



3: A Hole in the Church | Pastor Joe Wittwer | November 1, 2009

A. Fellowship Time (10-15 minutes)

1. Chitchat. Perhaps offer coffee, tea, or a cold drink with some snacks.
2. Pray (or invite someone to pray) to open the discussion.

B. Review Time (Read the summary below to the group: 5-10 minutes)

If you're following the reading plan, you've finished part 4 in the book, "A Hole in the Church." Stearns begins this section with a warning: he's going to say some things that are critical of the church universal and of individual local congregations. It's never fun to be criticized, but if we want to get better, we need to listen to our critics. Stearns begins this section with "A Tale of Two Churches," contrasting two imaginary churches: The Church of God's Blessings here in America, which has everything; and The Church of the Suffering Servant in Africa, which has almost nothing. Both churches love and follow Jesus. So how can this disparity exist? How can we have one church that has everything and another that has nothing? There are basically two reasons: The first is simple lack of awareness. Neither church is aware of the other. The other reason is self-absorption. We become so preoccupied with our own lives that, even if we are aware, we tend to overlook the challenges faced by churches in other lands. This disparity between rich and poor isn't new. In **2 Corinthians 8-9** Paul devoted two entire chapters to giving to the poor. [Read **2 Corinthians 8:1-15** together.] The church in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times, so Paul was collecting an offering from the Gentile churches to give to their suffering fellow-believers in Jerusalem. God cared that one had plenty while another was in need. The local church is the hope of the world, but only when the church is at her best! The problem is that we haven't always been at our best.

1. What we've done: our checkered past.

We have often been on the wrong side of social issues, and Stearns attributes this to a cultural blindness—an inability to separate ourselves from the dominant culture and see it through God's eyes. Stearns gives several examples: Native Americans, slavery and civil rights are all part of the dark side of our history. It would be unfair to say that all Christians and all churches were on the wrong side of these issues; there are many believers who saw these sins for what they were and fought against them. That is why we are calling it our *checkered* history: it is good and bad. While most Christians and churches either participated in or supported these things, other Christians led the fight for change. This cultural blindness is nothing new, nor is it exclusive to American Christianity. It is true of all people of all faiths of all time. Jesus addressed it in His day. Speaking of His Jewish contemporaries in **Matthew 13:14-15**, He said: *"In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'"* He could say the same of us. We have a tendency to be blinded by our culture, to accept as normal the values and practices of the culture in we are reared. But the lessons of our history should cause us to ask where our blind spots are today. Perhaps one of the most pressing issues that we have been blind to is HIV/AIDS. There are 15 million AIDS orphans in the world; as Christians shouldn't we do something about this? If we're going to avoid the mistakes of our past, the mistake of being on the wrong side of such issues, we need to honestly ask, What are our blind spots? Where is injustice being done? What makes God's heart break?

1. What we've become: the richest church in history.

We, the American church, are the richest church in history. That is not a criticism or an indictment; it's a simple statement of fact. Depending on what we do with it, that wealth could

be a great thing or it could be a bad thing. The total income of American churchgoers is \$5.2 trillion. We comprise about 5% of the global Christian church, but control almost half of the global Christian wealth. [Read **1 Timothy 6:17-19** together.] What is Paul's advice to rich Christians? Two things: first, put your hope in God, not your money. It all comes from God, and it all belongs to God. We are not owners but managers. We have been entrusted by God with all we have, and one day we will answer to Him for what we did with it. Second, do good, be rich in good deeds, be generous and willing to share. In other words, use what you have to do God's work and help others. Don't spend it all on yourself and your immediate family. God expects us to use what we have for His purposes, which includes helping others who need it.

3. What we could be and do: a vision of our potential.

The richest church in history could change the world! But only if we put our talents, our intelligence, our gifts, and our money to work for God's purposes. Let's use our money as an example. One of the great principles of Scripture regarding our money is the tithe. The first 10% of our income is to be given to God. **Leviticus 27:30** states this principle: "*A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD.*" The tithe was not considered a gift to God; it already belonged to God. The purpose of the tithe was two-fold: First, it provided for God's work at the temple, and it was used to care for the poor, the aliens, orphans and widows. Second, the tithe was to teach and remind us of our complete dependence on God. He knows that our chief competitor to our dependence on Him is our money. When we have enough money, we can become self-reliant. Money is power, and power competes with God for supremacy in our lives. So God gave us the tithe to free us from money's control and to help us depend on Him. The tithe belongs to God; when we keep it, we are robbing God! [Read **Malachi 3:8-12** together.] When we tithe, there is "food in God's house"—that is, there is plenty to fund the work of the church and care for the poor. If every Christian in America tithed, the American church would have an extra \$168 billion to spend on God's work worldwide. If every American Christian tithed, we could literally change the world! And that's just the money. Of course, it will take more than just money. It will take courage and all the smarts we can muster, and millions and millions of minutes---lots of hard work. But we could do it, if we're willing.

C. Life Group Questions (select, revise, and add as desired: 20-40 minutes)

1. As you reflect on the contrast between the American church and most of the churches around the world, why do you think there is such a disparity in wealth? Knowing that God cares about this disparity, what are you prompted to do--what are you willing to do?
2. Our history reveals that some Christians and local churches have in fact supported injustice at times. What injustices do you see in the world today--what do you think "breaks God's heart" when he sees the world? How are we members of the church, members of Christ's body, responding to these injustices?
3. What thoughts came to mind when you read or heard this statement: "If we don't think we're rich, we don't see it as our responsibility to help the poor"? What helps you recognize and regularly remember how rich we are compared to the rest of the world?
4. Read **1 Timothy 6:17-19** again. What does being "rich in good deeds" mean to you? What are practical ways of applying this Scripture?

D. Personal Application (1-3 Minutes)

- Discuss ways you might use your minutes and your resources to help others in need.
- Make a plan of action—start to identify your passions for helping others and follow through.
- Check out our website (www.lifecenter.net) for ideas and possible ways to use your minutes.

E. Prayer Time (As a whole group or subgroups of 3-4: 10-15 Minutes)

- Ask the Lord to "give us eyes that see" and hearts that break over the needs of others.
- Thank God for the wealth He has given you, and ask Him how He wants you to share it.
- Pray that God will help each of us to be part of the solution to poverty, and that He will give us direction as we explore opportunities and options as the series progresses.