

A Positional Response
to the
Socioeconomic Divisions of Cleveland, Tennessee

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Cleveland, Tennessee is a community divided. In common with most of the cities in North America and in much of the world, the most apparent division is the one based on socioeconomic status (a combination of economics, education, and social class). Our city consists of many residential “subdivisions” each of which is principally defined by the market value of the houses it contains. There was a time when neighborhoods were formed by cultural and ethnic heritage at least partly as a result of discrimination in housing. The pattern was to be born, live, and die in the same community. For most Americans this is no longer the case. Neighborhoods are formed not around cultural heritage but around socioeconomic standing.

One unintended consequence of reducing racial and ethnic discrimination in housing has been an increase in socioeconomic segregation – those with the means to move to more desirable housing, usually do. The present reality is that subdivisions are created in response to the pursuit of the American dream of upward mobility. Very few choose to move into a subdivision on the basis of allegiance to extended family, friends, church, or ethnic origins. Most people simply do not even know their neighbors. Those left behind in the spiral of upward mobility also find themselves clustered on the basis of socioeconomic standing and are often isolated without friend or family to rely upon.¹ The sad truth is that the modern American community is defined not by the relationships it fosters, but by the socioeconomic label it represents. Neighborhoods are valued not for their heritage of human and cultural resources but for their potential investment return. Such communities are handicapped in their efforts to address social ills.

The socioeconomic realities of Cleveland reveal a hidden bias against certain groups. It is common to find native Clevelanders (Anglo and Afro) in low-paying, service oriented jobs with few benefits. Immigrants from other states with higher education and higher social class typically fill better paying jobs. People born in Bradley County tend to make up a large percentage of the lower classes and those born in other regions tend to make up a large percentage of the more affluent classes. These two dominant groups live in separate worlds and they are uncomfortable with each other. One is concentrated on the northern and western side of the city, the other on the southern and eastern side. They do not mingle except perhaps for high school sports events.

The socioeconomic divide is apparent in the churches of Cleveland. There is a well-documented difference in average income by denomination (Gallup Opinion Index, 1987).

¹ There is also a trend of businesses relocating to follow more affluent customers; taking jobs and services with them. While this might make good business sense, it has a devastating impact on those left behind. Those without the finances to move often end up without the means to change their situation.

Those differences have been evident throughout modern history (although any given denomination may rise in socioeconomic standing as its members are upwardly mobile and new groups emerge among the poor). More astounding may be the socioeconomic differences *between* congregations of the *same* denomination. Virtually every denomination with more than one congregation in our city has affluent congregations and others struggling to survive. The churches of Cleveland can be sorted into lower, middle and upper class as easily as they can be sorted by denominational label.

The effects of these socioeconomic divisions are complex and subject to much debate. It seems obvious, however, that these divisions hinder the mandate for Christian unity and they serve as an obstacle to a common witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They are incompatible with the Biblical vision of God's people. They foster suspicion and contribute to social stress and instability. Therefore, it is the position of this paper that these socioeconomic divisions are contrary to Christian values.

Further, the Scriptures demand a response to the isolation of the poor. The foundation for any response must be recognition that the earth and all that is in it belong to God who is loving and just; human beings are at best stewards over God-given resources. Personal possessions must be held in trust for his purposes. God condemns the hoarding of possessions (Luke 12:13-21).

The most obvious Biblical mandate concerning the poor is that God requires those who prosper to provide for the needs of the poor and to do so liberally and ungrudgingly (Deuteronomy 15: 7-11, Leviticus 19:9-10). The needs of the poor should first be met by their own household and extended family, and secondly by neighbors (Matthew 22:39; I John 3:17). Personal relationships establish the front lines of defense against the savage effects of poverty. But the Scriptures demand that "neighbor" be defined as anyone within the sphere of one's personal influence (Matthew 22:34-40; 25:31-46; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37). In the absence of such relationships and provisions, it is the responsibility of the nation to care for its indigent. That responsibility extends to aliens who reside within the nation (Leviticus 19:35-37; Deuteronomy 19:10) and by implication to "neighbor" nations. God condemns persons and nations that ignore the sufferings of others (Amos 5:11-13).

God expects provisions for the poor to be personal and holistic; they must address the causes and effects of suffering. Poverty is seldom limited to the matter of personal possessions. Other forms of human brokenness accompany it. Pure religion is not merely to *give* to the widow and orphans, but rather to *visit* (care for) the widow and orphans (James 1:27). Orphans need father figures; widows need comfort. God's expectation is that where possible there be personal engagement with the needy. They are to be invited to feasts (Luke 14:13-14) and received with honor in public gatherings (James 2:1-7).

A second clear mandate of God is that the poor be defended against injustice (Micah 6:6-8; Psalms 82:1-4). Those who unjustly afflict the poor, including the working poor (Deuteronomy 24:14-15; James 5:1-6), will be judged by God (Proverbs 22:22-23; Isaiah 10:1-4; Amos 4:1-3; Zechariah 7:10-11; Malachi 3:5). Conversely, God promises to bless those who do not oppress the poor (Psalms 41:1-2; Jeremiah 7:5-7; Ezekiel 18:5-9). Injustice takes many forms all of which center on depriving persons of their God-given dignity and rights. One form of injustice is the use of power to profit from the sufferings of others. God condemns opportunistic price gouging (Leviticus 25:13-17) and usury (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:36-37).

The challenge before Cleveland is to rise above faulty perceptions of the poor and to build relationships across socioeconomic barriers – relationships that foster appreciation for diversity and recognize the value of every human being. Our modern economy and social structures require a conscious effort to bridge the gaps between neighborhoods. This is especially true for the churches of Cleveland. Christian congregations must find ways to be inclusive of all socioeconomic groups and to build relationships across neighborhood barriers.

Churches are encouraged to reflect on the factors that contribute to their isolation from socioeconomic groups; Are there elements in their worship, the ambiance of their gathering places, their location, etc., that encourage other groups to stay away? How could the situation be improved without compromising the church's theological heritage?

They should also reflect on the values that inform church policies and procedures. Are the formal structures and events of the church inclusive or exclusive on socioeconomic grounds? Who holds the positions of power (church offices)? Who does not hold power? Why? Who is allowed to do public ministry and why? Who is honored? Who is not honored? For what types of accomplishments are people honored? Are those accomplishments representative of the larger community?

Further, churches can be agents of change if they build cooperative relationships with other congregations across socioeconomic barriers, both within and outside of their respective denominations. Common witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ requires common mission for his kingdom. When every member of the Body of Christ is valued, cooperative ministries that draw upon the resources and talents of all socioeconomic groups will serve to build relationships across the barriers between those groups.

Finally, churches must assess their effectiveness as prophetic voices for justice and righteousness in Bradley County. Congregations must find ways to address the social evils of our community. Surely, we can agree to publicly speak out against the oppression of the poor. In most cases this can be done cooperatively across denominational lines without violating our various faith traditions. In situations where we disagree on method or other specifics, we can agree to honor the righteous intent of the other.