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Thomas K. Johnson

Poverty and Chastity in Reformed Ethics



Theological Accents
Theologische Akzente

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Poverty and Chastity in Reformed Ethics¹

Thomas K. Johnson

I am often surprised at where one discovers insights helpful in formulating a more complete Reformed ethic. During background reading for teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit (not usually a central theme in ethics), I picked up a book by church-growth author Peter Wagner. (Bear in mind that church-growth types are sometimes viewed by academic theologians with a bit of condescension if not suspicion.) There I found the exegesis that lets us view voluntary poverty and celibacy in a positive light while retaining the best insights of Reformed theology.

Because of the Reformation, we are inclined to be rather cautious of voluntary poverty and celibacy. As components of the monastic vows, poverty and celibacy were associated with works salvation. Untold numbers of misguided believers took such vows in an attempt to find assurance of salvation, not realizing that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. The Reformation recovery of the doctrine of God's grace put such practices in a bad light.

In addition, the monastic vows were part of the two-tiered social ethic rejected by the Reformation. Before the Reformation only the "religious" (priests, monks, and nuns), who took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, were seen as really pleasing God.

The masses who responsibly earned a living and raised their families were often seen as rather unspiritual, perhaps even unsaved. But the Word of God taught the Reformers that we can serve God in every sphere of life, not only in a narrowly "religious" realm. Again, voluntary poverty and celibacy were put down.

Besides our positive Reformation heritage, any discussion of this topic today is complicated by the crazed hedonism and absolute individualism so characteristic of current society. Financial achievement and self-indulgence have replaced the two great commandments even for many believers, rendering our topic unpopular as well as theologically difficult.

But what sensitive soul among us can fail to admire a Mother Theresa and her Missionaries of Charity? And are not poverty and celibacy almost necessary to their work? Would not evangelical ministries of that sort help bring light to our dark world? Might these gifts help the church resist the materialist temptation? Should we not see if voluntary poverty and celibacy could be reframed in a more positive light, without the baggage that led to the abuses of the past?

Peter Wagner has pointed out that both poverty and celibacy are listed as gifts of the Spirit (charismata) in 1 Corinthians.² In 1 Cor. 7:7 Paul says, “I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God.” The way in which one could be like Paul in the context of this discussion of conjugal duties and rights would be by being contentedly celibate. And that is a gift, he declares, that God gives, though not to all. In 1 Corinthians 13:3 we read, “If I give all I possess to the poor ... but have not love, I gain nothing.” The driving point of the passage is that spiritual gifts are all useless unless they are energized by love. But we must not miss the fact that “giving all I possess to the poor,” what I am calling “voluntary poverty,” is included in the list of gifts of the Spirit. And I can think of no reason to suppose that celibacy and voluntary poverty should be included among the revelatory gifts that we claim have ceased. Therefore, we must conclude that God is still giving these gifts to the church today.

This puts them in a much better light than they previously enjoyed. I see at least four parts of this better light. First, use of these gifts is not to be seen as an attempt to earn salvation but as a proper expression of gratitude for God’s grace. This is evident from the fact that the discussion of spiritual gifts in the book of Romans occurs in chapter 12, which heads the positive description of the life of gratitude for God’s grace received by faith. According to the order of teaching in Romans

12 and 13, use of spiritual gifts in serving one another is as much a part of the life of gratitude (though perhaps not so central) as obeying the Ten Commandments or submitting to the magistrate. And none of these duties may be seen as earning salvation.

Second, because any particular spiritual gift is only given to a small percentage of the members of the body, we should expect only a few Christians to be genuinely able to practice voluntary poverty or celibacy. Paul acknowledged this in regard to celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7:7. And in 1 Corinthians 12:29, 30 he uses a series of rhetorical questions to point out that not all gifts are given to each believer.

Third, if seen as spiritual gifts, these practices do not lead to an improper two-tiered ethic. There are differences in spirituality among Christians, but in relation to gifts, the issues are whether or not we use our gifts and whether or not our use is moved by love, not which gifts we have been given. God seems to esteem the use of many other gifts (e.g., teaching, showing mercy, encouragement, and administration) at least as highly as the gifts of self-denial.

Finally, celibacy and poverty seem to be gifts that primarily allow one the freedom to use other gifts more fully. Not ends in themselves, they allow one to give oneself more readily to teaching, evangelism, care of the poor, or whatever else may directly contribute to the edification of the church. Paul’s great gift was to be an apostle to the Gentiles. But this gift did not stand alone; it

was facilitated by his celibacy and free acceptance of poverty, which liberated him from normal familial and comfort constraints and allowed him to risk his life in a way that a husband and father could not responsibly do. Though sometimes associated with foreign missions, some of our established churches might be invigorated by a person or two who could pour vast amounts of energy into the church instead of using that energy in work or family.

So how might we recognize these gifts? My hunch is that a person's desires are an initial signal of the gift. The person with one of these gifts might feel little desire for marriage or material comforts. For example, if one reads, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want," (Philippians 4:12) and finds Paul's example too easy to be challenging, wondering why everyone does not share Paul's sentiments, this person probably has a gift of voluntary poverty.

This initial internal signal of one of these gifts should be confirmed by consultation with elders of a church, who could guard against abuses and guide the person to an effective place of service. This sort of submission to the church via her elders would subdue the elitism and "Lone Ranger" mentality that sometimes reduce the effectiveness of believers with these gifts. But this consultation is likely to occur only if our teenagers and young adults hear our elders and teachers talking about these gifts. And without such teach-

ing, our people may not interpret their desires as spiritual gifts. We may have many people in our churches who are contentedly single and/or comfortable living very simply, but who have not yet seen those facts as a spiritual gift and a call to pour their energies into the edification of the people of God.

In advising our people, we should recall the wise warning of the Westminster Confession (22:7) which regards monastic vows as "sinful snares." For how can one take a vow without knowing whether or not God might change one's calling in several years? But a perusal of Christian biographies shows that many of our best evangelical and Reformed leaders practiced celibacy and/or voluntary poverty for portions of their lives.

Our world is drowning in its mad pursuit of personal peace and affluence, and the church looks far too little like a lifeguard. But just a few in our midst who use the gifts of self-denial might help the rest of us break from our easy conformity to the world. To this end we should set these gifts in a better context in our ethics. This would encourage those with these gifts, and God might respond by raising up more people like them.

Annotation

Anmerkungen

¹Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D. is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America serving as a missionary in the Czech Republic since 1996. He has been a church planter, a professor in both secular universities and evangelical seminaries, and is currently serving the World Evangelical Alliance as Religious Freedom Ambassador to the Vatican. He has been associated with Martin

Bucer Seminary since 2003. This essay was originally published in *Presbyterion*, the journal of Covenant Theological Seminary, 16:1, 1990.

²Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979), pp. 53-67, 96-99.

The Author

Über den Autor



Prof. Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D., has served as pastor of three evangelical churches, including serving as a church planter, and has taught philosophy or theology in eleven universities and theological schools in nine countries, including the dissident, anti-communist European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, and Charles University in Prague.

Dr. Johnson is presently Vice President for Research, Martin Bucer Seminary; Special Advisor for the International Institute for Religious Freedom (WEA); Professor of Philosophy, Global Scholars; Board President of the Comenius Institute (Prague); and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. In March 2016, he was appointed Religious Freedom Ambassador to the Vatican, representing the World Evangelical Alliance and its 600 million members; in December 2016, he was honored for his international human rights efforts with a knighthood from the Sovereign Imperial House of Ghassan.

The first edition of Johnson's *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (2008) was widely read and became a standard evangelical resource. The second edition (2016) was jointly published on behalf of the WEA and the Vatican-based *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*. He has written five other books and some two hundred articles and essays; he has edited 20 books on issues of religion and society as well as numerous human rights reports. Many of his writings are available on the Martin Bucer website. Though traveling extensively to meet with senior Roman Catholic representatives along with other diplomats and scholars, he lives in Prague with his wife, Leslie P. Johnson. She was the first director of the Christian International School of Prague and is now an educational consultant for the Association of Christian Schools International. They have three grown children as well as grandchildren.

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