



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Global Inequality
(*Global Wealth*, pp. 18-25)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2007 The Center for Christian Ethics

Global Inequality

Are the world's rich and poor growing closer together or farther apart? Why should we care either way? Inequalities matter when they obstruct persons from realizing their human dignity in their own communities. The Christian story expands our moral vision to see every person not as a potential consumer in a global market, but as a reflection of God's image.

Prayer

O Lord our God,
"Your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path."
Startle us with your good news for all, open our hearts and minds to your truth, and give us courage to respond with faithful, joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Readings: Exodus 16:11-19 and 2 Corinthians 8:8-15

Reflection

Asking the Corinthian Christians to give money generously to help the poorer Jerusalem church, Paul said the saints should support one another in an equalizing way: "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality" (2 Corinthians 8:14 NIV^t). He didn't promise them a chicken in every pot or iPod in every pocket. Rather he invited them to live in another world – where God supplies enough and no one gathers more than they need (verse 15, quoting from the story of God giving manna in the wilderness).

The Apostle Paul's concern to amend inequalities may sound strange to us today. "It is not easy for citizens deeply influenced by the modern discourse on freedom and individualism to focus on the disparities and corresponding deprivations that economic free markets allow or even exacerbate," Douglas Hicks says. We know absolute *poverty* is bad; but what's wrong with *inequality*?

He notes that inequality – when some fall far behind others in resources – impacts the poor in three ways:

- ▶ *Prices change.* If the incomes of the rich go up while the earnings of the poor stay the same, the prices for goods and services will increase. "Thus, in inflation-adjusted terms, the poor actually become less well-off," Hicks writes. Of course, we might correct for this effect by requiring that real income, or buying power, for the poor remain the same.
- ▶ *Consumption patterns change.* As wealthier people change what they buy, this can limit what's available to the poor. For instance, "the rise in private automobile usage in the past fifty years had a severe impact on the availability of public transportation for those without the means to buy or lease a vehicle. Similarly, the recent proliferation of cell phones has led to the near disappearance of public pay phones in many cities."
- ▶ *Solidarity is undermined.* No one needs a TV, but we feel left out without one. "It is about social belonging.... People's health and sense of overall well-being are more closely correlated with relative deprivation position than with absolute levels of income



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2007 The Center for Christian Ethics

or wealth.” Call it a “manna deficit,” if you will: we may not be starving, but we sense we’re not in community with others and they are callously leaving us behind.

Of course, not all inequalities are bad – e.g., some study science longer than others, with direct or indirect public support, but we all benefit from having better-trained physicians. And some inequality in income, wealth, and education is necessary.

So when is an inequality excessive? When is it wrong? The “capability approach” to economics helps us explain when inequality matters. “Global inequality in various forms – such as income, wealth, political and cultural participation, educational attainment, and health and longevity,” suggests Hicks, “matter to the extent that they obstruct at least some persons from realizing their human dignity within their own communities.”

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between poverty and economic inequality? Do you agree that inequality of wealth can be morally wrong in itself?
2. In what three ways does inequality of wealth affect the poor, according to Hicks? List specific examples for each way that you notice in your community.
3. What other inequalities, in addition to disparities of income and wealth, can undermine human dignity?
4. Do inequalities present any moral dangers for the advantaged? If so, how might the advantaged be better off in a more egalitarian society?

Departing Hymn: “God of the Strong, God of the Weak”

God of the strong, God of the weak,
Lord of all lands and our own land;
light of all souls, from you we seek
light from your light, strength from your hand.

In suffering you have made us one,
in mighty burdens one are we:
teach us that lowliest duty done
is highest service unto thee.

Teach us, Teacher of humankind,
the sacrifice that brings your balm;
the love, the work that bless and bind;
teach us your majesty, your calm.

Teach us, and we shall know indeed
the truth divine that makes us free;
and knowing, we may sow the seed
that blossoms through eternity.

Richard W. Gilder (1844-1909), alt.

Suggested Tunes: GERMANY or HAMBURG

† Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Global Inequality

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the difference between poverty and inequality.
2. To discuss how excessive inequality of wealth affects the poor.
3. To consider when an inequality (of income, wealth, political and cultural participation, educational attainment, or health and longevity) matters morally.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Global Wealth (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God of the Strong, God of the Weak” locate the familiar tune GER-MANY or HAMBURG in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

Reviewing the vast economic inequalities in the world today, David Held, a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, observes, “Would anyone freely choose a distributional pattern of scarce goods and services which causes hundreds of millions of people to suffer serious harm and disadvantage independent of their will and consent (and 50,000 dying every day of malnutrition and poverty-related causes), unless they had a privileged stake in the existing social hierarchy? Would anyone freely endorse a situation in which the annual cost of supplying basic education to all children is \$6 billion, water and sanitation \$9 billion, and basic health to all \$13 billion, while annually \$8 billion is spent in the U.S. on cosmetics, nearly \$20 billion on jewelry and \$17 billion (in the U.S. and Europe) on pet food?”

“That global inequalities spark conflict and contestation can hardly be a surprise, especially given the visibility of the world’s lifestyles in an age of mass media” (David Held, “Becoming Cosmopolitan: The Dimensions and Challenges of Globalization,” in Peter Heslam, ed., *Globalization and the Good*, 11-12).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Exodus 16:11-19 and 2 Corinthians 8:8-15 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study looks at the moral importance of global inequalities. Economists may disagree about whether economic inequality is on the rise in the world, and if it is, whether it is caused by globalization—the combining of national economies through international trade—or by other trends, such as increasing reliance on computer technologies. “It is very clear, however, that current global inequality *levels*—whether they have been moving up or down—stand very high,” Hicks writes. “If we envision the whole world as one society—which is precisely what globalization encourages us to do—we would see that economic inequality among the world population is greater than it is within these countries [like South Africa, Guatemala, and Brazil] marked by

economic disparity and social fractures.” For current maps and projections about a range of global inequalities, see The UC Atlas of Global Inequality maintained by the University of California, Santa Cruz (available online at ucatlas.ucsc.edu).

Everyone agrees that absolute *poverty* is a moral issue; this study will help members to understand when and why great *inequalities* of resources are morally wrong as well.

Study Questions

1. *Poverty* is having less annual income than an individual or family needs to live. Thus, the U.S. Census Bureau originally defined a poverty threshold of income in terms of the food budget for a family under economic stress. *Economic inequality* refers to a relative difference of wealth. Thus, even if no one fell below the poverty threshold, there would still be economic inequalities and these might be increasing and excessive.

In the world today there is both widespread poverty (the World Bank estimates that 1.1 billion people lived in extreme poverty in 2005, down from a high of 1.5 billion) and great inequalities of wealth (the U.N. Development Program says that in 1997 the richest 20% of the world’s people in the richest countries had 74 times the income of the poorest 20%, up from 30 times as much in 1960).

We should not neglect the moral problem of poverty, but we should be more aware of the problem of economic inequality. Many economists (and lay persons) have ignored economic inequality. Ask members to respond to this case: “Bill Gates’ income increases by five million dollars, while all other incomes remain the same. In this scenario, overall income rises (because Gates’ income goes up); poverty remains the same; and income inequality increases. According to the standard economic analysis, this is a social improvement” (*Global Wealth*, 21).

2. To the detriment of the poor, prices change, consumption patterns change, and a sense of solidarity with the community is undermined, Hicks says. (The first problem can be defined away in a certain way. Think about the Bill Gates example again, but change it so that the least advantaged people’s *buying power* – or, *real income* – stays the same while Gates gets richer. We would still say economic inequality increased, but the poor would not suffer since they could still afford to buy the same products.)

Form smaller groups to brainstorm how the poor in your community are affected in these ways. First, price changes occur (at least in the short run) when the wealthy bid up the price of goods and production cannot catch up. For example, corn and corn-based food products are more expensive because of increased demand for ethanol, and housing costs in redeveloping inner cities are soaring beyond the means of the poor. Second, the poor have fewer resources to adjust to changing consumption patterns. For instance, building upper- and middle-class suburbs often degrades basic city services; using personal computers to get news and comparison shop hastens the end of radio news and neighborhood stores; and building designer hospitals and preferring specialists decreases basic clinics and low-cost medical services. Third, imagine how the poor feel “left behind” in your community in regard to transportation, entertainment, medical services, education, and so on.

3. Hicks mentions inequalities of health and lifespan, in educational attainment, and in access to global media and markets. Members might think of unequal access to transportation, communication technologies, food, insurance, and leisure activities.
4. Do inequalities tempt the advantaged to excessive materialism and consumerism, to pridefully defining themselves by possessions, educational accomplishments, physical health, and other differences from the disadvantaged? If so, the inequalities undermine their humility, lessen their solidarity with others, and spiritually distance them from the poor.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.