

Equal to or Greater Than: Inequality, Education, and a Christian Calling to Something More

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Introduction: Is There a Problem?

The presence of inequality in America and debate over its importance, or lack thereof, is nothing new to our country's social and political discourse. Our nation's inequality has not been constant. Alexis de Toqueville noted an apparent lack of economic disparity in his work *Democracy in America*, writing, "Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people".¹ Ironically, inequality in America was beginning to surge in de Toqueville's time, the era of Jacksonian democracy and the common man.² The Gilded Age brought gross disparities between the working class and the American elite. The rise of popular labor movements of the late nineteenth century are no surprise then, largely motivated as they were by the inequality facing the working poor. One might be tempted to believe that the American Christian church was exempt from this turmoil; this was not the case, as Heath Carter has pointed out.³ Despite a reversal in inequality trends during the years following World War Two, inequality has steadily increased in society and the church to its record high levels today.

However, not everyone sees economic inequality as it exists in the United States today as a problem that deserves our attention and efforts. Some point to the relative wellbeing of the American poor when compared to the global poor. Their relative wellbeing, detractors claim, is evidenced by their material possessions and health levels; therefore, this mitigates any concerns for remedying inequality. In addition, some people reason that the poor have an ability to better themselves by working harder, regardless of their status in the social structure. This implies that the problem is one of work ethic and failure to seize the opportunities for economic mobility that

¹ Tocqueville and Goldhammer, *Democracy in America*.

² Williamson and Lindert, *American Inequality*.

³ Carter, *Union Made*.

the American economic system provides them. On top of all of these reasons for bypassing inequality is the deep-seated assumption that inequality will always exist and any attempts to eradicate it will be ultimately futile.

In this paper, I will show how these positions overlook the context and nuance of American inequality, and that they miss out on the hope for change in the process. Economic inequality in the United States hinders economic growth and undermines the fairness of our economic system, which affects more than just those at the bottom rung of the ladder of prosperity. In addition, our nation's inequality runs along racial and spatial lines, unjustly enabling certain individuals over others. These hierarchies are fundamentally opposed to the principle of equality of opportunity. One of the main arenas in which inequality manifests itself is in education, with serious repercussions for society. Furthermore, these considerations involve a Christian sense of human dignity, altruism, and justice. Economic inequality must be addressed in both the public and private sectors, and faith-based organizations are uniquely compelled and equipped to participate in this process.

What Does It Mean To Be Poor?

While it is common to express concern for gross levels of inequality, some people argue that it is not worth the talk and effort that we give it. William Bole coined one of the most direct formulations of this argument as the "We Got Stuff School".⁴ This school of thought was originally put forward by Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield in their article, "Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: What is Poverty in the United States Today?"⁵ In their article they argue that the majority of the American poor are not poor by the conventional understanding of poverty, which

⁴ Bole, "Relative Poverty."

⁵ Rector and Sheffield, "Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox."

encompasses “the inability to provide a family with adequate nutritious food, reasonable shelter, and clothing”.⁶ While there may be many people who are considered “poor” in the United States, their living standards are actually quite reasonable, as evidenced by their possession of a car, two color televisions, various kitchen appliances, and other assorted goods. In other words, the “poor” are not really poor, but instead are just less well off than others in their society. This is what we might call inequality. The “We’ve Got Stuff” argument implies that comparing the American poor with the poor in an impoverished developing country leaves no basis to call the Americans poor.

This reasoning is not totally useless; there are many benefits to living in the United States that we take for granted. However, imagining poverty in this way comes at it all wrong. Poverty encompasses much more than material concerns. There are social aspects of poverty as well that manifest themselves when the poor are not adequately connected or empowered to participate fully in their communities. Social capital, a political voice, and a robust civil society are all indicators of a well-functioning society. All individuals inhabit a particular place and context, and this particularity should influence our notions of material and social poverty.⁷ The resources that a poor individual in a Brazilian *favela* requires to be a full-fledged member of society are different than those required of someone living in the inner city of Detroit. This principal is biblical too. Ronald J. Sider points out that the Bible refers to the poor as “being on the verge of ‘falling out of the community’”, with Leviticus 25:35 reading “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them... so they can continue to live among you”.⁸ Poverty is not merely about having little, but also about not having enough. To be poor is to be marginalized, and marginalization implies inequality.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bole, “Relative Poverty.”

⁸ Ibid.

The American Dream: Hard Work Brings Success

How do people end up poor? To answer this question, many people will refer to our nation's reputation as a place where prosperity can be achieved with hard work, and that socioeconomic mobility comes with a good work ethic and responsibility. Some say that inequality does not hurt the ability of the poor to improve their situation by working hard. By focusing on narrowing wealth gaps and making everybody's situation equal, we are disincentivizing hard work and its benefits. The fear is that efforts to correct the perceived injustice of inequality will merely result in an unjust redistributive system that robs from the rich and gives to the sometimes undeserving poor. Heath Carter, in his study of social Christianity in the nineteenth century, coined the notion of the "underserving poor" as the doctrine of scientific charity.⁹ This doctrine holds that materially aiding the poor irrespective of their personal lifestyles is an affront to moral sensibilities and an injustice in itself.¹⁰

Similar to the "We've Got Stuff" argument, the value of incentivizing hard work has aspects that ring true. Any justification for reducing inequality through non-voluntary means needs to account for the fact that many people's wealth is the product of their proverbial blood, sweat, and tears, and as such cannot simply be taken away without an adequate reason. To this end, one must consider that it is ultimately the fairness of the economic system is undermined by inequality.¹¹

To understand this thesis, we must make key distinction between equalities of outcomes versus equalities of opportunity. Equality of outcomes refers to the eradication of all inequality, while equality of opportunity means giving every poor person equal ability to become rich and

⁹ Carter, *Union Made*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

¹¹ Scanlon, "The 4 Biggest Reasons Why Inequality Is Bad for Society."

vice versa.¹² The desire to make the United States a nation where equality of opportunity is a reality is a worthy goal. In fact, equality of opportunity offers a way to justly reduce inequality while still supporting the value of hard work and innovation that constitutes the American dream of hard-earned success. Unfortunately, economic inequality makes it almost impossible for a society with equality of opportunity for all to exist. Socioeconomic and racial background influences many aspects of an individual's future, including nutrition, life expectancy, psychological health, likelihood of imprisonment, stress levels, and educational achievement.¹³ Educational achievement in particular is the biggest determinant in prosperity and well-being in the United States. The unfortunate reality is that low socioeconomic status serves as a significant hurdle to success in the United States.

Inequality and Education

One has to look no further than the American education system to find a link between inequality and a lack of opportunity. One of the biggest determinants of prosperity and well-being in the United States is educational achievement, particularly regarding the achievement of a college degree: “when today’s young adults are compared with previous generations, the disparity in economic outcomes between college graduates and those with a high school diploma or less formal schooling has never been greater in the modern era”.¹⁴ Martha Bailey and Susan Dynarski’s findings in “Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion” show that the gaps in post-secondary education between low- and high-income families have been growing over the last decades.¹⁵ In the period from 1960 to 1980, high-income children showed

¹² Bajaj, “The Vicious Cycle of High Inequality.”

¹³ “Children, Youth, Families and Socioeconomic Status.”

¹⁴ Street et al., “The Rising Cost of Not Going to College.”

¹⁵ Bailey and Dynarski, “Gains and Gaps.”

an increase in college completion rates of eighteen percent compared to a paltry four percent for low-income children. This is especially pronounced for females, with high-income females outdistancing their male counterparts at a greater rate than low-income females. These numbers are not the result of poor test scores, lack of motivation, or the failure to dream big. A report by the National Center for Education Statistics tracked 15,000 high school sophomores over the course of thirteen years to see how their parents' education, income, and occupation affected their academic achievement, college entrance and graduation rates, and work history.¹⁶ High hopes for college education was common for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, though their ability to follow through on those hopes varied greatly. By the end of thirteen years, only one in four low-income students who had wanted a bachelor's degree had been able to achieve their goal, while over two-thirds of high-income students had achieved their goal of a bachelor's degree. What is even more concerning is that these numbers cannot be explained away by saying that poorer students had lower test scores, and therefore were not able to complete college. In actuality, "a poor teenager with top scores and a rich teenager with mediocre scores are equally likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree...Put bluntly, class trumps ability when it comes to college graduation".¹⁷

Race Reflected in the Census and the Classroom

"Class trumps ability when it comes to college graduation".¹⁸ This reality is directly opposed to a nation of opportunity for all, where an individual succeeds by their ability and the content of their character instead of their social class or skin color. And inequality does run along racial lines, with African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans having on average a

¹⁶ "Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS)."

¹⁷ Dynarski, "For the Poor, the Graduation Gap Is Even Wider Than the Enrollment Gap."

¹⁸ Ibid.

fraction of the wealth that their white counterparts have. In fact, the last five years' recovery from the Great Recession has caused racial wealth inequality to hit its highest point since 1989.¹⁹ It is not just wealth that reflects the disparities within our nation, but also the juvenile court system, the spatial distribution of urban pollution, and public health measures. For example, the Ferguson Commission noted that life expectancy differs by nearly forty years depending on which zip code of Greater St. Louis one lives in, with stark differences between majority white and black neighborhoods.²⁰ Returning to education, it becomes clear that racial inequality permeates every aspect of society, and has done so for a while; a headline in a 1949 issue of *The Christian Century* reads "'Equality' Vexes Virginia Schools: Despite Efforts to be Fair, Boards Are Accused of [Racial] Discrimination".²¹ Despite the fact that *Brown v. Board of Education* struck down legal segregation of schools in 1954, our schools are more segregated today than they were forty years ago.²² The schools that minorities²³ attend are usually high-poverty schools that are in the lower percentiles of school performance and student outcomes.²⁴ These schools have few experienced teachers, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning materials, and zero-tolerance discipline techniques that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline that plagues adolescent males of color. As discussed previously, starting off life with poor education limits outcomes later in life. It follows that if the problem of American inequality is ever to be solved, the solution must address education inequality, and it must be aware of the role that race plays.

¹⁹ Kochhar and comments, "Wealth Inequality Has Widened along Racial, Ethnic Lines since End of Great Recession."

²⁰ "Overview."

²¹ Burnham, "'Equality' Vexes Virginia Schools."

²² Strauss, "Report."

²³ Minorities in this instance refers to black, Hispanic, and Native Americans.

²⁴ Logan, Minca, and Adar, "The Geography of Inequality Why Separate Means Unequal in American Public Schools."

Reform Outside of the Church

There has been promising headway made in higher education along this front. One model program that could be implemented more broadly is targeted financial support to higher learning institutions that enroll low-income students. Normally universities find it difficult to accept low-income students because of the strain it puts on their financial aid budgets. However, the Cooke Foundation in Northern Virginia awarded a no-strings-attached \$1 million prize to Vassar University this year for their work towards providing educational opportunities to low-income students across America.²⁵ Even though \$1 million will not turn the course of education inequality around, it has raised awareness about the difficulties that low-income students have when applying to colleges.

Racial integration of schools would also constitute significant steps toward equal distribution of educational opportunities across racial lines. President Obama called attention to the continuing integration campaign when he included “a \$120 million grant program for school integration aimed at de-concentrating poverty”.²⁶ Many propose choice systems that allow low-income families to choose which schools they would like their children to attend based on racial makeup, school performance, neighborhood, etc. However, school choice is not the magic solution, and in actuality it can exacerbate the situation and makes school choice less fair for minorities if there are not adequate choices or there is inadequate information. Gary Orfield writes, “[School choice] Policy discourse in the United States has slipped from what conditions to impose to make choice fair to the belief that unrestricted choice will now produce results fundamentally different from those in the past”.²⁷ Instead of abandoning choice as a tool for integration, we must

²⁵ Leonhardt, “New Prize Rewards Economic Diversity at Colleges.”

²⁶ Spencer, “New York Schools Wonder.”

²⁷ Orfield and Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions?*, 303.

be smart about how we use choice. Choice coupled with information provision, transportation subsidies, increased funding, and local community engagement could yield promising benefits for spreading opportunity around.

The Church's Imperative and Tools for Reform

It would be remiss of me to not address the role that the Christian church²⁸ has to play in combatting inequality in our society and in our schools. Firstly, Scripture clearly lays out an imperative to fight for equality for all. While some level of material inequality is part of reality this side of eternity, the Bible warns against sizeable divides in which people must struggle to keep from “falling out of community” as Sider puts it, citing Leviticus 25:35-36.²⁹ The verses read, “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you”.³⁰ Reverend John Packer, the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds reminds us that Scripture is clear in its call for us to expand our imaginations in regards to how we can recognize and respond to care for those in need.³¹ Jesus made it clear that our generosity and aid to others need not have qualifications or programs that ensure we will receive a return on our investment.³² In addition, there is no room in the church for any discrimination or unloving treatment on the basis of gender, socioeconomic status, or race; our identity, and therefore the basis on which we treat each other, comes from our salvation and inheritance in Christ as Paul lays out in Galatians 3. There is a biblical vision of

²⁸ I will be writing about the Christian church, but many of the same principles that I give to motivate Christians to participate in reform can also be found in other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam.

²⁹ Bole, “Relative Poverty.”

³⁰ “Bible Gateway Passage.”

³¹ Packer, “Close the Gap: Introduction.”

³² Hoek, “Close the Gap: Biblical Attitudes to Inequality.”

equality for the church, and Christians ought to work to further God's church in society along with the biblical realities the church brings. This is not to conflate poverty and inequality, as there is an important distinction to be made between the two for policy purposes. However, we should not ignore those on the lower rungs of society simply because they are not poor in the stereotypical sense. To do so would be to abuse the economic privilege that shelters those with much from the harsh realities of those with little. The good news is that the church has not only a stronger imperative for taking action, but also some unique tools at their disposal to fight inequality.

One of the cyclical factors of inequality in America is the difficulty that the lower class faces in obtaining civil skills and social capital, such as organizing, public speaking, building relationship networks, financial training, etc. Without these skills, communities may find it difficult to express their voice in the democratic process or work to close the inequality gap from their end. Research has shown that church congregations and church-related activities give opportunities for the lower classes to gain access to these skills. In addition, churches show the least discrimination based on educational attainment out of all civil society organizations.³³ While church congregations cannot be the silver bullet for equipping the poor, there is promise in church involvement, especially for congregations that are economically integrated.

Greater awareness of the role that the church can play is also vitally important to changing the structures that have perpetuated the inequality of our society. Affluent white congregations could particularly benefit from education and an increased consciousness of inequality and systemic racism in America. These congregations could potentially leverage their high levels of social and monetary influence to change the systemic issues plaguing our society. While the pulpit

³³ Schwadel, "Testing the Promise of the Churches."

is not always an appropriate place to make political statements, there is a balance that could be struck that preserves the Gospel message while invoking its political implications for our time.

Faith-based organizations can also get involved with community-based programs that support education. Church members in Chicago have been volunteering with the Safe Passage program to help students get to school safely, or with New Life Church's "Urban Life Skills" program that works with wards of the court that are involved with gang activity to ensure that they are not just another number in the school-to-prison pipeline.³⁴ Ultimately it is not only financial resources, but time, care, and raising awareness that will bring about change.

Concluding Thoughts

Addressing inequality matters for spiritual, philosophical, and ideological reasons. At its core inequality undermines the legitimacy of the American claim to equality and the Christian claim to care for neighbor. Remedying the damage done by inequality is not an easy task, as it has a distinct racial and spatial character to it, and as such it runs deep in the veins of American society. Nevertheless, there is hope for change. Education reform offers promise when diversity and opportunity are the ends pursued rather than choice offered or tax dollars allocated. The church is also uniquely called and equipped to play a role; in an issue that demands we think outside of our own needs and to the needs of others, the church has much to bring to the table.

³⁴ "Urban Life Skills: New Life Centers of Chicagoland."

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