

THE RESPONSE OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH TO MATERIAL NEEDS IN RELATION TO MODERN MATERIALISM

James 2:5

First of all we need to say what we mean by “the period of the Primitive church”. Is it the church at the time of Jesus' Disciples in the period before the beginning of the Paul's mission to the gentiles? Or does the period of the Apostolic Fathers also belong to this period? There will be different answer given by HARNACK, and different answer by a Catholic theologian. One of the possible solutions is given in BULTMANN'S book *Primitive Christianity*¹. BULTMANN says Christianity is a syncretistic religion, but all his quotations, that characterize primitive Christianity, are from the New Testament. In spite of my reservations with the BULTMANN'S theology I am using his definition of the period and I am limiting myself to the quotations from the New Testament.

We can simply say, that the response of the Primitive Church to the material needs was the deaconship, and that the response to materialism were the warnings against the danger of the wealth. The first consisted in action and the second in words. These two things – words and deeds – are inseparably united in the response of Primitive church although we must agree with THIELICKE who says, that: “...the specifically “Christian” element in ethics does not emerge at the level of acts and in ethical programs.. specifically “Christian” element in ethics is found only at the level of motives”² (This means simply that you cannot prove the words or deeds as Christian by simply listening or observing them.) So we must understand that the response of the Church to the issue of material needs on the one hand and materialism on the other hand was the formation of the *motives*, building-up of faith and Christian love. That's why in addition to our interest in the history of the Christian action we need to concern ourselves also with the interpretation of those actions in words.

THE CHURCH AND POVERTY

The way in which the New Testament understands poverty is based on the Old Testament theology. Here the words describing “the poor” are mostly – especially in Psalms – connected with oppression, humility and piety. The poor are *the God's poor*, they are oppressed and get help from God. It has nothing to do with *risen proletariat* demanding its historical rights. The LORD himself identifies with the poor like these.³

According to this OT understanding, the Primitive church saw the difference between the poverty purely physical and the poverty, that was connected mainly with the *piety and humility*. We can see this on a Jesus' expression *the poor in the spirit* (Mt 5:3). This expression is an equivalent to Hebrew “poor and humble” (Eg. Ps 9:12; 25:9; Pro 16:19). The reminder found in the letter to Timothy shows that not everyone, who is physically poor should be object church's care. This can be understood from the characteristic of a *widow*. (Tim 5:5 ...puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help NIV).

“...the churches... were largely charitable institutions for the support of widows and orphans, strangers and travellers, aged and infirm people in an age of extreme riches and extreme poverty.”⁴

CLEMENT OF ROME wrote in the Epistle to the Corinthians: „Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect unto the strong. Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because He hath given him one by whom his need may be

¹ BULTMANN, R. *Primitive Christianity*. Meridian Books, 1956.

² THIELICKE, H. *Theological Ethics I*. p. 19, 20.

³ E.g. Pr 19:17

⁴ SCHAFF, P. *History of the Christian Church I*, s. 499-500.

supplied.”⁵ POLYCARP wrote to the Philippians: „And let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always "providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man;" abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgment; keeping far off from all covetousness”⁶ And ARISTIDES, the apologist, wrote this testimony to the Roman Caesar around the year AD 140: “Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.”⁷

Although the Old Testament pays a really close attention to the poor, the physical poverty does not mean that the poor are somehow privileged.⁸ The same can be told about the New Testament. In Lk 14:13 we read the appeal of Jesus to pay special attention to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (NIV). And Paul in the Epistle to the Galathians goes so far as to changing his topic, when he tells of the reminder he got in Jerusalem not to forget the poor (Gal 2:10). In Jesus’ words, the poor are blessed,⁹ because they are more ready to get something much better, something that the rich will get only with a serious difficulty. And James states without reservations, that God had chosen the poor “to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom” (Jas 2:5 NIV).

Despite the great emphasis in the Bible on the care for the poor, we have to realize, that the social aid that is due to them, is in many ways of a secondary order. Eg. it was secondary to the Jesus’ mission to preach (“...so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” Mk 1:34-38 NIV). It was secondary to the devotion to Jesus himself (when Judas criticized the “waste” of precious ointment Mt 26:11). It is also subordinated to the preaching of Gospel to the poor, since the poor are primarily the object of the preaching of Gospel.¹⁰ A similar principle is used by the apostles in the sixth chapter of Acts, when they refuse to abandon preaching and prayers, but they separate deacons for the social service (Acts 6:1-4).

The same assessment must be applied to what is sometimes called “the Jerusalem communism” (Acts 2:44, 4:32-37). The meaning of this fellowship was the spiritual unity of the church, not the total social equalisation,¹¹ as we can see in the case of Ananias and Sapphirra (Acts 5:4). Besides, the spontaneity of the Jerusalem communism later gave way to organized diaconate. (The beginnings of this are obviously recorded in Acts 6:1-5.) The “charity initiatives” can be seen in the activities of Tabitha in Acts 9:36 and in the voluntary offering given as a ministry to the poor in Judea (2Cor 9).

On the other hand, those who are the object of Church care must not misuse it. The well-known expression of this principle is: „...If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (1Thess 3:10 NIV). When the Church applies this strict principle of directing her social aid it will not become a questionable support of laziness and abuse. Her help is aimed at the *weak* (Acts 20:35), who despite their efforts

⁵ CLEMENT OF ROME *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Chapter XXXVIII.

⁶ POLYCARP *The Epistle to the Philippians*. Chapter VI.

⁷ ARISTIDES *The Apology*. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/aristides_02_trans.htm (20 January 2003)

⁸ A good example of this is the warning given in Ex 23:3 – “Do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit” (NIV).

⁹ Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Lk 6:20 NIV)

¹⁰ Jesus quotes in Lk 4:10 the passage from Is 61:1 – “The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” (NIV)

¹¹ Although the 2Cor 8:13 speaks about *equality*, it is not an enforced response of the church as a whole, but the voluntary decision of an individual, who has wealth.

to find job and work still cannot support themselves.

The real biblical meaning of material aid given to the poor is admirably expressed in the word “alms”. This Greek term captures the meaning of charity in the New Testament. In LXX, it translates the Hebrew words for “mercy” (“lovingkindness” in KJV), “justice”, and in one place “truth” (Gn 47:29). These are words that represent the ultimate meaning of Christian social action. It is an expression of God's mercy, it also speaks of justice in accordance with the law of God, in which love is central. The poor receiving alms may still remain poor, but they know of God's care in now, and look to the Kingdom of God that is coming. The meaning of *material* aid is *kerygmatic*.

THE CHURCH AND MATERIALISM

First I have to explain more closely, what kind of materialism we are talking about here. The word *materialism* is a term of very wide semantic field, but basically it is used either in its philosophical meaning or in its ethical meaning. Briefly, we can sum up the philosophical materialism in the statement, that “everything has its origin in matter and that everything can be explained by the processes that occur in matter”. Materialism in its ethical meaning can be captured in the statement, that “material goods are the most important things for man” (for his existence and his happiness). 1Tim 6:17 expresses this state as putting “hope in wealth, which is so uncertain”, (NIV) Another definition, that it says about “...idolatrous elevation of money and the material possessions it will buy as the goal of life”.¹²

These two aspects of materialism are often (but not always) connected. And so we meet people, who are convinced materialists in their worldview, but at the same time they are “idealists” and unselfish people, who find fulfillment in the culture of human spirit, or even in philanthropy. On the other hand, there are philosophical idealists, or those who have a religious worldview and believe in God, but their everyday life and their ethics is determined by the material goods.

If we wish to use the response of the Primitive Church as a model for the Church in our days, it is necessary to realize the differences between the materialism in the times of New Testament and today. While materialism in antiquity was philosophically based on the denial of gods (atheism), stressed the *primaeva* matter, and the ethical form of materialism concentrated on pleasures (Cynicism, Epicureism), modern philosophical materialism is stressing the laws of nature discovered in modern times and the future of the human society that will be brought up by progress. This is what gives the modern form of materialism the element of regularity (in substitution of God's Commandment), and with the elements of theology (instead of religious hope).

Ethical materialism of the Biblical times is expressed in the 1Cor 15:32 in the words Is 22:13 – “Let us eat and drink, ...for tomorrow we die!” (NIV).

The response of the Primitive Church to the material needs was clear not only in what she was teaching but also in what she was doing. When we talk about the materialism of the rich and wealthy – at first the Church limited herself to the warnings addressed to them and appeals to use their property in accordance with the Christian love. Only later, under the influence of the Greek (Platonic) dualism, communities, who considered asceticism and poverty the means how to reach Christian perfection, began to be created. As we do not find these opinions supported in the New Testament, we will not deal with these and we will deal with the words only.

The Primitive Church based her view of wealth and the rich on the Old Testament, in the same way as it was in the case of the poor. The rich owners of the soil in the agrarian society of the Old Testament times were only *tenants* of God (Lev 25:23). This means, that the real *owner* was God.

¹² SCHLOSSBERG, H. *Idols for destruction*. p. 88

As this society was agrarian, the soil was the main source of the wealth. And since it belonged to God, the source of the wealth was God Himself. This principle had its specific expression in the jubilee year, when the soil was to be restored to the family that had originally sold it.

But although in relation to God no man was the owner of the soil, nevertheless the Old Testament protected the private property not only against stealing (Eighth Commandment¹⁸), but also against lusting (Tenth Commandment¹⁹). The wealth was a sign of God's blessing (Dt 8:18). e.g. Israel "...will lend to many nations but will borrow from none" (Dt 15:6 NIV).

Against the background of this positive evaluation of wealth as the blessing of God, there are numerous warnings about the vanity and deceitfulness of riches. "Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked" (Ps 37:16 NIV). To trust in wealth leads to fall: "Whoever trusts in his riches will fall" (Pr 11:28 NIV) and unsatiable lust: "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income" (Ecc 5:10 NIV).

In the New Testament probably the sharpest warning of the danger of wealth is that it claims love of man: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Mt 6:24 NIV). A rich man finds consolation in his wealth, and so he do not look for the joy that comes from God (Lk 6:24). Famous is also the parable that Jesus told about the rich entering the Kingdom – it is compared to the probability of a camel getting through the eye of a needle!. The same meaning conveys the story of a rich farmer who planned to rebuild his granaries, or the story of the Dives and Lazarus. CHESTERSON wrote: "...a man who is dependent upon the luxuries of this life is a corrupt man, spiritually corrupt, politically corrupt, financially corrupt. There is one thing that Christ and all the Christian saints have said with a sort of savage monotony. They have said simply that to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck"¹³

From what was said above it should be clear, that despite great danger, wealth does not *necessarily* mean that the rich has materialistic outlook on life. The New Testament sees the root of the problem in lust (Rom 7:7-8), in the love of money (1Tim 6:10), in pride and the trust in wealth, in the ruthless amassing of property, and in the oppression of the poor. This is the heart of the materialistic outlook and lifestyle. At the end, this leads to apostasy (1 Tim 6:10), the greatest tragedy in human life.

Although the New Testament knows of voluntary poverty as an expression of following after Christ, this is not its main response to the problem of materialism. Since materialism is not in the first place the problem of the *quantity* of the owned things, but mostly of the *attitude* to wealth. The solution of this problem must be first of all the *inward change*. The command of Jesus "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear", but have confidence, that the Heavenly Father takes care of His children (Luke 12:22-30) presupposes inward liberty. Apostle Paul invites Christians: "...those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (1Cor 7:30-31 NIV). BULTMANN comments on this passage correctly with the words "dialectics of participation and inner separation".¹⁴ This kind of attitude is totally dependent on the reality of eschatological expectation of the Kingdom of God, as it is expressed vividly in the Epistle to the Hebrews 10:34 "...joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions."

Inward liberation is the precondition for the righteous use of wealth. Jesus describes this liberation from the wealth with a very strong word: *to despise*. But this contempt does not mean, that mammon cannot be used for the purposes of the Kingdom of God (contrary to Platonic dualism), and Jesus also says: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:9 NIV).

The precondition for correct usage of wealth is inner involvement of Christian love ("But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you." Luke 11:41 NIV). The example

¹³ CHESTERTON, G. K. *Orthodoxy*, chpt. 7

¹⁴ BULTMANN, R. *Primitive Christianity*, p. 207.

of this Christian love is the widow of Mark 12:43, and apostle talks about it explicitly in 1 Cor 13:3 “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

IGNATIUS in the letter to the deacon in Antioch added to this also the demand of orthodox doctrine: “Every one that teaches anything beyond what is commanded, though he be [deemed] worthy of credit, though he be in the habit of fasting, though he live in continence, though he work miracles, though he have the gift of prophecy, let him be in thy sight as a wolf in sheep's clothing, labouring for the destruction of the sheep. If any one denies the cross, and is ashamed of the passion, let him be to thee as the adversary himself. "Though he gives all his goods to feed the poor, though he remove mountains, though he give his body to be burned,"¹³ let him be regarded by thee as abominable.”¹⁵

THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH AND THE PRESENT DAY SITUATION

The response to the question how we can use the principles of the primitive church in our times, times of material demands and of the materialism of the present day is still unanswered. The state is responsible for the social care, and the materialism of nowadays have dimensions that were absolutely unknown to the people in the biblical times.

In the post-biblical times the church got under the influence of Platonic dualism and the material assistance to the poor received character of a meritorious ascetic act, which means the promotion in the career in church. At the Seventh Ecumenical Council the note like this was said: “those who, on account of their large expenditure on churches and the poor, have been raised, without simony, to the clerical estate as a reward and recognition of their beneficence; and being proud of this, now depreciate other clergymen who were unable or unwilling to make such foundations and the like”¹⁶

Much later, Marxism did not preach ascetic *abnegation*, but certain kind of “*eschatological expropriation*” of the rich. This is the reason why the church today is not under pressure to answer the problem of Platonic elevation of the giving (*ascetic abnegation*), but she has to answer Marxist view of the recipients. The way these recipients of the Marxist expropriation see themselves is very different from the self-image of the humble and pious poor of the Old Testament! Sure, this does not mean, that the social aid should not exist, but it means that it is necessary to *say* while giving social aid. Acts of love must be accompanied by the words of Christian message.

Historical experience of the Christian church shows, that the response of the Church to the material needs must not be based on the principle of *abnegation* (Platonism), nor on the principle of *expropriation* (Marxism). The aim is that both should *give thank to God*, who is the giver of everything. We can achieve this only when we interpret social aid through the Word of God. Today, the demands for social aid are incomparably bigger, and gratitude is incomparably smaller than in the biblical times. The Christian response to the material needs of the present has to *speak* both through the act and through the word.

The division of the world today – into the rich North and the poor South – means that we – the Christians living in the North – have to see our neighbours not only in the people of our own nation, but, also in those behind our state's borders. The task of the national and international church organisations is to remind Christians in the rich North, what *real* poverty is, and to change what SIDER says in his book: “Present economic relationships in the worldwide body of Christ are unbiblical, sinful, a hindrance to evangelism and a desecration of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

It seems to me that our more immediate problem is materialism and as *myth about happiness* as a glittering *fata morgana*, that man is pursuing after, but is not able to reach. An analyst wrote: “The real conflict in our age is between opposing types of imagination – or, to speak more accurately,

¹⁵ The Epistle of Ignatius to Hero, a Deacon of Antioch.

¹⁶ The Canons of the Holy and Ecumenical Seventh Council, Canon V, Hefele's note.

¹⁷ SIDER, R. J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, p. 99.

among a variety of types of imagination. ...So the great contest in these declining years of the twentieth century is not for human economic interests, or for human political preferences, or even for human minds – not at bottom. The true battle is being fought in the Debatable Land of the human imagination. Imagination does rule the world.”¹⁸ Imagination of contemporary man is in its essence hedonism transformed into transcendency of an unassailable faith. Materialism of this kind, in a unashamedly makes parallels between an experience of buying of some goods and an experience of sexual intimacy or the experience of religious faith. SCHULZE describes this process as follows: “In the hedonistic-aesthetic conception of the world, the world offers itself as a cosmetic object. Inability to change one’s thinking (or the too great effort that this would require) on the one hand corresponds with the possibility to step up and to refine the commercialisation of needs and to create new needs. So the life here is pretty good, despite the fact, that the unsolved problems remain unsolved. The surface symbols of the problem are:

- detergents – and their demonstrable efficiency
- home appliances: dishwashers, washing-machines, TV-sets
- nicer living: furniture, family house, second flat
- holiday, caravan, aeroplane trips
- fashion
- entertainment industry: show, illustrated magazines, public gossip
- flirt, sex without any risk etc.

... Since long time it is not the reification (*Versachlichung*) of the world (GOGARTEN) nor the demythologisation (BULTMANN) that it is about. Much more it is about new ideology, about new pseudoreality, about new unreality of the world of illusions (*Irrealität einer Scheinwelt*), about 'the technic and science as an ideology'.”¹⁹

The experience of ownership is short-term and in it can in no way substitute for the depth of religious or interpersonal relationships, materialism ends in insatiability. HUXLEY called the commercial catalogues of modern society “The Newest Testament” to emphasize their place in people’s minds. A rich materialist of biblical times could be surrounded by expensive things and maybe by slaves. But his modern parallel can thanks to the mass production constantly be running after new and better things and with the help of technology to create virtual reality, that blunts his ability to perceive the “real reality”.

Modern materialism defends its positions by the appeal to the economic principles, that have the status of physical laws, although they are an expression of human selfishness and greed. “If language is not useful for this (ie. criticism), what else could allow us to accomplish this task without which human beings do not have much significance? Today, of course, this task seems negligible, compared to the importance of making refrigerators or refining oil. Anyone who tries to interfere with such efforts by means of the word is considered to be nothing but a conjurer.”³¹

The Word is still the powerful tool of the Church. The message of the Primitive church is that the church of today must rely on the Word of God.

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¹⁸ KIRK, R. *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky*, in COLSON, C.: *Against the Night*, p. 171.

¹⁹ SCHULZE, H. *Theologische Sozialethik*, p. 283.

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