

AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO THE PREACHING OF AMOS

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Preaching demands a response. The listener can ignore what is said, reject it as false, or accept it as truth and let it work toward a change in behavior. The OT often allows the reader to see how Israel or Judah reacted to the preaching of the prophets. The book of Amos mentions only the response of one individual: Amaziah the priest of Bethel. Presumably he was acting officially on behalf of the government of Jeroboam II. Amaziah told Amos to go back to Judah and preach, because Bethel, against which Amos had been preaching, was "a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence" (7:13).¹

Evangelicals, with their belief in the absolute authority of Holy Scripture, need to accept the deepest demands of God's prophetic word through Amos. Understanding of a message is surely prerequisite to response. As one of the "minor" prophets Amos is preached only occasionally. Yet his message has much to contribute to discussions of social justice. Carl Henry raised a challenge a decade ago: "A high responsibility presently rests on evangelical clergy to deepen the awareness of churchgoers—and their own expertise as well—in what the Bible says about social morality."² His challenge still remains, and a good place to begin to meet it is to learn from the herdsman from Tekoa.

I. THE PREACHING OF AMOS

Amos the preacher came with a message of inevitable judgment. God would not turn back because the transgressions were too many. The element of hopelessness is symbolized well in the vision of the basket of summer fruit with its wordplay between "summer fruit," *qayis*, and the "end," *qēs*. "The end has come for my people Israel," intones Yahweh with heavy words of doom.

This emphasis on judgment is occasioned by a continual barrage of accusations against Israel. The people's rejection of Yahweh's covenant and his repeated warnings have made the coming destruction inevitable (cf. 4:6-13). The accusations Amos makes fall into two broad categories. He cries out against practices that were harmful to the poor among the Israelites, human relation-

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¹All Biblical citations follow *NASB* unless indicated otherwise.

²C. F. H. Henry, "Reflections," in *The Chicago Declaration* (ed. R. J. Sider; Carol Stream: Creation House, 1974) 129.

ships being at the heart of the covenant.³ The Israelite who oppresses the poor and enriches himself at their expense only deludes himself when he participates in worship of Yahweh. Therefore as a corollary to preaching against injustice Amos cites a lack of true worship of Yahweh in Israel. Their attention to ceremony and sacrifices has left the heart of the worshiper untouched. Consequently when the people think they are serving Yahweh they are actually sinning, as Amos so memorably states: "Enter Bethel and transgress; / In Gilgal multiply transgression!" (4:4).⁴

Amos is not entirely without hope. In common with the other true prophets he looks for a remnant, viewing judgment as a sifting process to be followed by the messianic kingdom. Yahweh declares:

For behold, I am commanding,
And I will shake the house of Jacob among all nations
As grain is shaken in a sieve,
And [NASB "But"] not a pebble [NASB margin] will fall to the ground (9:9).⁵

At the very end of the book Amos predicts a future restoration under the Davidic king (9:11–15). Appeals for repentance are absent except for chap. 5. Knowing that there is still time for repentance and on the basis of remnant theology Amos pleads: "Seek Me [Yahweh] that you may live! / But do not resort to Bethel, / And do not come to Gilgal, / Nor cross over to Beersheba; . . . Seek the LORD that you may live!" (5:4–6). Later in the chapter he varies the wording: "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; . . . Hate evil, love good, / And

³Amos 3:2 refers to God's covenant with Israel. H. Huffmon takes the root *yd'* as a technical covenant term ("The Treaty Background of Hebrew *YADA*," *BASOR* 181 [1966] 34–35). The phrase "all the families of the earth" occurs elsewhere only in Gen 12:3; 28:14, both being part of well-known covenant passages. Amos 2:4–5 notes Judah's violation of the "law of the LORD" and "His statutes." Many have wanted to delete the passage as a "Deuteronomistic" addition, but the language is not especially "Deuteronomistic" and the passage fits the overall thrust of Amos well (treated in detail in the author's unpublished paper, "The Alleged Deuteronomistic Redaction of Amos"). See also F. H. Seilhamer, "The Role of Covenant in the Mission and Message of Amos," in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers* (ed. H. N. Bream et al.; Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974) 435–451.

⁴The verse could be taken as a reference to idol worship (e.g. C. L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* [Chicago: Moody, 1976] 99–100). The thrust of Amos' book, however, appears rather to treat violations of laws concerning human interrelationships. Amos goes deeper than the level of outward form of worship. The people evidently thought they were worshiping Yahweh at Bethel under the figure of the calf. Amos' point is that there can be no true worship of Yahweh by people who are oppressing the poor and helpless. His attitude might be compared with Jesus' statement in Matt 6:22–24. Hosea, contemporary with Amos, made explicit statements against the calf-worship at Bethel (8:5–6; 10:5). Amos probably had the same feelings but simply did not have occasion to mention them. In another sense Amos does refer to idolatry in 4:4. Because the inner essence of the covenant was missed, the God the people thought they were worshiping was not really Yahweh; rather, they were sacrificing to a god of their own making, both physically and theologically. Hosea's statements stress the physical problem, while Amos' emphasize the theological problem. For a more detailed study see L. B. Paton, "Did Amos Approve the Calf-Worship at Bethel?," *JBL* 13 (1894) 80–90. A more explicit reference to the practice of idolatry may be made in 5:26, but the verse has numerous problems of interpretation.

⁵The remnant is the fine grain that falls through and is preserved, while the pebbles remain for judgment. See H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 349; J. A. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974) 149–150.

establish justice in the gate" (5:14-15). Then Amos sounds the only glimmer of hope for the present in the entire book: "Perhaps the LORD God of hosts / May be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." His final appeal contains what is perhaps his most well-known phrase: "Take away from Me the noise of your songs; / I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. / But let justice roll down like waters / And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:23-24).

The details of how one is to seek Yahweh and to practice justice are contained in the vivid catalog of sins laid to Israel's charge. Amos did not expect the judgment to be stayed—it was too late for that. But he did hope for a remnant from Joseph to heed his words and preserve their own lives. For those who did not respond in this manner the preaching of Amos confirmed their judgment.

Amos' words about social justice need detailed examination in light of the importance God attaches in both Testaments to human interrelationships. J. A. Motyer raises a challenge in his exposition of Amos 5:15:

What a call this ["And establish justice in the gate!"] constitutes to Bible Christians to rediscover the moral and social teaching of Holy Scripture! How often our contributions on social and socio-ethical questions are small, insignificant, inhibited because we simply have not laboured to acquire biblical definitions of the issues involved! If we do not labour to *establish justice in the gate*, we shall be accused from this passage in Amos of a one-sided morality stopping short of the biblical concern for society, we shall be exposed, according to Amos 3:9-4:5, of playing around with a useless religion while society rots, and we shall find, according to Amos 6:3, that, while we have been unconcerned, other and sinister forces have been at work to enthrone violence and disorder.⁶

As a foundation for remarks about the application of Amos' preaching, we will examine who the poor and oppressed were in the period of Amos and what was happening to them.

II. TERMINOLOGY

Amos uses four different terms to describe the poor in Israel. The first, "righteous" or "innocent" (*ṣaddiq*), describes the legal status of the poor. They are innocent of wrongdoing; they have not done anything to deserve the treatment of their oppressors. The word occurs only twice in Amos (2:6; 5:12) and could be called a "victim" word. A victim is an innocent party. The oppressor is guilty, not the victim. The *NASB* translates both instances of *ṣaddiq* in Amos as "righteous." Elsewhere in that version the translation "innocent" is used only in 2 Kgs 10:9. The *NEB* translates "innocent" in Amos 2:6 and "guiltless" in 5:12. "Righteous" may overstress the victim's relationship to God. The legal connotations of "innocent" or "guiltless" emphasize the victimization of the poor by their oppressors.

Both occurrences of *ṣaddiq* are in poetic lines that find their echo in a second

⁶Motyer, *Day* 125.

term for the poor: *'ebyôn*. Although the etymology of this term is uncertain,⁷ usage points clearly to the sense of someone who is needy or lacking something. This lack may be food (Exod 23:11), power (Deut 24:14), water (Isa 41:17), clothing (Job 31:19), or the basic necessities of life (30:25). Specific examples include the widow and the orphan (Job 24:3–4; 31:16–19; Jer 5:28). While *šaddiq* is a “victim” term, *'ebyôn* is a “need” term. The *'ebyônîm* need money, power, and legal recourse in the courts. Lacking these things they are merely a means for others to get rich.⁸

The third term for the poor is *dal*, which like *'ebyôn* also expresses neediness.⁹ Perhaps the frequent use of *dal* in contrasts between “rich” and “poor” will help to clarify the difference. For example, Boaz praised Ruth because she did not go after “young men, whether rich or poor” (3:10). Visualize also the “lean cows” (*dallôt*) versus the “fat cows” of Pharaoh’s dream (Gen 41:19). The idea of the term *dal* may be captured by the expression “the have-nots.” The *dallîm* (“poor”) were the “have-nots,” while the *'ebyônîm* (“needy”) lacked some basic necessity. Whether a person is considered rich or poor may be a relative matter, but often the poor are also needy. The word “poor,” then, is a term of comparative need, implying a standard of wealth or abundance against which to compare the lack of wealth. By contrast *'ebyôn* indicates more of an absolute need.

In Amos 2:7 the parallelism of *dal* with “afflicted” (*NASB* “humble”) points to a comparison of power. The powerful trample on the powerless or, as the *NASB* has it, the “helpless.” For the remaining instances of *dal* in Amos (4:1; 5:11; 8:6) the translation “poor” seems best, though the rendering “helpless” is given by the *NASB* for 8:6. Even within the book of Amos the degree of poverty varies. The “poor” in 8:6 are destitute enough to be in a debt slavery situation, but 5:11 envisions poor tenant farmers who are higher up on the relative scale of wealth.¹⁰

The last term is “afflicted” (*'anāwîm*).¹¹ The *NASB* renders “the humble”

⁷M. Ellenbogen says “there is general agreement” that *'ebyôn* “is probably an Egyptian loanword” (*Foreign Words in the Old Testament: Their Origin and Etymology* [London: Luzac, 1962] 1). However, G. J. Botterweck is more uncertain and lists both the possibility of a Semitic root *'ābā*, “to lack, to be in need,” and of an Egyptian derivation (“*ebhyôn*,” *TDOT*, 1. 27–29). The Egyptian occurrences have a negative connotation of “evil,” which is lacking in the Hebrew term.

⁸In the Psalms the term develops a spiritual connotation (e.g. Pss 40:17 [Hebrew 40:18]; 70:5 [Hebrew 70:6]; 86:1): The “poor” is someone who needs and desires spiritual help from Yahweh (see Botterweck, “*ebhyôn*” 37–38).

⁹The *NASB* once translates *dal* as “needy” (Isa 10:2).

¹⁰M. Fendler, “Zur Sozialkritik des Amos,” *EvT* 33 (1973) 40–41; see also H.-J. Fabry, “*dal*,” *TDOT*, 3. 222.

¹¹BDB lists two forms, a noun *'anāw* and an adjective *'ānī*, both with the meanings “poor, afflicted, humble,” but with the added meaning “meek” for the former term. Probably only one form should be listed because (1) the only occurrence of *'anāw* in the singular is in Num 12:3, and even there the *Qērē* is *'anā(y)w* (this compares with twenty instances of the term in the plural); (2) out of 75 occurrences of *'ānī* only 19 are in the singular, and even two of these have the reading *'nwym* for the *Kētib* (Amos 8:4; Ps 9:19). The singular, then, tended to change the *waw* to *yod*, whereas the *waw* was normally preserved in the plural. Only the plural occurs in Amos.

for both instances of *ʾānāwīm* in Amos (2:7; 8:4 [*Kētib ʾnwym*]). While there are passages where the word implies the positive virtue of humility or meekness (see esp. Num 12:3; Prov 3:34 [where *NASB* renders “afflicted”!]), the contexts in Amos demand a concept parallel to “poor” (*dallīm* in Amos 2:7) or “needy” (*ʾebyôn* in 8:4).

Etymological connection with the verbal root *ʾānā*, “be afflicted,” suggests the translation “afflicted” or “distressed.” It is unclear, however, how strongly the connection was actually felt by speakers of classical Hebrew. A study of the usage reveals that the term is connected most often with *ʾebyôn*, “needy.” In fact the two together form almost always a stereotyped expression (e.g. Deut 15:11; Isa 41:17; Jer 22:16; Ezek 16:49; Job 24:4; Ps 12:5 [Hebrew 12:6]; Prov 31:20). The *ʾānāwīm* (or the singular *ʾānī*) are also connected with the “brokenhearted . . . captives . . . prisoners . . . all who mourn” (Isa 61:1–2), the orphan (Job 29:12), the stranger or sojourner (Lev 19:10), widows (Isa 10:2), the thirsty (41:17) and the hungry (58:7). Also the afflicted are described as robbed of their rights (10:2), homeless (58:7), oppressed (Ezek 18:12), pursued (Ps 10:2, 9), devastated (12:5 [Hebrew 12:6]), pushed aside (Job 24:4) and killed (24:14). Probably *ʾānāwīm* can best be described as a “suffering” word. It depicts the poverty-stricken as suffering because of their helplessness and vulnerability.

By using these four terms—innocent (a “victim” word), needy (a term of absolute need), poor (a term of comparative need) and afflicted (a term of suffering)—Amos depicts a class of people in Israel who lack any share in the wealth of the kingdom of Jeroboam II, who lack the basic necessities of life, and who are suffering as innocent victims. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel demanded a compassion toward these people. The innocent should be acquitted, the needy fed, the poor respected, the afflicted comforted. Instead the injustice of the Israelites contributed to the problem. For this sin Amos preached the judgment of God.

III. DESCRIPTIONS OF OPPRESSION

In his book Amos views specific instances of rich Israelites oppressing their less fortunate neighbors. The closest thing to a general description of oppression is the accusation that many are “distressing” the poor (5:12) or “trampling” on them (2:7; 8:4) so as to “destroy” them.¹² In each case the general reference is included with a series of specific examples. Amos also uses vivid imagery, speaking for example of the corruption of the judicial system as turning “justice into poison, / And the fruit of righteousness into wormwood” (6:12).

The particular instances of sins against the poor that Amos describes are the selling into slavery of either an innocent victim or of a person whose in-

¹²The Hebrew of 2:7 reads literally “who trample [or “pant after”] upon (the) dust of (the) earth on (the) head of (the) poor [*dallim*].” Feinberg lists three possible meanings for the text as it stands (*Minor Prophets* 91). Some commentators feel that “upon (the) dust of (the) earth” is a gloss to make sure that the meaning “trample” rather than “pant after” is given to the verb *šāʾap* (e.g. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* 133 n. 1), although the ancient versions presuppose the Hebrew text. The solution adopted does not affect the general sense that some in Israel are unrelenting in their cruelty against the poor.

debtedness is so paltry that it should be forgiven anyway (2:6; 8:6),¹³ bribery of judges (5:12), failure to return a garment taken in pledge at the end of the day (2:8), denial of due process of law (2:7; 5:12), extortion and defrauding (4:1),¹⁴ exacting of heavy rent through an unfair grain tax (5:11),¹⁵ tampering with weights and standards (8:5), and selling a low quality of merchandise (8:6). The pattern is clear: Rich and powerful people are becoming richer and more powerful at the expense of the poor and powerless.

The Mosaic law gave explicit regulations or prohibitions for each of these crimes.¹⁶ Debt slavery was permitted only as a temporary condition, and the indebted person was to be treated as a fellow Israelite and given compensation of some sort (Exod 21:7–11; Lev 25:39–43; Deut 15:12–15). Bribery is forbidden (Exod 23:8), and the right of all to due process of law before God is affirmed (Deut 10:17–18). A garment taken in pledge is to be returned before sundown (Exod 22:26 [Hebrew 22:25]). Fines are specified for certain civil actions, but they are to be applied fairly, not used as a means of extortion (cf. 21:22). Extortion or “oppression” is put on the same level as robbery (Lev 6:2 [Hebrew 5:21]). The law against taking interest from a poor person (Exod 22:25 [Hebrew 22:24]) may be extended to cover the case of heavy rent and an unfair grain tax.¹⁷ Honesty in the marketplace is decreed in no uncertain terms: “You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:36). Amos apparently extends the principle of honest dealings to the practice of selling inferior merchandise.

¹³Some take 2:6 to refer to bribes extorted by a judge (Feinberg, *Minor Prophets* 91; R. S. Cripps, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* [2d ed.; Great Britain: SPCK, 1960] 140). The innocent party is thereby sold for money. Others see a reference to debt slavery. Wolff points to other expressions for bribery in Amos (esp. 5:12; probably also 2:7, “and the way of the poor they turn aside”) as an argument in favor of debt slavery as the intended meaning. Also the verb “sell” is used of debt slavery (Exod 21:7–8; Lev 25:39; Deut 15:12; Wolff, *Joel and Amos* 165). The “money” and the “pair of sandals” probably refer to the debts owed to the creditors. We are taking the pair of sandals as a paltry debt, but some see a reference to a legal idiom for the possession of property (e.g. J. L. Mays, *Amos* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969] 45). The reference in 2:7 to “a man and his father” who “resort to the same girl” may indicate a woman sold as a slave. The evidence for an allusion to cult prostitution is weak, and a simple accusation of sexual immorality is otherwise unknown in Amos. The regulations in Exod 21:7–8 would prohibit both a man and his son from having sexual relations with a slave girl (cf. Fendler, “Sozialkritik” 42–43).

¹⁴The verb *ʾāšaq* is apparently more specific than simply “oppression.” *NASB* translates it “extorted” in Lev 6:2 (Hebrew 5:21); the derived noun is “extortion” in v 4. The term is often associated with robbery (*gāzēl*; e.g. Deut 28:29; I Sam 12:3; Jer 21:12; Ezek 18:18; 22:29). In Eccl 7:7 the parallel concept is “bribery” (cf. Ezek 22:12). The point is that dishonest means are used to extort money from others (cf. also Hos 12:7 [Hebrew 12:8], extortion through false balances; Mal 3:5, extortion through unfair wages).

¹⁵For a discussion of the Hebrew term *bōšas* see Wolff, *Joel and Amos* 230 n. aa. It means “exact heavy rent” on the basis of an Akkadian etymology.

¹⁶Cf. Seilhamer, “Role” 438–439.

¹⁷Cf. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* 247.

IV. RESPONSE

An evangelical response to the preaching of Amos should in some way differ from a nonevangelical response. It is also meant to imply a need for a renewed evangelical perspective on the book of Amos. Ronald Sider outlines, albeit in oversimplified form, the history of evangelical and nonevangelical attitudes toward Biblical teaching on social justice in the twentieth century. From the evangelical side:

We are familiar with the way the liberalism/fundamentalism controversy in the early twentieth century resulted in the tragic loss of concern for social justice which had been so much a part of British and American evangelicalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is exciting and important, however, is that evangelicals are beginning to transcend the unholy dichotomy of evangelism or social concern.¹⁸

On the other hand:

When liberalism neglected the fact that sin is deeper than social structures, that personal ethics are as important as social ethics, that societal improvements do not equal salvation, and that social restructuring will not usher in the Kingdom, it neglected fundamental biblical themes.¹⁹

In other words, fear of social-gospel theology has immobilized many evangelicals in the area of social concerns, while liberalism has neglected Biblical teaching about personal ethics, personal salvation and the depravity of man. Sider has done a useful work in pointing out the stress in Scripture on social justice and the need for evangelicals to live up to their declarations of the authority of Scripture by becoming more concerned with social justice. There are more controversial aspects of Sider's economic analyses and suggested solutions that are not germane to the present paper.²⁰

Sider calls for a merging of the emphases of social concern and gospel:

Somehow we must talk, pray, debate, and read the Word together until biblical social concern is an integral part of our evangelism and the proclamation of forgiveness through the Cross is integral to our prophetic social criticism. Only then can we faithfully proclaim the whole gospel for the whole man.²¹

The book of Amos is a case in point. Amos was critical of his society, but his criticisms were grounded in the covenant relationship of Yahweh with his people. If the people would return to Yahweh in repentance they would take the first step toward reformation (5:4). The identity of Yahweh is stressed through the hymnic passages (4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6) and the divine names—Yahweh, Yahweh God, Yahweh God of hosts, Yahweh whose name is the God of hosts. The sovereignty of God and his everlasting covenant with Israel shines

¹⁸"An Historic Moment for Biblical Social Concern," *The Chicago Declaration* (ed. R. J. Sider; Carol Stream: Creation House, 1974) 12-13.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰This paper neither endorses nor opposes such issues in Sider.

²¹Sider, "Historic" 35.

forth from the remnant theology of the book and from the promise of the restoration of the "fallen booth of David" (9:11). The repetitive and ever stronger note of judgment lays bare the awfulness of sin and the depravity of man.

Sider also makes a connection between evangelism and social action by pointing out that the world is attracted to the gospel when it sees a demonstration of caring and loving concern for society.²² Amos approached Israel from a different stance. The surrounding nations were guilty of great crimes, some of them against Israel directly (1:3—2:5). The examples were raised because the Israelites were expected to concur heartily that judgment was necessary, but then Amos accused Israel of equally heinous acts. When the judgment of the heathen is held up as an example for judgment against the covenant people, something is desperately wrong (cf. Amos 3:1—2). Social concern is imperative for effective evangelism, because the lack of it could subject the Church not only to scornful rejection of its message by the world but also to the judgment of God.

From the vantage point of the holiness, justice and mercy of God on the one hand and of the sinfulness of man on the other, a more thorough grasp of Amos' social preaching is possible. God, through the prophetic word of Amos, demands more than a tinkering with the economic or legal systems. He expects believers to show love and compassion on the basis of a deep trust in him. The identity of God is to be the source for all human relationships.

Amos reminded Israel that the God of the covenant has a special interest in the plight of the poor and oppressed, an interest that was reinforced by other prophets and ultimately by Jesus Christ and the NT. Consider the demand to "let justice roll down like waters / And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). This justice must find its definition in the character of God. Justice characterizes all that God does, yet it is a justice saturated with mercy and compassion. For example, a garment taken in pledge must be returned before sundown because it is the only covering a poor person has: "What else shall he sleep in?" (Exod 22:27).

Amos views justice in terms of fairness. Cheating and extortion must stop. But the depths of what he means by justice are not exhausted by the concept of fairness. Justice and righteousness, as viewed by God, will demonstrate compassion. The just man will not trample the poor into the dust (2:7); he will not hound a debtor for the last penny (2:6); he will not deprive the poor of the basic necessities of life (2:8); he will not extort from others through unfair wages or dishonest business practices (4:2; 5:11). Rather than deny the poor their access to justice he will help them to have their day in court (5:15). "Seek Me," says Yahweh through Amos. "Seek good and not evil" (5:4, 14).

A term that can comprehend the demands of fairness as well as the active seeking of good that Amos demands is needed to bridge the gap between Amos' words and their application to our own times. I would propose that the term "generosity" captures the essence of the message of Amos. It is true that Amos dwells on the negative aspects of judgment, but the judgment is precisely because the oppressors have been ungenerous with the oppressed. Israel did not

²²R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 100.

remember the generosity of God toward them, which should have occasioned a corresponding generosity toward the poor (cf. 2:9–10). Generosity is a major distinctive of true religion throughout the Scriptures (e.g. Nehemiah 5; Matt 6:12; James 2). The generosity we are considering is not a naive generosity but a generous spirit that cares enough to discover the facts of a problem and to work toward its solution. Such a spirit would motivate its possessors to discover who the poor really are and what they need. It would avoid generalizations and stereotypes, recognizing instead the worth of every individual before God, rich or poor.

Sider and others are calling for deep changes in Christian lifestyle to reflect concern for the poor.²³ Amos condemned the luxurious living of the wealthy, both because it was at the expense of the poor and because lavish parties crowded out the possibility of grieving “over the ruin of Joseph” (6:6). That is, their lives were filled by wealth rather than by genuine feeling for people.

Most of us would do well to consider our lifestyles in light of the numerous Scriptural warnings of the dangers of wealth and in view of needs throughout the world. Generosity could be expressed through conservation of resources and less extravagant living. But the message of Amos is more radical: It asks for repentance from selfishness and from lack of concern. Learn about poverty, Amos would tell us, and consider how your lifestyle contributes to the problem or suffocates your sensitivity to suffering. Seeking the Lord in deep humility will be reflected in a new generosity of life and a mourning over the sickness of a selfish, unfeeling society.

The book of Amos has special relevance for employers, businessmen, and especially the wealthy. Amos was himself a successful businessman.²⁴ Detailed study of the book from the standpoint of business ethics would be a useful exercise for many churches.

One issue that needs deeper study than is possible here is the private versus corporate nature of sin.²⁵ Amos speaks of individuals who oppress other individuals. Yet he also sees the oppressors as a sizable portion of the nation who comprise most of its wealthy and powerful citizens. In addition his admonitions are based on a socio-economic structure that had been in process of change ever since the days of Solomon. The divinely ordained system of family ownership of land was giving way to an increasingly powerful and wealthy royal court and landed aristocracy.²⁶ Amos was given the prophetic insight to see the trend and its effects on the common people of the land.

²³Cf. *Living More Simply: Biblical Principles and Practical Models* (ed. R. J. Sider; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980).

²⁴See Wolff, *Joel and Amos* 90–91. Amos was a “sheepbreeder” (*nôqêd*, 1:1); his additional work of tending sycamores (7:14) required travel beyond Tekoa, since sycamores do not grow in the hill country around that area.

²⁵See W. Pannell, “Evangelicals and Social Concern: The Present and the Future,” *Chicago Declaration* (ed. Sider) 47.

²⁶One could cite the example of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21); see also Fendler, “Sozialkritik” 33–35.

As soon as Amos directed his message against the king he was in trouble. Amaziah accused Amos of conspiracy against Jeroboam II and against Bethel, the royal city. Evidently the crown encouraged oppressive practices because of the wealth brought in through them. The court system was denounced bitterly by Amos. Bribery of judges and the refusal of the right of due process of law for the poor characterized the judicial system.

The evangelical Christian faces the problem of how to participate in government so that it will become a more equitable system. Biblical principles of government would include the formulation and enforcement of laws that foster rights of full participation in the judicial system by all citizens, regardless of wealth or power; that encourage standards of honesty and quality in business; and that discourage unfair practices such as extortion, bribery and exorbitant pricing. The evangelical Christian should expect and work for these principles in government. The responsibility to "grieve over the ruin of Jacob" includes the responsibility to work as actively as possible for a repair of the ruins. The burden falls first, however, on individual Christians and on the Church before it falls on government.

V. CONCLUSION

The book of Amos stirs to action by its practical and timely nature and in light of the harsh words from God that it contains. No one likes to hear preachers who point out the truth about themselves. Yet Amos refers those who disagree with him to the source of his message. He did not learn it in school; God revealed it to him. With all of the issues that Amos raises about personal and social reform, it is worth remembering a plea made by Sider in his introduction to *The Chicago Declaration*: "Is it too much to hope that prayer might become the trademark of biblical social action in the seventies?"²⁷ Prayer coupled with exegesis of Scripture will lead to a knowledge of divine direction for personal, social and governmental reform. Prayer and exegesis will also help evangelicals to find a proper balance in seeking the salvation of the whole man—body and soul.

²⁷Sider, "Historic" 40.