

A Vow of Poverty: The Problem & Possible Solution

This is not legal advice. It is an article that has been written in response to several people asking a pastor about a “Vow of Poverty.” Many people asking this question feel that although they agree with the sentiment of renouncing the world, and dedicating themselves to God in body, mind, and soul. However, they find that they cannot reconcile their spiritual beliefs, which are based on the authority of Scripture, with the notion of binding themselves to a spirit of poverty.

This article discusses this issue, and suggests a possible work around for the benefit of someone who is considering a better way of stating that they are entering a “Vow of Poverty,” in a way that is aligned with their spiritual and Scriptural conscience.

Scriptural background

Many Biblical passages indicate that a walk with God brings blessings, and not curses.

Deuteronomy 28:1-68 is a classic passage that deals with the subject of God, believers, prosperity, and poverty.

The first 14 verses highlight the blessings of prosperity that will follow those who follow God. In contrast to this, the remaining verses graphically speak of the curses and poverty that will follow those who are disobedient. These describe a horrible descent into abject poverty and misery, which is clearly not what God intends for those who choose to follow Him.

So, what is the issue?

The issue is that Scripture makes it very clear that although we are in the world, we are not be of the world. This is a subject of its own, that can result in many books. We will try to keep this as short as possible.

Consider the following scriptures:

Jesus said...

*"None of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."
Luke 14: 33*

*"You cannot serve God and mammon..."
Matthew 6: 24*

*"So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."
Luke 12: 21*

*"Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness
against you..."
James 5: 3*

How does this fit together?

Deuteronomy 8:18 is a key to understanding God's purpose for prosperity, without being "sold out" to money.

*"It is God who gives the power to get wealth, so that he may establish His covenant
which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day."*

This needs to be tied together with Haggai 2:8 which states,

"The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,' declares the Lord of hosts."

In other words...

Believers are called to renounce the things of the world, because none of it belongs to us anyway! It all belongs to God from the beginning. Yet we also have a dual responsibility to use that which belongs to God from the beginning to establish His covenant.

(Deuteronomy 8:18)

The Temple of the Holy Spirit

One further factor to consider is that poverty invariably leads to poor health and harm to the body of the person in poverty, and to those who depend on the poverty-stricken person for their care and support. If a father fails to produce an income, his family starves. Hunger follows, and so does ill health. These effectively harm, or destroy, the body. Deliberately harming the body is forbidden by scripture.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 states,

"Do you not know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

In other words, although the intention of a "Vow of poverty" is renunciation, the implication of deliberate self harm is not scriptural.

Therefore in reference to the "Vow of poverty," a believer may choose to use the term like a "Vow of renunciation," or a "Vow of dedication unto the Lord," or similar.

In terms of legal concept, it is fundamentally one and the same, and should therefore still stand, if challenged. In terms of spiritual importance, the term, a "Vow of Poverty," cannot be used by many believers for spiritual reasons, and as such some may choose, (as a personal conviction based on their religious beliefs), to replace this term with a term such as a "Vow of renunciation and dedication unto the Lord."

Bylaws

If a choice is made to opt for the term a "Vow of renunciation and dedication unto the Lord," rather than the term "Vow of Poverty," a clear record should be created to document the fact. If you are in a ministry or church that has bylaws, it would be wise to record the policy in the bylaws.

The following text is an example of the type of verbiage that may be drafted. Speak to an appropriately qualified lawyer or an attorney, if you are concerned about its legal veracity.

The Trustees of XYZ hereby agree upon, and declare and decree the following addition to the bylaws:

When it comes to the "Vow of Poverty," we (XYZ), as a religious belief and theological principle based on the supremacy of Scripture, take issue with the word "poverty." (See scripture references below). We do however; fully accept the principle of worldly renunciation, which is inherently implied in the "Vow of Poverty." We hereby clarify that our position is one of renunciation, as is the case in the "Vow of poverty," but not of self-degradation, self-harm, or willful self-destitution (which would all be contrary to the scriptural mandate to "Know ye not that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19), and "Do you not know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him..." (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Nor do we endorse, imply, consent too, or agree in any way to contract spiritually or materially with spiritual powers or principalities that would seek to impoverish others or bring poverty upon humanity in any way, shape or form.

In other words, in terms of legal matters only, our use of the term a "Vow of Renunciation and Dedication unto the Lord," will have equivalence and equal standing to the term "Vow of Poverty." However, in all other matters, domains, and interpretations, the preferred Scriptural implications we have described above stand with full force. As a spiritual principle, we denounce, and reject the self-destructive aspects implied by a "Vow of Power," while walking in the high and blessed calling of a "Vow of renunciation and dedication unto the Lord."

Signed (The Trustees).

Resources

1. From the IRS website:

Publication 517 (2020), Social Security and Other Information for Members of the Clergy and Religious Workers

For use in preparing 2020 Returns

Members of Religious Orders

- If you are a member of a religious order who hasn't taken a vow of poverty, your earnings for ministerial services you perform as a member of the order are subject to SE tax. See Ministerial Services, later. However, you can request that the IRS grant you an exemption as discussed under Exemption From Self-Employment (SE) Tax , later.

Vow of Poverty

- If you are a member of a religious order and have taken a vow of poverty, you are already exempt from paying SE tax on your earnings for ministerial services you perform as an agent of your church or its agencies. You don't need to request a separate exemption. For income tax purposes, the earnings are tax free to you. Your earnings are considered the income of the religious order.

Source: https://www.irs.gov/publications/p517#en_US_2020_publink1000255890

2. The Priesthood and a Vow of Poverty (A Catholic Perspective).

Source: <https://catholicexchange.com/the-priesthood-and-the-vow-of-poverty>

3. The vow of poverty in general

The vow of poverty may generally be defined as the promise made to God of a certain constant renunciation of temporal goods, in order to follow Christ. The object of the vow of poverty is anything visible, material, appreciable at a money value.

Source: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12324a.htm>