



A PEOPLE CALLED TO LOVE

CHRISTIAN CHARITY IN NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY

The Poor You Will Always Have With You: A Biblical View of People in Need

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The church's proper attitude toward and concern for people in need arises from her proper attitude toward and worship of the one true God. In response to God's command to promote the neighbor's life and well-being, the church sees the suffering face of the poor Christ in the poor of today and finds ways to remember them through ongoing personal and communal commitments.

I.

I have fond memories of Betania, a district of Panama City, Panama, where I lived most of my early elementary school days. As I look back to my days in Betania as an only child, I remember most fondly the long-awaited birth of my sister Dayana, a welcome addition to the Sánchez household (and to my play time!). So when I think of Betania, I think of Dayana.

In 1952, Betania's first residents named the district after ancient Bethany, a town near the city of Jerusalem where a woman anointed Jesus with expensive oil in a gesture of reverence which the one anointed interpreted as an early preparation for his own imminent burial (Mt 26:6–13, Mk 14:3–9, Jn 12:1–8).¹ At the end of the narrative Jesus anticipates the immemorial character of the woman's service: "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mt 26:13). When the church thinks of Bethany, the church thinks of this woman.²

¹ Unless otherwise stated, biblical references are to the NRSV.

² In John 12:3, the woman who anoints Jesus's feet (head in Mt 26:7 and Mk 14:3) is called Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

Although the main point of the narrative for its hearers is that they—as the woman once did—might see Jesus as the object of their faith and worship, it is impossible to lose sight of Jesus’s famous admonition to his disciples in the same passage. One recalls that the disciples were angry at the woman and scolded her for wasting a costly perfume that could have been used presumably to help the poor. Jesus rebukes them saying, “For the poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me” (Mt 26:11[(translation mine)].³ What are we to make of such words?

Here and there one hears Christians use the first half of this admonition to suggest that neither calls for, nor efforts towards, poor relief will ever be enough to get rid of poverty—so why bother to try our hardest and best at an impossible dream! While this analysis may be interpreted theologically as more realistic than pessimistic on account of our sin—our failure to care for our neighbor—Mark’s report actually steers us away from theologizing about poverty in any way that could lead to a lack of vigorous concern for the poor: “For you will always have the poor with you, *and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish*; but you will not always have me” (Mk 14:7 [italics mine]).

Jesus assumes that doing good to the poor “always,” “whenever you will,” at any time, is what God desires. An allusion to Deuteronomy 15 in Jesus’s admonition confirms further that Jesus understood God’s will for his chosen children that there would “be no one in need among you” (Dt 15:4). Admittedly, in the same chapter of Deuteronomy, God anticipates the sad consequences for the poor resulting from his own children’s lack of concern and therefore reminds Israel of its obligation to the needy in the community. The first half of Jesus’s rebuke of the disciples echoes the prelude to the divine mandate in Deuteronomy 15:11: “*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth*, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (Dt 15:11; cf. 7–8 [italics mine]). That the poor will

³ In John 12, Judas Iscariot, “the one who was about to betray him” (4), is the disciple who protests against the woman’s actions (probably expressing the sentiments of the rest) “not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the purse and used to steal what was put into it” (6).

always be among us, that there will never cease to be poor in our land, does not frustrate but rather promotes God's will for us to help the needy among his people.

The early Christians certainly took the remembrance of the poor among them to heart, giving "according to their ability" (Acts 11:29),⁴ "and even beyond their means,"⁵ to help their brethren. In some cases they gave so much of what they had that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34).⁶ The pillars of the church in Jerusalem asked Paul and Barnabas "to remember the poor" (Gal 2:10). Paul gave concrete expression to this request by giving churches instructions on a collection for the saints in Jerusalem—an undertaking that characterized much of his apostolate (1 Cor 16:1–4; cf. Rom 15:25–27; 2 Cor 8–9). The early Christians' concern for the poor also extended beyond the confines of the community of faith. Calling the church in Galatia to "work for the good of all," Paul shows that the church works "especially" but not exclusively "for those of the family of faith" (Gal 6:10.) For the same reason, Paul exhorts the church at Rome to "contribute to the needs of the saints; [and] *extend hospitality to strangers*" (Rom 12:13 [italics mine]). Paul's calls to help "all" and "strangers" are in tune with God's will for Israel whom he saved from Egypt: Since the Lord, your God, "loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. [Therefore] You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Dt 10:18; cf. Ex 22:21; 23:9).

We measure our concern for the poor on the basis of faithfulness to God's command to love our neighbor. In the specific case of the poor, however, we must be careful not to depersonalize them or minimize their situation by making them a sort of neighbor in general—the neighbor who is without a face and thus has little or no place in our actual list of neighbors. The poor are in fact among the *neediest* of neighbors. From Latin America, where I was born and raised, comes the phrase "preferential option for the poor." The phrase does not use "preferential" to exclude others who may also need our help, but rather to remind us in the

4 Here believers in Antioch send relief to believers in Judea during "a severe famine" (v. 28).

5 The example of the Macedonian church in 2 Corinthians 8:3.

6 This is the case of the church in Jerusalem (cf. 4:32–37; 2:44–45).

strongest possible way that the poor need us *most* and so we give them the “priority” of our love.⁷ The poor are those whose level of need is such that they suffer partial or continuous hardship and deprivation of basic everyday needs that should, in principle and in reality, allow for dignified living conditions—items such as nutritional food, adequate health care, safe housing, and (for those who can work) a decent job.

Of course, whatever is “nutritional,” “adequate,” “safe,” or “decent” may be debated, not at the expense of the poor but precisely for their well-being. Debates over the adjectives should not turn into word games that play with people’s lives. In fact, there are helpful indicators that may serve at least as a starting point in our responsible individual and communal assessment of needs among people in our congregations, communities, the nation, and other countries.⁸ The goal of such an assessment is not to overburden the congregation but to arrive at what Paul calls “a fair balance between your present abundance and their need” (2 Cor 8:13–14). As faithful stewards of what God has given us, we are encouraged to evaluate opportunities to care for the needy in sustainable ways that go beyond mere sympathy or interest, the occasional monetary gift, contributions of perishable items on days near holidays, or the once-or-twice in a lifetime “mission trip” to a poor barrio or dump somewhere in Latin America. While such attitudes or initiatives are not entirely outside the scope of concern for the poor, they must nevertheless be seen as complementary to a deeper, serious, and more ongoing commitment to people in need—like frosting on the cake. Moreover, as we participate in such sporadic or special initiatives, we must be careful not to use the poor as a means to feel good about ourselves. As God commands, we serve the poor unconditionally, out of love and ultimately for their benefit, not ours.

⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, ed. and trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), xxv–xxviii; Scripture often singles out orphans and widows as the special objects of God’s love (Dt 10:18; Ex 22:22–23; Jas 1:27; 1 Tm 4:16). We must also take care of those in our own family, our relatives, our closest neighbors (1 Tm 4:8, 16).

⁸ The Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has statistics on poverty in states and counties. The U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offer guidelines for measuring poverty at the national level. The United Nations and the World Bank provide statistics and guidelines for assessing poverty in other countries. Of course, these resources are only examples that must be supplemented by other data from local governments, ecclesiastical and other non-profit organizations that help in poor relief, and—more simply—those realities of poverty that are plain for us to see and do not need further proof or confirmation.

II.

Scripture speaks of poverty in spiritual (often called religious) and material terms.⁹ As little children put their trust in their parents, so do the “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:1) of Jesus’s beatitudes humbly put their faith in God above all things. Even though many of Jesus’s disciples were materially poor, they were not blessed because they were born poor or became poor.¹⁰ They were blessed because of God’s promise to save all who trust in him and his final deliverance from this present age where the poor—in the spiritual and material sense—seem to have nothing going for them while the rich and proud of the world seem to have everything going for them (see Jas 2:5).

The faith of the woman from Bethany made her, we might say, “poor in spirit.” Her act of devotion to Jesus expressed externally the condition of a thankful and loving heart. One could argue that through her act of faith and worship, the woman also showed her love and care for the poor—in this case, Jesus himself! Here faith and love become one and the same act of worship. In the mid-1970s, Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan priest, led poor *campesinos* (farmers) from his homeland in a discussion of Matthew 26:6–13. After narrating the disciples’ scolding of the woman for her waste of that costly perfume which should have gone to the poor, one of many weekly dialogues between the priest (I) and the poor congregation unfolded.

Oscar: If they’d sold it, it would have gone to only a small number of the poor, and the poor of the world are countless. On the other hand, when she offered it to Jesus, she was giving it, in his person, to all the poor. That made it clear it was Jesus we believe in. And believing in Jesus makes us concerned about other people, and we’ll even get to create a society where there’ll be no poor. Because if we’re Christians there shouldn’t be any poor.

William: But all that perfume. And the bottle. The alabaster bottle!

⁹ See Hauck and Bammel, “πτωχός, πτωχεία, πτωχεύω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 885–915.

¹⁰ Although wisdom literature can speak of poverty as the result of individual moral shortcomings (Prv 6:6–11; 10:4; 13:18; 14:23; 20:13; 21:17; 23:19–21) and prophets can see poverty as the result of God’s punishment for the collective sins of his people (Hg 1:3–11; Mal 3:8–12), Scripture does not lead us to care any less for the poor or to make excuses for not helping them. Poverty is also an unfortunate condition that results from others’ sins. God’s judgment is upon those who oppress the poor (Is 3:14–15; 10:1–4; 58:6–7; Jer 22:13–17; Ez 18:10–13; Am 2:6–7; 4:1; Mal 3:5).

I: The alabaster bottle was sealed, and it had to be broken to use the perfume. The perfume could be used only once. And the Gospel says the whole house was filled with the fragrance of nard. It's believed that nard was an ointment that came from India.

[Later on...]

Maria: Jesus was a poor man, too, and he too deserved to have the perfume poured on him.

I: And worse off than poor, for they were going to kill him two days later. In the passage before this, Jesus said that it was two days to Passover. And in the following passage it's told that Judas went away from there to make the bargain to sell him.

[Later on, after reading Jesus's statement on the remembrance of this woman by future hearers of the good news...]

Olivia: It seems to me that the remembering is for us also to do what she did. So that we do it now, not to him anymore, but to the poor. Or to him in the person of the poor. That's why we must remember her....¹¹

We must note that these reflections come from the poor themselves, who in this particular context interpreted Scripture under the threat and experience of torture and death by a brutal military dictatorship often supported by people of wealth and influence. They read the biblical texts in light of their faith in Christ the crucified and their identification with him in their own experience of poverty, persecution, and suffering. Most insightful are their comments on Jesus as the poor man *par excellence*. Jesus is the poor man “we believe in” and therefore deserves our worship and lives, but he is also the one through whom we are made into Christians who, like the woman of the alabaster bottle, will always care for “him in the person of the poor.”

The church remembers the woman of Bethany when the church thinks of the poor, both the Christ whom she trusts and the Christ in her midst whom she loves. First, the church remembers the poor one who is anointed for burial, the suffering one on the way to the cross, our generous Christ who—as Paul reminds the Corinthians in an appeal to help the poor Jerusalem

¹¹ Ernesto Cardenal, “A Nicaraguan Example: The Alabaster Bottle – Matthew 26:6–13,” in R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 436–43. The italicized comments in brackets are mine.

church—“was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).¹² Then, the church also remembers the poor who is Christ among us. What does this mean?

Christ’s self-identification with the poor in the flesh may at times surprise us, but such radical humiliation stands in perfect continuity with the loving character of the one God of Israel who identified himself with the poor by upholding their cause, hearing and answering their cries, and protecting them from their oppressors (Ex 22:23; Is 41:17; Ps 12:5; 14:6; 69:33; 70:5; 140:12).¹³ Perhaps we speak and think too often of the incarnation in abstract terms: Christ assumes a human nature that we can conceive of somewhat apart from a concrete human history. We forget that Christ became incarnate concretely as a poor child to become a rejected prophet from the borderland region of Nazareth in Galilee from where nothing good comes (Jn 1:46; 7:52; cf. Acts 24:5).¹⁴ In his incarnation and humiliation, Jesus the Galilean identifies in his person with the poor and rejected in such a radically historical way that the church’s concern for the poor today must be seen—like in the case of the woman from Bethany—as nothing less than a single act both of devotion to Christ and love to him in the person of the poor.

In the Christian tradition, one thinks of Martin Luther for whom Christ truly identifies with people in need. Despite various interpretations on the identity of “one of the least of these” in Matthew 25,¹⁵ Luther uses the text in his explanation of the fifth commandment to identify

12 Cf. Phil 2:3–8 where Paul exhorts us to give ourselves in service to others as Christ Jesus showed his radical self-giving to us in his incarnation and humiliation.

13 Similarly, for Melito of Sardis (died ca. 190 A.D.), Christ “is the one who in many people endured many things. This is the one who was murdered in Abel, tied up in Isaac, exiled in Jacob, sold in Joseph, exposed [to die] in Moses, slaughtered in the lamb, hunted down in David, dishonored in the prophets.” *On Pascha*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2001), 69.

14 There is no room to explore the implications of Jesus’s identity as a Galilean for the church’s ministry among marginalized borderlands peoples. See Virgilio Elizondo’s revised and expanded classic *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), and the section on “Mestizaje and Galilean Christology,” in Timothy Matovina, ed., *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends* (Orbis, 2000), 143–186.

15 “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me” (v. 40, cf. 45). For the diversity of interpretive options on this point, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 428–30, cf. 421–23.

the rejected Christ with “those in need and peril of body and life.”¹⁶ We also find a powerful example of Luther’s portrayal of Christ’s identification with the poor in a Christmas sermon, where he warns against our inclination to judge the people of Bethlehem for not giving a warm welcome to baby Jesus and his mother. Luther suggests that if we think we would have been so moved to help the Christ child in his poverty then, we should help the poor who is Christ in our midst now.

There are many who are enkindled with dreamy devotion, when they hear of such poverty of Christ, are almost angry with the citizens of Bethlehem, denounce their blindness and ingratitude, and think, if they had been there, they would have shown the Lord and his mother a more becoming service, and would not have permitted them to be treated so miserably. But they do not look by their side to see how many of their fellow men need their help, and which they let go on in their misery unaided. Who is there upon earth that has no poor, miserable, sick erring ones, or sinful people around him? Why does he not exercise his love to those? Why does he not do to them as Christ has done to him? It is altogether false to think that you have done much for Christ, if you do nothing for those needy ones. Had you been at Bethlehem you would have paid as little attention to Christ as they did . . . you beat the air and do not recognize the Lord in your neighbor, you do not do to him as he has done to you.¹⁷

We are called to see the suffering face of the poor Christ in the poor of today. Who are the ones who recognize the Lord in the needy neighbor? Those who are led to repent for rejecting the poor now as they would have rejected the Christ child then, but also those who are moved to love the poor, empowered by Christ who first loved us and became poor that we might be saved.

¹⁶ “Therefore God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life. He will pass a most terrible sentence upon them at the Last Day, as Christ himself says. He will say: ‘I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ That is to say, ‘You would have permitted me and my family to die of hunger, thirst, and cold, to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, to rot in prison or perish from want.’” The Large Catechism (LC), “Ten Commandments,” 191, in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). 412.

¹⁷ J. N. Lenker, ed., *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, trans. J. N. Lenker et al., vol. 1.1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 155.

III.

“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him” (Prv 14:31; 17:5). There is a close relationship between the fifth and first commandments. Insofar as Christians promote the lives of those “in need and peril of body and life,” they are treating God’s most vulnerable creatures with dignity and therefore honor him as the Creator who made us all. Kindness to God’s creatures expresses faithfulness to the Creator and God whose will includes that we help the poor and the powerless in our midst. By contrast, active oppression of the poor (a sin of commission) or passive failure to assist the poor (a sin of omission) insult our Maker and, moreover, may indicate that we are putting our trust in gods other than the one true God.

True worship of God leads to true love of the neighbor. But our idolatry hurts the neighbor. In his explanation of the first commandment, Luther speaks against “those who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that *they care for no one else*.”¹⁸ When “mammon” or riches become the object of one’s devotion and trust, concern for the poor goes out the window. Later on, Luther criticizes another form of “false worship,” namely, one in which the conscience “seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God . . . [by keeping] track of how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc.”¹⁹

As love of riches hurts the needy neighbor, so does false trust in one’s works toward gaining salvation. Luther makes this point right away after the previous citation from his Christmas sermon: “You . . . do not recognize the Lord in your neighbor . . . Therefore God permits you to be blinded, and deceived by the pope and false preachers, so that you squander on wood, stone, paper, and wax that *with which you might help your fellow man*.”²⁰ This is the kind

18 LC, “Ten Commandments,” 5 (italics mine), Kolb/Wengert, 387; cf. Mt 6:24.

19 Ibid., 22 (italics mine).

20 Lenker, 155.

of language Luther uses to attack any practice that is done as a work to earn “heaven” or God’s favor. Yet the attack does not end there. It goes beyond the idolatry of false works to unmask its disastrous consequences for carrying out the works of mercy that God actually commands us to do in imitation of Christ.

Of what benefit is it to your neighbor if you build a church entirely out of gold? . . . Do you think that God will permit himself to be paid with the sound of bells, the smoke of candles, the glitter of gold and such fancies? He has commanded none of these, but if you see your neighbor going astray, sinning, or suffering in body or soul, you are to leave everything else and at once help him in every way in your power and if you can do no more, help him with works of comfort and prayer. Thus has Christ done to you and given you an example for you to follow.”²¹

In Luther’s day, people typically assumed that taking a monastic vow of poverty and giving alms to the poor were works that earned the forgiveness of sins.²² These forms of idolatry or false worship shaped a romantic view of the poor and a utilitarian attitude towards them. First, monastic self-renunciation idealized poverty as the most favorable state in the eyes of God.²³ In particular, the Gospel narrative of the rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to be saved was “overworked by the medieval clergy” to show that renouncing one’s possessions and giving them to the poor earned God’s grace (Mk 10:17–21).²⁴ People saw poverty as the most elevated spiritual condition and the poor in particular as the closest to God (Tb 12:9 [cf. 4:10];

21 Ibid., 146; cf. 192, 214 for similar comments by Luther in another Christmas sermon.

22 On the theology of poverty in the middle ages, see Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 22–33; see also Robert Rosin, *Bringing Forth Fruit: Luther on Social Welfare*, in Robert Rosin and Charles Arand, eds., *A Cup of Cold Water: A Look at Biblical Charity* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1996), 117–164; “It was pretended that monastic vows would be equal to baptism, and that through monastic life one could earn forgiveness of sin and justification before God . . . In this way monastic vows were praised more highly than baptism.” AC XXVII 11–13 Kolb/Wengert, 82.

23 “It was also said that one could obtain more merit through the monastic life than through all other walks of life, which had been ordered by God, such as the office of pastor or preacher, the office of ruler, prince, lord, and the like.” AC XXVII 13 Kolb/Wengert, 82; cf. 16–17 (or being a “farmer” or an “artisan,” Ap XXVII 37).

24 Lindberg, 27; Luther argues against the prevailing interpretation of the parallel passage (esp. Mt 19:21) by appealing to the spiritual sense of poverty: “The poverty of the gospel [Mt 5:3] does not consist in the abandonment of property, but in the absence of greed and of trust in riches . . . Perfection consists in what Christ says next: ‘Follow me.’ This sets forth the example of obedience in a calling.” Ap XXVII 45–49 **Kolb/Wengert, 88**. This is Luther’s way of saying that the “poor in spirit” are those who trust in God and serve their neighbor.

Sir 3:30).²⁵ Second, almsgiving became a divine means for the richer to be saved and secure the ongoing intercession of the poor.²⁶ It justified the existence of the poor as an indispensable step on the road to salvation. Interestingly, some of the most popular biblical passages in this regard came from apocryphal books like Tobit, in which “almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin,” or Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) where we are told that “almsgiving atones for sin.”²⁷

Inevitably, when the poor are idealized or seen as a means to one’s own spiritual benefit, the end result is that the poor themselves do not become the object of our love. At times, one hears attitudes towards the poor among Christians today similar to those of Luther’s day. On the one hand, Christians may praise or look up to the poor for their lack of attachment to material things and presumably wish they could be like them. By making this move, they romanticize the poor and, therefore, take too lightly the harsh reality of poverty and the church’s need for an ongoing commitment to help them actually improve their situation. On the other hand, Christians may be motivated to help the poor on special occasions or through special projects on the condition that they hear the gospel in some way. They may talk about how much their own faith has grown as a result of these experiences without any further acts of solidarity towards the poor. By making these moves, they tend to use the poor primarily as a means to their own spiritual growth or the potential growth of church membership and, therefore, do not make the poor themselves the primary object of their works of mercy.

Concrete acts of love towards people in need should be done without expecting to receive anything in return from either God or the poor. Christian service is a matter of faith active in

25 For example, the monastic vow of poverty became an aspect of “Christian perfection” that led to righteousness before God. This way of thinking obscured the evangelical meaning of “true perfection and true service of God,” which is to fear God, trust that he is gracious to us because of Christ, pray to and expect help from him in every need and in all afflictions, and do good works according to our callings in life. AC XXVII 44–50 Kolb/Wengert, 88; cf. Ap XXVII 27.

26 Typically, the church received the alms of the rich presumably on behalf of the poor. In Luther’s day, testaments, charters, buying and selling of indulgences, leaving money behind for the poor to participate in one’s funeral, and masses for the dead assumed that the poor—also the saints—could intercede for the dead (especially, the rich). See Lindberg, 27–33.

27 Lindberg, 27. In contrast to the prevailing interpretation, Melancthon interprets Tobit’s statement on almsgiving not as a work that reconciles us before God, but as a fruit of love that results from faith in a gracious God on account of Christ. Ap XXVII, 163.

unconditional love. One does not anoint the poor with oil—no matter how costly it is—to get something back. Luther’s teaching on justification by faith apart from works turned medieval views on poverty and the poor upside down. By leaving the matter of one’s own salvation, and even temporal blessings, fully in God’s gracious hands, people could turn away from an obsessive preoccupation with their own spiritual merits and temporal lifestyles and instead focus their efforts towards serving the neighbor in “worldly-concerns,” like embarking on initiatives to assist the poor. Luther’s teaching created a monumental shift from the “I” to the “thou,” from self-service to self-giving. Carter Lindberg sums up Luther’s contribution as follows:

If salvation is by grace alone, poverty no longer serves anyone. The poor no longer possess any special sanctity; they are sinners like their wealthier compatriots. With faith, not charity, as the locus for the relationship to God, attention could be focused on this-worldly problems and their causes. Because salvation was no longer understood to be the goal of life but rather the foundation of life, human energy and reason were liberated to this-worldly concerns.

Because faith and trust in the one true God who saves us in Christ drives away the gods of riches and salvation-by-works that seek to alienate us from our neighbor, we are now free to serve the poor like we mean it—trying our hardest and best with what God has given us! The church’s worship of the one true God who comes to us in the poor and suffering Christ will shape her own self-giving to those in need in her midst, but also extend beyond the confines of congregational walls to reach into the world of the poor “out there” who is also Christ among us. Those who are served by Christ in the liturgy through his holy Word and holy Supper in turn remember and serve Christ among them through their works of mercy—this is “the liturgy after the liturgy.”²⁸ Indeed, for those who live in Christ, who trust in him and love him in the person of the poor, faith in the one true God and love of the neighbor become nothing less than one single act of spiritual worship flowing from the church into the world.

²⁸ Cited in Lindberg, 164. The term “is the Orthodox tradition’s understanding of ecclesial community marked by the Eucharist and directed toward service to others” (n. 14); cf. Melancthon’s statement that “the worship of the New Testament is spiritual, that is, it is the righteousness of faith in the heart and the fruits of faith.” Ap XXIV, 27.