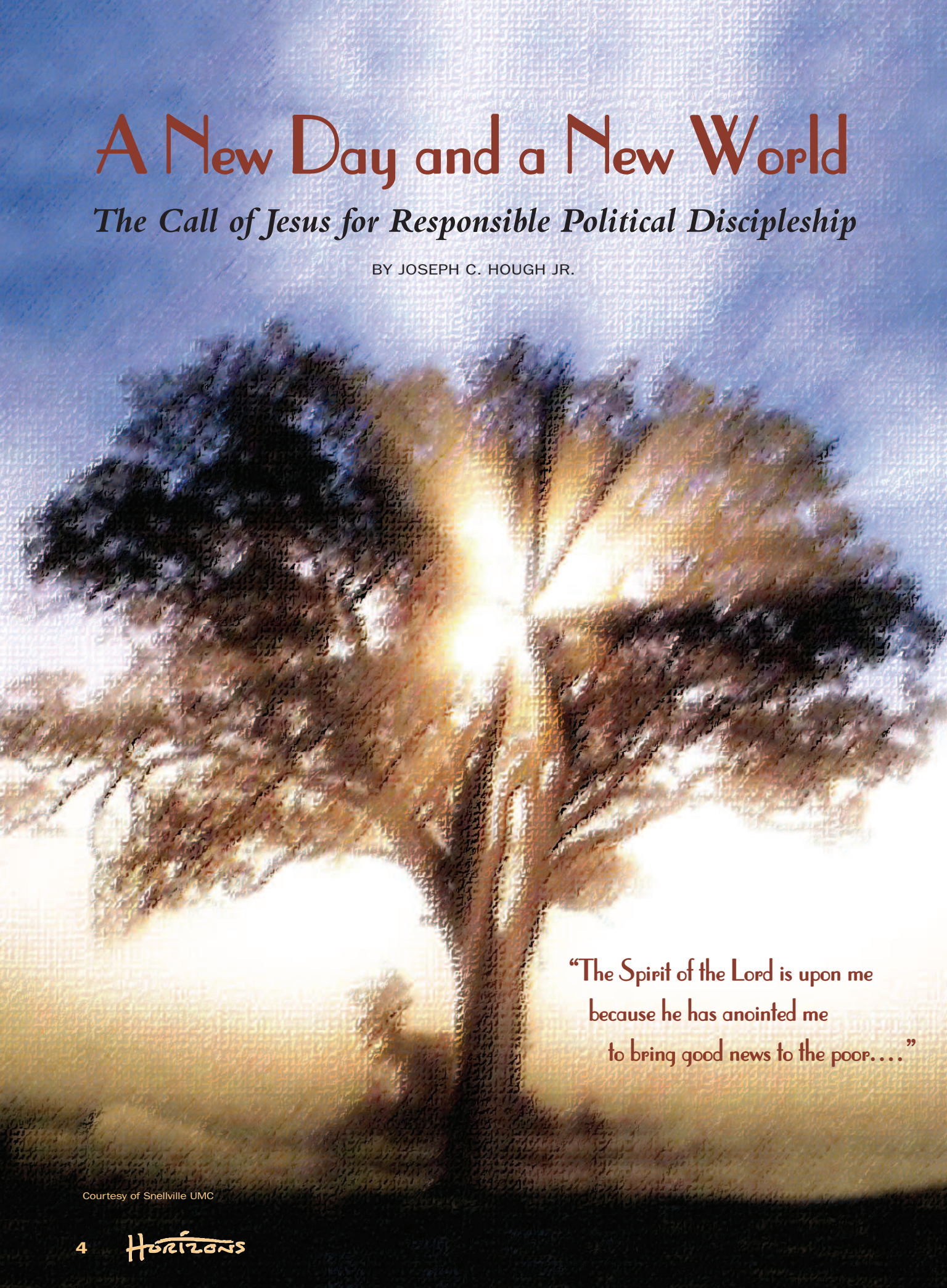


# A New Day and a New World

## *The Call of Jesus for Responsible Political Discipleship*

BY JOSEPH C. HOUGH JR.



“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor....”

Courtesy of Snellville UMC

Americans are about to make one of the most important political decisions of their lifetimes.<sup>1</sup> Never before has there been stronger bipartisan agreement that the financial state of the nation and its citizens presents a crisis.

## The State of the Union

The dollar has spiraled to record lows against other strong currencies. National tax policy has created an obscene gap between the rich and the rest of the country. That gap is greater than at any time in our country's history. During the last decade, the richest one percent of Americans have seen their incomes rise exponentially while middle-class Americans and poor Americans have seen their wages stagnate and even decline.

The safety net for the poorest Americans and aging Americans is disappearing, while the healthcare crisis continues to grow. More than 40 million Americans have no healthcare coverage, including nearly nine million children who have no insurance coverage of any kind.<sup>2</sup> Our major financial institutions have reported record losses because of a deregulated mortgage market. Left in the rubble of the mortgage debacle are hundreds of thousands of middle-class and poor Americans who face foreclosure and the loss of their homes.

## The Pervasiveness of Poverty

Far more Americans are victims of these circumstances than we might imagine. Mark Robert Rank, in chapter 4 of his book, *One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) has demonstrated statistically that of all Americans who are 55 years old, 45 percent will have experienced living in poverty. If you add to those already in poverty, those Americans who have lived in "near poverty" (just one and a half times the

national poverty level), 61 percent of 55-year-old Americans will have lived for at least one year on the brink or deep in the poverty that kills hope and opportunity. Finally, 18 percent of these same 55-year-old Americans will have lived at poverty level at least five times during their adult lives. In our country, with its minimalist approach to family assistance, once you are poor, you are much more likely to fall back into poverty. By the time this same group of 55-year-old Americans is 65 years old, 65 percent of them will have had occasion to ask for public support of some kind to assist them out of poverty.

It is not just a small group of irresponsible people who are in need of public support. And the people given public assistance, for the most part, do not receive that assistance for long. The overwhelming majority of Americans, at some time in their adult life, need public help to overcome a disruption in child care, the loss of transportation, the disaster of a health crisis, a job loss or a divorce, and they do not ask for assistance for more than two or three years. Of those who do remain on public assistance for long periods of time, 38 percent have a disability and 31 percent have a severe disability (Rank, p. 32).

These are figures that reflect the life chances of all Americans, and the percentages become much worse if the research is focused on single parents, children of single parents, minorities and women. And if your family is poor as you grow up, the odds are heavy that you will have difficulty climbing out of poverty. After all, poor children have worse health, experience more crime, attend poorer schools, live in the unhealthiest environments and suffer most often from poor nutrition. Fewer poor children graduate from high school, and even fewer go to college. What should be even more troublesome to people of faith is the fact that a great many of the poor are chil-

dren. Approximately four million children under six years of age live in families that are victims of extreme poverty, living on incomes of less than \$6,500 per year (about the same amount of money as the hourly income of the highest paid one per cent of Americans).

As a result of our history of cuts in public assistance, the loss of jobs, the loss of health care for 20 million Americans and declining wages of the poor, our country, the United States of America, ranks at the bottom of the 18 other major industrial democracies in social health indicators. Using the language of Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Prize winner in economics, a greater percentage of Americans lack the "capability to function" as citizens in our democracy than is the case in any of the other 17 countries where this social indicator is measured.<sup>3</sup> This situation is morally intolerable. It is a statistic of shame.

## Clear Directions for Christians

In times like this, Christians need to remember that the biblical accounts of Jesus' ministry give clear directions for making political choices that are responsive to the needs of the poor. From his own tradition, he identified the kind of world we hope for, a world that defines our primary public and political obligation. Within the sacred writings of Judaism, the *Tanak*, the main themes of God's justice and the special place of the poor emerge in *Exodus 23*, *Leviticus 19*, *Deuteronomy 15* and *Deuteronomy 24*. The same themes are evident throughout the *Psalms*—*Psalms 9*, *Psalms 10*, *Psalms 41*, *Psalms 72*, *Psalms 74* just to name a few. The prophets, especially Isaiah and Amos, constantly reminded the people of Israel that care for the poor is central to their covenant with God. They warned Israel that violation of that covenant put them at great risk. As the writer of *Proverbs* put it, "Those who oppress

the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him” (*Prov. 14:31*).

It is, therefore, no accident that Jesus, when he made his first appearance as a reader in the synagogue in Nazareth (*Luke 4:16–19*) turned to *Isaiah 61* and read:

“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.”

The power of this reading becomes even more dramatic given the story that Luke tells just before this public reading at Nazareth. Jesus had gone into the wilderness for a time of fasting and prayer (*Luke 4:1–2*). His solitude was interrupted by a shrewd interlocutor, Satan himself, who came to Jesus with three propositions—all suggestions for the dramatic announcement of Jesus’ ministry. All three of these suggestions were shorthand versions of reigning Jewish apocalyptic ideas about the powers of the coming Messiah. It is the fact that all three of Satan’s propositions represented popular conceptions about the expected Messiah that lends importance to Jesus’ own announcement in the synagogue. Even more important than this, the Lukan story alerts us to expect something different.

And something different was what his neighbors heard that day! Jesus announced the coming of a divinely ordered kingdom that stood in stark contrast to the world that the people in that synagogue knew. It was a world where

- most of the people were barely able to earn enough to eat and to have shelter;
- the poor owned little and worked hard, only to pay exorbitant tributes to the landowners who were rich and prosperous;
- the poor bore the lion’s share of taxes collected for the Roman conquerors; and
- tax collectors connived with authorities to overlook cheating and reward duplicity.

## Jesus’ Call for a New World

No wonder that Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world. Literally, the kingdom of heaven is the movement of God into the world to destroy injustice and renew fairness and righteousness. As such, it is the divine contradiction of the world of Jesus’ day, and the world as we know it today.

This new kingdom of justice for the poor becomes a major theme of Luke’s gospel, but Luke is not alone among the New Testament writers. For example, in the parable of The Judgment of the Nations (*Matt. 25:31*), concrete acts in support of the

marginalized and the poor become followers’ sole tickets into the kingdom. Just confessing the name of Jesus is disregarded and treated with some disdain by the judge of the nations. Altogether in the New Testament, there are more than 40 references to the special place of the poor in the heart of God and in the divinely initiated, new kingdom of God that is coming into the world.

The remarkable thing about this central core of Jesus’ teaching is that it is so obvious. From the day he read from the scroll in Nazareth, he said it plainly, again and again.

Yet Christians have struggled for centuries with this clear call to work for a new world. Some, like St. Francis, have decided to take a lesson from the sad case of the rich young ruler—sell their possessions, give the money away and live in poverty (*Matt. 19:16*). Others have established institutions to care for poor and marginalized people. For most of us, however, these are seen to be special vocations, and we have defined caring for the poor largely in terms of alms or personal charity. American Christians and Americans in general are generous people, and there is no doubt that their generosity has relieved a great deal of human suffering. But charity alone cannot address the call of Jesus for a new way of living together, and a kingdom of justice. In an act of charity, only the giver determines who will benefit and what is to be given. Jesus asks for more than this. He has called us to do nothing less than to “bring in the kingdom,” the kingdom of justice for the poor. That requires moving beyond charity to advocacy for just policies that attend to the needs of the least of these, our brothers and sisters.

In this election year, the central question from Christians for those who wish to be our political leaders is quite simple. What policies will you advocate that can help us recover from decades of disregard for the poor? As you prepare to vote, consider which candidates have a vision to help us restore this moral basis to our democratic community. Anything less falls short of the new day and the new world that Jesus promised to us all. 🍎

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### Notes

- 1 “Americans” in this article refers to citizens of the United States.
- 2 National Coalition on Health Care, “Health Insurance Coverage,” 2008, [www.nchc.org/facts/coverage.shtml](http://www.nchc.org/facts/coverage.shtml). Accessed April 10, 2008.
- 3 Amartya Se, *Commodities and Capabilities* (New York: Oxford University, 1999)