

POOR IN THE BIBLE REMOVED:

A BIBLE FULL OF HOLES

One of the best summaries I have read about the problem of certain conservative evangelicals cutting out passages on God's concern for the poor from the Bible was written by Jim Wallis:

"I was freshly converted out of the student movements of the 1960s and I wanted to go to a theological school where they took the Bible seriously. So I chose Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, outside of Chicago, instead of one of the more "liberal" seminaries in the country. Almost immediately upon our arrival, a small group of activist evangelical seminarians began to form, and we quickly turned our attention to the Bible.

I've told the story many times about how we discovered a "Bible full of holes," when it came to the question of the poor. Here's what we did. Our band of eager young first-year seminary students did a thorough study to find every verse in the Bible that dealt with the poor.

We scoured the Old and New Testaments for every single reference to poor people, to wealth and poverty, to injustice and oppression, and to what the response to all those subjects was to be for the people of God. We found several thousand verses in the Bible on the poor and God's response to injustice.

We found it to be the second most prominent theme in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)—the first was idolatry, and the two often were related. One of every sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor or the subject of money (Mammon, as the gospels call it).

In the first three (Synoptic) gospels it is one out of ten verses, and in the book of Luke, it is one in seven! After we completed our study, we all sat in a circle to discuss how the subject had been treated in the various churches in which we had grown up. Astoundingly, but also tellingly, not one of us could remember even one sermon on the poor from the pulpit of our home churches. In the Bible, the poor were everywhere; yet the subject was not to be found in our churches.

The prophets were simply decimated. When he got to the resounding command of Amos to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” he just cut it out. When he found God speaking through Isaiah to say, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, and let the oppressed go free?” he just cut it out. When he discovered the summation of God’s call in Micah to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God,” he just cut it out.

He cut out almost everything that the Hebrew prophets had to say about how nations, rulers, and all of us are instructed to treat the poor. Much of the Psalms also disappeared, where God is seen as the defender and deliverer of the oppressed. And all references to the Hebrew tradition of Jubilee had to be cut where, from Leviticus onward, the practice of a periodic “leveling” was lifted up as crucial to the health of a society—slaves were to be set free, debts canceled, and land redistributed to its rightful owners. It was all too dangerous to remain in the Bible.

When he got to the New Testament, the seminarian with the scissors had a lot of work to do. He began with the thankful prayer of a simple peasant woman who would bear the new messiah. Mary's famous Magnificat prophesied the meaning of the coming of Jesus: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away." Because Mary didn't sound like a religious service provider with a faith-based federal grant, but instead like a social revolutionary; her prayer had to be cut.

Then there was Jesus's first sermon at Nazareth, his "Nazareth manifesto," where he announced his messianic vocation. Harkening back to Isaiah, Jesus proclaimed his own mission statement by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Because all the biblical scholars agree Jesus is talking about that Jubilee thing again, this was a mission statement that had to be cut before it reached committee.

His Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, threatened to turn the world (as we know it) upside down by saying, in his kingdom, the blessed ones are the poor, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and the ones who are hungry and thirsty for justice. It clearly had to go. That account of how the early church began to practice economic sharing, after the Spirit landed on them, would be pretty incredulous incredulous to churches today. And so would the totally unrealistic assertion that "there was not a needy person among them," even if Paul was encouraging economic redistribution as a sign of fellowship wherever he went. Snip, snip, snip.

All the stuff from John about not having the love of God in you unless you open your heart to the needy just doesn't apply to some of our most important and pious church leaders, not to mention our television evangelists. And the idea from James that "faith without works is dead" was dangerously close to the "social gospel." So some more cuts were in order. When the zealous seminarian was done with all his editorial cuts, that old Bible would hardly hold together, it was so sliced up. It was literally falling apart in our hands. What we had done was to create a Bible full of holes."

Wallis, Jim. *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (211-214). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.