

The Wealthiest Christians in History

Excerpts from The Hole in Our Gospel by Richard Stearns

It is important to put the American Church in perspective. Simply stated, it is the wealthiest community of Christians in the history of Christendom. How wealthy? The total income of American churchgoers is \$5.2 trillion. (That's more than five thousand billion dollars.) It would take just a little over 1 percent of the income of American Christians to lift the poorest one billion people in the world out of extreme poverty. Said another way, American Christians, who make up about 5 percent of the Church worldwide, control about half of global Christian wealth; a lack of money is not our problem.

A few years back I had the opportunity to spend some time with former president Jimmy Carter. World Vision was collaborating with Habitat for Humanity on one of their massive "blitz build" projects in the Philippines, and I was assigned to work on the same house as President Carter. As we worked, he shared that he had just been asked to prepare a speech that would answer the question, what is the greatest challenge facing humankind in the twenty-first century? It was 1999, and the world was focused on the beginning of the new millennium. I was quite surprised at the former president's conclusion. He believed that the greatest problem of our time was *the growing gap between the richest and poorest people on earth*. Let me start with the good news. You're rich, we're rich, and the Church in America is rich. And now I am sure you are thinking that I am wrong, that you're not rich, and neither is your church. But bear with me, because wealth is always measured in relative terms. Brace yourselves for this good news! If your income is \$25,000 per year, you are wealthier than

approximately 90 percent of the world's population! If you make \$50,000 per year, you are wealthier than 99 percent of the world! Does this shock you? Remember, of the 6.7 billion people on earth, almost half of them live on less than two dollars a day.

If you earn \$50,000 per year in America and you don't feel rich, it's because you are comparing yourself to people who have more than you do—those living above even the 99th percentile of global wealth. It's also because we tend to gauge whether or not we are wealthy based on the things we *don't* have. If we think we need a bigger house or apartment, a nicer car, more clothes, or the ability to go out for dinner more often, we don't feel "rich." Again, it's all relative to our expectations. When you realize that 93 percent of the world's people don't own a car, your old clunker starts to look pretty good. Our difficulty is that we see our American lifestyles as normative, when in fact they are grossly distorted compared to the rest of the world. We don't *believe* we are wealthy, so we don't see it as our responsibility to help the poor. We are deceived.

There is much at stake. The world we live in is under siege—3 billion are desperately poor, 1 billion hungry, millions are trafficked in human slavery, 10 million children die needlessly each year, wars and conflicts are wreaking havoc, pandemic diseases are spreading, ethnic hatred is flaming, and terrorism is growing. Most of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the developing world live in grinding poverty. And in the midst of this stands the Church of Jesus Christ in America, with resources, knowledge, and tools unequalled in the history of Christendom. I believe that we stand on the brink of a defining moment. We have a choice to make.

When historians look back in one hundred years, what will they write about this nation of 340,000 churches? What will they say of the Church's response to the great challenges of our time-AIDS, poverty, hunger, terrorism, war? Will they say that these authentic Christians rose up courageously and responded to the tide of human suffering, that they rushed to the front lines to comfort the afflicted and to douse the flames of hatred? Will they write of an unprecedented outpouring of generosity to meet the urgent needs of the world's poor? Will they speak of the moral leadership and compelling vision of our leaders? Will they write that this, the beginning of the twenty-first century, was the Church's finest hour?

Or will they look back and see a Church too comfortable, insulated from the pain of the rest of the world, empty of compassion, and devoid of deeds? Will they write about a people who stood by and watched while a hundred million died of AIDS and fifty million children were orphaned, of Christians who lived in luxury and self-indulgence while millions died for lack of food and water? Will schoolchildren read in disgust about a Church that had the wealth to build great sanctuaries but lacked the will to build schools, hospitals, and clinics? In short, will we be remembered as the Church with a gaping hole in its gospel?