Does Inequality Really Matter?

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There is a great temptation to deal with the issues of inequality either in terms of economics alone or in a polemical style that simply dwells on the bad effects of inequality—as if that solves the problem. Instead, I want to start by seeking to address this issue more theologically, thus my question, “Does inequality really matter?”

So what if there’s inequality? There has always been inequality and there most certainly always will be inequality. This is not just a quick lapse into an approach much influenced by Darwin, that affirms the solutions for our society are about survival of the fittest and devil take the hindmost, if you’ll excuse the mix of disciplines in that sentence. Rather, it’s a genuine question in terms of a world that is deeply caught up in diversity, and seemingly to the world’s great benefit.

To put it another way: are the extremely wealthy merely the latest or possibly the last minority, a persecuted group to be identified, whom we need to defend, not attack? Should there be marches, or possibly processions of limos or Rolls Royces (necessarily chauffeur-driven), down Wall Street or Lombard Street with elegantly crafted placards produced by top-end designers saying, “Justice to the ultra-rich,” “Billionaires are people too”?” Why does inequality matter?

I want to go back to two originating stories, turning first to the Genesis story and the development of diversity within humanity in its earliest forms.

In the great west window of Canterbury Cathedral, in the center of the bottom row of stained glass, there is an image of Adam digging in the Garden of Eden. The cathedral, for those who do not know it, progresses from west to east upwards, like this church. As you go further east you go further up, except in Canterbury it’s pretty steep:

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it goes up about thirty-five feet. At the east end, just near where the shrine of St. Thomas of Canterbury would have been until the Reformation, there is the throne of St. Augustine, into which one is rather firmly put when you start this job. Archbishop Robert Runcie used to say that he was constantly reminded that when he sat on the throne of St. Augustine, he was level with Adam digging at the other end of the cathedral.

Underlying that comment is a wealth of thoughtfulness about the relative importance of offices to which others ascribe importance, but also the significance of Adam digging in the garden. One can meditate for days on those particular stories in the early chapters of Genesis. But one of the aspects to note is that at the beginning we are all equal. In the days of the English revolution in the seventeenth century, the gentry who were overthrowing the tyrannical rule, as they saw it, of Charles I were not in the slightest bit interested in equality with the peasantry. They wanted a decent hierarchy, only with those who were slightly more important taken down a peg or two, or taken off a head or two. Cromwell took strongly against the levelers and the diggers, quasi-communist groups who went back to Adam and Eve and proclaimed there should be no social distinctions. Hierarchy is deeply embedded, but the Adam and Eve story, the story of the Garden, has constantly come back to capture the imagination of those who see that in the creation of God there is equality.

And at the heart of the Genesis story of the creation of human beings is the essential nature of the human being, both male and female, existing to know God intimately and to walk intimately with God. There is an equality of worship, in adoration of the presence of God; there is an equality of reveling and feasting, in fellowship with God in the Garden. Equality is a gift in creation, it is the foundation of equality before the law, equality of voice in the public square, equality in righteousness.

Walter Brueggemann makes a similar point in his commentary on Isaiah, concerning chapter fifty-nine. The postexilic community in Israel is deeply flawed: not by its lack of worship, of which there is plenty, but by its inequalities in justice, in voice, in inclusion of all who accept Torah, regardless of wealth and status.

The first point to make is thus that inequality contrasts with the basic equality that exists before God. That may well not make it wrong, but as I will come back to when looking at the issues of the use of power, it raises a significant question mark. Is it possible, where
there is gross inequality, for equality in worship and fellowship to be maintained?

Moving on through the Old Testament, we find that the patriarchs develop great wealth, yet it is seen as a sign of God’s blessing on them, not as a way of distinguishing their importance from one another. In fact, when there is a dispute over relative areas of prosperity, Abram lets Lot choose the more prosperous and goes his own way into the less prosperous. As a result Abraham finds afresh the blessing of God, while Lot gets caught up by Sodom and eventually ends in disaster.

In the rest of the Old Testament, we find the tensions of inequality running through it from beginning to end. Let me mention just a few. In the Exodus story, there is a commonality of status, and the absence of great riches, which speaks to a deep sense of the divine imperative toward equality. In the wilderness the people of Israel are equal. The people do, it is true, essentially loot the Egyptians on their way out (3:22), but the goods they take with them are held together. They all have gold and silver, incidentally with which to contribute to the making of the golden calf, but that’s a separate story on a different topic. They are prosperous as a people, but there is no huge social distinction. They are a wandering people living in tents.

And once they have settled, the whole structure of the Levitical code prevented the indefinite accumulation of land and slaves within the people of Israel, through the laws of Jubilee. Wealth was fine, but not forever, and not so as to create such inequality of power that the theocratic, Yahweh-centered life of worship and fellowship should be corrupted. Indeed, the menaces of inequality and injustice that result from the indefinite accumulation of wealth are seen as utterly vitiating worship that was filled with delight and joy (Isaiah 58).

The prophets hark back to the idealized beginning, and challenge the inequalities of both Israel and Judah. Isaiah condemns those who add house to house; Nehemiah condemns those who allow other Jews to sell themselves into slavery to pay their debts. And yet there is an ambivalence. The wealth of Solomon is triumphantly celebrated, as is that of Abraham, of Jacob, of Hezekiah, of the restored Israel in Isaiah 60:17. So there is an ambivalence: on the one hand, an acceptance of wealth as blessing, and on the other hand, a hesitation—a fear—about its consequences.

The second originating story is that of the early part of the Acts of the Apostles, the foundation of the church after Pentecost. It is a story that consciously echoes the Exodus narrative.
We are all aware of the two “communist” passages, as some people (falsely) call them: the last verses of Acts 2 and Acts 4. Here we have a community on a journey, in which all is held in common. Contrary to the oppressive power structures of Rome and of the Jewish leaders of the time, in which the people are contrasted with the Temple authorities, the new people of God’s church are one. There is prophetic and charismatic authority, but no right to be rich.

Echoes of that moment are found in Paul’s epistles, and in the Epistle of James. In 1 Corinthians, the criticism of the rich at worship who eat their own food at the Eucharist is excoriating. The common meal must be shared in common. The Eucharist in its thanksgiving includes thanksgiving for the new community in which needs are met, poverty ended, and the just rule of God is seen. And James hits hard at the wealthy who do not share their wealth and at the business people who do not depend on God.

These passages must be tied into the gospel passages on the incarnation, written at a similar point. The Magnificat, the Song of Mary, is so revolutionary that I am surprised Joseph McCarthy did not ban it as unAmerican. The British, under the East India Company, before 1857 certainly did ban the Magnificat from being sung at Evensong in India. You do not want the subordinated “natives” getting ideas about the hungry being fed, the poor lifted up, and the rich and powerful overthrown and sent away empty.

It is absolutely clear that the origins of Christian prophetic life, from the moment of the incarnation forward, carried a challenge to inequality.

Yet in Acts, even Ananias and Sapphira are told they could have kept their wealth: which is to say, common ownership was a move of the Spirit, not a compulsion of the community. The household codes of the New Testament in the letters of Peter and Paul clearly accept social distinction, inequality defined not only by wealth but by hierarchy, and thus we see again pragmatic ambivalence when faced with the inevitable realities of economic and social differentiation.

The ambivalence about wealth is both in scripture and liturgy. While at one side we see it as an evil and a sign of a society turning away from God, a danger which plays on the weakness of human sinfulness, on the other, we are equally likely to regard those who possess it as uniquely blessed and even to pray for their prosperity. In the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, in the collect for the monarch, is a prayer for his (or her) prosperity.
Both at this point and later in Christian history, whenever there is spiritual renewal, extremes of wealth are challenged by the prophetic words and actions of those caught up in the renewal. It is complacent, lazy churches that accept inequality without question. The development of monastic life in the deserts of Egypt is one example. In the Rule of St. Benedict, private property is forbidden for all, whatever their background. Monks sit in order of their seniority since taking vows, not by social rank, and that was revolutionary. As usual, of course, human pressure cuts in and by the eighteenth century most of the major French monasteries had lay titular abbots who got the income, while the scions of the nobility always got the best places.

Let’s consider this theological overview in our contemporary, and especially Western, world. I will not rehearse the massive increase in inequality in Europe (especially the United Kingdom) and the United States arising more than anything out of the liberalization of financial markets in the 1980s. Its absurdities can be seen in the fall in bonuses in London so that it was reported last week that the top paying bank in bonuses is down to an average of only £3 million for 2014. Oh . . . [ironically] may we have a moment of silent sorrow?! May we take a retiring collection to help them out?! The Financial Times has majored on this recently. Early in 2013 Gillian Tett sent out a survey demonstrating that the elites are no longer trusted. And Francis Fukuyama writes powerfully of the return in the U.S.A. to what he calls “patrimonialism,” a system based on the control by vested interests on the means of government. In this case the main force at work is that of the ultra-rich, not just individuals but organizations, and especially, as in Europe, of the banking system.

This is perhaps the best modern example of the political and moral danger of the gross inequality that has reemerged over the last thirty years. I do not intend to get diverted into a lecture on banking, but let us recall that at the heart of the crisis of 2008 was the problem of “too big to fail”: that some banks and financial institutions are so large that their failure would destroy the economy. Thus in October of 2008, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, recounts how one weekend after negotiations with two of the major British banks, which between them represented several times Britain’s GDP, early on the Monday morning, at one or two o’clock in the morning, he was told, essentially, “Either you underwrite a cheque for 250 billion pounds, the thick end of 400 billion dollars, now, or the banks won’t open in the morning, nor the cash machines, nor will
there be any way of transferring money, of making payments, of doing anything in the economy at all.” He looked down the barrel of that gun and realized he had no choice.

Thus in Spain, despite the government in 2007 running a primary budget surplus, the threatened failure of the banking system almost destroyed the financial viability of the government’s credit.

Despite this catastrophic failure, the banking system is in repair-mode not replace-mode. It seeks to get back to the enormous levels of leverage and freedom from constraint, totally inappropriate to an industry that can destroy an economy overnight, or at least over a few weeks. Again to oversimplify, it reached this position through the growth of inequalities that gave a sense of divine right to wealth, and to national support.

I have picked this example partly because it illustrates the biblical and theological issues, and does so in a way that we can relate to today. Inequality would be arguably harmless if the resultant power were always to be benevolent. But the theological understanding is that wealth is always in danger of corrupting its holders, and in most cases, the corrupted become too powerful.

A response I have often heard, especially in the U.S.A., is that there is a remarkable and extraordinary tradition of philanthropy from those who have created wealth which demonstrates how the wealthy can very often be trusted with their power. When we look at Warren Buffett or Bill Gates, we see a disciplined and extraordinary dedication to the management of wealth for the common good, and we give thanks. The biblical injunction is not against all personal wealth. As I have shown, in the Bible there is a respect for and a sense of God’s blessing for those who create wealth for the common good. But there is a biblical injunction against the systematic and indefinite accumulation of grossly unequal societies. It always leads to abuse, even if every wealthy person is generous, because the asymmetries of power mean that wealth allocation becomes a matter of paternalism, not a basic issue of justice.

And there lies the great challenge for our world in the next forty years—one of many, of course, but this is one where we have the tools to meet the challenge. In an era in which we will see the growth of technologies like Artificial Intelligence and gene therapies, economists like Lawrence Summers foresee growing inequalities between the small minority who can maximize the benefits of new technology and the large majority who will see only stagnation in income. We
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face the challenge of a society in which inequality of education or health or opportunity becomes and continues to be a life sentence to poverty. And that challenge is exactly the one we find the prophets so concerned about.

Inequality is an issue because it stands against the equality of access to God in worship and fellowship, according to the great Bible texts concerning our beginnings. It is a problem because it plays on the corruption of the human person, our sinfulness, to create power-grabs, patrimonialism by the powerful: that which is self-serving, not foot-washing. It is a fundamental theological issue remediable by a human society that manages its limits, constrains its expression, and opens the way to its own corrections. We have done it before.

I end with hope, because inequality is an issue that lies in the hands of God. In his hands, with our repentance, it is an issue that can change; it will change. The God who meets us in Jesus, the God who raises Christ from the dead, changes everything. We are today not in a place of menace and danger, because we are increasingly conscious of inequality. We are in a place of hope and opportunity, and we are in a place where the church, in the grace and the providence of God, holds within its hands the beauty of opportunity that can change our world: liberating the enslaved, creating the conditions of human flourishing, and bringing in the common good.

Thanks be to God.