



FAIR WAGE AS AN AGENDA FOR CHRISTIANS

Dana W. Wilbanks

Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics

The Iliff School of Theology



In the broiling atmosphere of current political debate, religion is an unusually potent ingredient. However, religion tends to be applied only to a narrow range of policy questions, or else it is employed specifically by Christians as a national self-congratulatory designation for American exceptionalism. Often what is lost in the political uses of religion is the prophetic element of Christianity. The missing theme is justice for the poor. The imperative of justice for the poor is central in the Christian tradition, and it speaks powerfully to current political debates. For example, it is in the context of this imperative that we need to consider the policy question of the minimum wage.

Jewish and Christian Scriptures reflect a realistic view of politics and economic life. It is to be expected that the poor suffers at the hands of the powerful. So prophets examine with an unrelentingly critical eye the ways this dynamic is operative in their communities. Consider Amos, the herdsman from Israel: "Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land!" (Amos 8:4) The Lord says with unmistakable clarity: "Take away from me the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:23-24)

This prophetic perspective is also reflected in the song attributed to Mary when she learned that she would be the bearer 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 away empty." (Luke 1:52-53) This is truly a revolutionary message. The tables are turned. God's justice brings a reversal of conventional priorities.

In recent years we have been challenged by the appearance of "liberation theology," which seeks to view biblical teachings from the perspective of the poor. If we are among the poor, if we adopt the standpoint of the poor, this can make a radical difference in our views of God's activity in history. God, then, is not viewed as blessing the status quo or as indifferent to political dynamics. Rather, we are challenged to ask the questions: in what ways are the conditions of the poor impacted? In what ways are the interests of the poor sacrificed for the continued benefit of the privileged? In the babel of political campaigning, where do we find "good news" for the poor?

The Gospel of Luke contains the text from Isaiah cited by Jesus when he came to the synagogue in Nazareth: "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." (Luke 4:18-19) "Good news for the poor" doesn't mean only a spiritual message of hope, but "good news" in the fullest sense—body, mind, heart and spirit. Christians today are thus challenged to be bearers of "good news" in word and deed, to bring "good news to the poor" to actualization in the political and economic life of our country.

Often these references to justice for the poor are interpreted as counsels of perfection. Maybe we SHOULD practice a politics that privileges the poor, but in the real world this could never happen. It is much too idealistic to be of any practical value. Still, Biblical realism about the persistent presence of the poor doesn't mean that nothing can be done. Indeed the realism is a constant reminder that we should not be naïve. We should not be surprised that there will be strong resistances to efforts to bring

about the “good news” of change that benefits the poor. But an all or nothing approach is not only unrealistic. It also undermines the motivation to seek justice. It consigns political efforts to inevitable futility.

An important initiative in Colorado illustrates the point very well. And this initiative has in fact become an important issue in the national campaigns for the U.S. President and Congress. The proposal: Raise the minimum wage. This is hardly a radical step. But it is one that clearly benefits a large class of the poor. There are different proposals -- \$15.00 an hour; \$12.00 an hour. Should we advocate the higher amount now and perhaps lose the opportunity or seek the lower amount with the intention of building momentum to support the higher amount? A coalition of organizations in Colorado is seeking to pass a ballot proposal that would secure a \$12/hour minimum wage by 2020. Currently the minimum wage is \$8.31.

Persons who work now for the minimum wage are being paid at a poverty level. They cannot afford to pay for food, housing, transportation, other incidental but necessary expenses, on this salary. The crunch is worse, of course, if they must support a family. A core principle of economic justice is that persons who work at a full time job should be compensated with a livable wage. When persons ask “who are the poor?” one part of the answer is those who are working hard, spending for necessities, and are still going into debt. In the U.S. the poor are often admonished to work to get ahead. But the reality for many is that they are working hard but are getting farther behind. All full time jobs should pay a livable wage. Raising the minimum wage requirement is one important, though only one step toward prioritizing the poor, toward establishing a measure of justice.

The current practice of low wages for many jobs is an example of how “the system” is rigged against the working poor. The best way to change this situation is through a law that compels compliance. An important benefit of raising the minimum wage is that businesses that want to do better for their workers can do so without being at a competitive disadvantage. Those businesses that welcome this change deserve the support of consumers that seek justice for workers. There is strong evidence that raising the minimum wage can in fact benefit the economy and business interests. (refer to other documents) Potentially, all can benefit from this small but significant step. We can celebrate this achievement. Yet this is not the final aim. The imperative of justice for the poor for the sake of the whole community remains the long range goal – the minimum wage of \$20.00 an hour.

70

Yes on Amendment 70

Increase Minimum Wage to \$12/hr by 2020

The minimum wage was created to help keep working families out of poverty, but the current wage of \$8.31/hr hasn't kept up with the cost of living in Colorado.
For more information: www.coloradofamiliesforafairwage.org

