times and places and stations of life. Persons who have grown up beaten down, persons mired in misery on the margins on account of race, gender, or class, often have internalized a false, negative sense of self that includes a sense of powerlessness. Sin in this world owes as much to powerlessness as it does to *hubris* and gluttony for power, especially given that asymmetries of power are so broadly institutionalized and enforced today. The other side of *hubris* or pride, declares Moltmann, is hopelessness, resignation, weariness, timidity — which all amount to falling away from the living hope that God promises. In Moltmann's understanding, *the sin that most profoundly threatens us* is not the evil we perpetrate with power, but rather the good that we do not do with the power we have.³³

Dykstra argues that Kohlberg's understanding of justice (and moral agency) is far too conventional and far too limited to be useful to the moral life of Christians. By the same token, by the time he is finished with his critique and reconstruction — though acclaimed for his beautiful prose — Dykstra essen-

tially has morphed justice into an understanding of service that itself is far too conventional and far too limited to be theologically and morally useful to the church's contemporary practice of remembering the poor, or even to Christian moral agency overall. In that we are asked to renounce power as inappropriate to service, our moral agency is shrunk. But so is the agency of the ones we are "to serve." In Dykstra's equation, it is as though the ones receiving Christian service have no moral agency, no power, no creativity of their own — only "need." Despite the potential of "visional ethics," everything about Christian service is said, done, thought, conceived from the point of view of the one who serves, *never* from the point of view of the ones being served. Moreover, despite warnings about determining what is healthy for others, service remains defined as that which we, as middle- or upper-class Christians, unilaterally *give* or *do to* and *do for* another person. This is a one-way street in which the agency of "the other" disappears into thin air. The servant relationship, says Dykstra, "provides opportunity for a person in need to feed off of the powers of the servant"³⁴ — as if other persons have no powers of their own.

Some people will want to argue that service is one foot of remembering the poor, and justice is the other. But all this view has ever done is hobble the church and hobble the poor. Justice is the core of the Christian moral life, and justice has two feet. Some people say we need to balance giving people fish for a day by teaching them how to fish for a lifetime; these are people who want to obscure their ownership of the ponds in the first place, and their control of who gets to fish in which pond. Some people will ask: what about the long tradition of *diakonia*? Today, there is no *diakonia* not already embedded in and tainted by vast economic and power inequities of corporate-driven consumer-oriented capitalism.

"June Cleaver, allow me to introduce you to Maria Santos"

It is interesting to note what Dykstra himself "sees" (and even scarier, what he does *not*) as he looks out through his "service" lens over the landscape of moral pain and moral dilemma in our world today. In his looking, he must have been living in Lake Wobegon. Aside from brief mention of the Detroit race riots in 1967,³⁵ the worst case scenario with which Dykstra deals in his book is a wife

34. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 103.

35. In the midst of the 1967 Detroit race riots, Dykstra's home church (Presbyterian) helped to organize the "New Detroit Committee" to bring white people and black people together in efforts to rebuild the city. Dykstra does not notice the class-ridden, white-privileged irony that a big-wig male from a big-wig church in upper-middle-class Grosse Pointe was sent in to chair the committee.

who "feels she is being used." When she finally cries to her husband that he is not paying enough attention to her, he retorts, "What do you want from me? I have given you everything. Time, a house, children, money — everything I have is yours!"³⁶ (This woman must be June Cleaver upset with Ward on a bad hair day.) The class-bound nature of this scenario speaks for itself, as does the never-never land where the Cleavers reside.

Consider alternatively the following scenario. After a short absence from attending church due to personal turmoil, Maria Santos shows up in a new congregation. She is fleeing an abusive marriage, and is suffering spiritually, emotionally, as well as economically, and also, in less obvious ways, socially and politically. She has little work experience, no college education, few job skills, no self-confidence, no money, very little family support, a broken spirit, a broken marriage, a guilty conscience, and three young children to feed, clothe, house, school, and otherwise properly care for. Maria spent years bent over, washing feet and washing clothes, renouncing her own power, and serving nothing but the needs of her husband, because that's what she heard the church telling her to do. Now she's bent under a burden of guilt for leaving. She has no immediate hope of receiving child support payments since her husband lost his job — and she lost out on a potential place of employment — when another industry in town closed and moved to Mexico for cheap labor and cheap materials (leaving several thousand local people jobless, mostly low-skilled Latina women with little education). While Maria receives welfare assistance she must spend full-time looking for gainful employment. Despite the fact that poverty rates are cut in half for single ethnic mothers who achieve even just one year of post-secondary education, her own state's welfare policy makes no provisions in that regard. And Maria has neither the time nor the money to attend college at night — besides, by evening she's way too exhausted, and who would care for her children? When Maria leaves the rolls of the welfare poor, she will join the ranks of the working poor. This is virtually guaranteed, given that the poverty rate in 2000 for families who stopped receiving welfare assistance and began working full-time ranged between an estimated 41 and 58 percent. Working full-time at minimum pay, Maria's income will not lift her above the poverty threshold, because in the U.S. *minimum wage is not a living wage*. To boot, she likely will have no health benefits through her job, and also she likely will have to work odd hours and be forced to pay high costs even for *substandard* child care. (Quality child care in most U.S. states is more than public college tuition.) Gender injustice will compound the harsh reality of the official poverty in which she now lives (if women were given equal pay for equal work, the poverty

rate of single-parent mothers in the U.S. would be cut in half). The condition of poverty will begin to dictate the options that are and are not available to her. This will be especially true for her children, now put at great developmental risk (poverty is the single most powerful factor that can negatively influence brain development). Because of the blighted neighborhood where the family now is doomed to live, the children will be exposed to environmental toxins, increased violence, lowered quality of child care, lack of quality schools, lack of primary supports needed by young people in order to navigate into responsible, caring adulthood. Research reveals further strong links between poverty and place: weak job information networks, lack of adequate public transit, deteriorated infrastructure, lack of decent, affordable housing.

Pour all this into the conventional impersonal service paradigm and then ask: what, thereby, do we *best* see, and what do we *not* see? Within any given ethical framework, before we can assist anyone we must first see the real nature of the need. Through the lens of Christian service given to us by Dykstra, the self-same lens through which practically the entire church today sees and remembers the poor, consider the vast parts of Maria's story we will ignore. Consider how various interlocking systems — religious, interpersonal, social, economic, global — are inextricably woven together into the fabric of Maria's life. Consider how the service paradigm functions to repress things we prefer not to notice anyway: realities that intimidate us because they seem unmanageable and overwhelming. In Christian service with Maria, Dykstra lays down the precondition that we renounce power. But he overlooks the tremendous *power of definition*. Within this paradigm, vast parts of Maria's story — her past, her present, and her future — will remain unattended to because *within the service paradigm, we are taught not to see or address them*. By renouncing power (or pretending to), we have exercised the greatest power of all: the power to conceal, the power to define, the power not to question the status quo, the power to determine the agenda.

Remembering the Poor: A New Paradigm

Fortunately, there are scores of grassroots, common-sense communities of practical theology all over the globe that are ignoring the pretensions and concealments of the middle-class, mainline piety of "Christian service." These communities have a vision of ordinary Christians — poor and non-poor alike — working together as partners in mutual resistance against "the ugly configuration" of institutionalized inequality and *de facto* rule by the rich, in the U.S. and in places around the globe where economic globalization is taking root.

36. Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, p. 14.

Hope for the future is appearing in dramatic and stunning ways. The world over, there are groups of people who are organizing and living toward an alternative vision of a global economic order (they have spun a movement called "glocalization"). In their countercultural vision, the wealth of a few is not bought by the impoverishment of the many and of the Earth itself. With imaginations inspired by the inexhaustible resources of Christian faith and hope in God's Reign, these groups craft ways for the whole household of God — all of God's created order, the human and non-human that both need and give life — to flourish and fulfill their God-given vocation. Though there does not exist a ready-made model of "Christian economics," these groups are drawing on a wealth of theological resources which, when brought into dialogue with economic theories and options, give significant insights into the ongoing reconstruction of an economy more radically inclusive of the least and last among us. Instead of the *consumer* society, we can pursue a vision of the *just* society.

In these communities, primacy is not given to generic "vision"; primacy is given to the poor and to their voice and to their perspective on reality. Primacy is given not to middle-class presence, primacy is given to the presence of the poor in history, and to God's own special presence in and concern for the poor. Concern for power is defined by what the have-nots don't have: *power*, not just money. In these grassroots communities, there is no false ideological divide between the personal, the interpersonal, the social, and the structural. Within these settings, persons are provided with a sacred, safe setting wherein they are invited to pour out and to share their personal, private pain, and along with others, translate collective pain into redemptive, public action for the common good. Here, pain, suffering, and anger are given epistemological and moral weight, for they illumine how and where the old order is groaning and manifesting transformational potential under God's renewing of all things in Christ.

In small supportive grassroots groups — which, by the way, emphasize interpersonal and intersubjective presence without curtailing concern for the systemic — persons pour out their pain, anger, and suffering; their stories become the basis for *collective critique of ideology*. Biblical faith, says Walter Brueggemann, instills the capacity to discern clearly the destructive powers of the dominant culture, and to claim the freedom to act apart from, or over against, those unjust structures. Public outcry and *public processing of pain* generate moral energy that helps people refuse to conform to present social and economic arrangements that benefit the few on the backs of the many. As Moltmann underscores, God creates in those who practice hope the energy to fight what is *eschatologically doomed*, and the energy to establish here and now anticipations of what is *eschatologically destined*.

Participants in these grassroots groups are members of a large movement

of the welfare and working poor who, in partnership with middle class Christians who join with them in common cause, are claiming a place at the table in their communities where decisions are made that affect their children, their families, and their daily lives. Through strategies associated with *faith-based community revitalization*, their foremost concern is to engage together in the context of local, distressed neighborhoods — where economic globalization shows itself in very concrete, tangible ways — and, with the help of the wider community, build healthier environments in which to raise children and youth. Faith-based community revitalization represents a convergence of themes and practices, old and new alike, which can be depicted as a three-legged stool. The three "legs" that together comprise this approach are the three interrelated strategies of *community organizing*, *community building*, and *community developing*, as explicitly faith-based, theologically informed practices.³⁷ As "universities of public theology," faith-based community organizations help grassroots people understand the public policies and public programs that bear on their local situation. Local residents identify the assets they presently have, as well as the resources they need in order to begin the process of community revitalization, redevelopment, and reinvestment.

In these communities, the people exercising mature moral agency and "visional ethics" commensurable with the Christian story and vision are the so-called "needy" ones themselves. The tables have been turned. These grassroots, commonsense communities of practical theology ought to be our primary mentors in the task of reconstructing notions of moral agency and Christian justice — not so-called experts whose only view of the world is from the top floors down.

37. Traditionally, these three practices have been seen as separate traditions, but in the paradigm I propose they are brought together. See Susanne Johnson, *Suffer the Little Ones: Children, Poverty, and the Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, forthcoming).

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