

BRINGING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

This text is part of the symposium on poverty and the poor, organised by the Institute for Faith and Education of Baylor University and recently held on the University's campus. It may be quoted, but only with the express permission of the author, whose email address can be found at the end.

Introduction

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7.22)

My task in this presentation is to offer a theoretical framework for considering a practical Christian response to poverty as an integral part of the Church's calling or mission, an inescapable element of its very *raison d'être*. From the outset, we should remind ourselves that we are speaking of the poor, who are real people living in concrete situations all over the globe, not just about poverty as an abstract concept. Poverty is experienced by actual human beings, created in the image of God. Whether they live close by or at a distance, they are our neighbours (Lk. 10.29-37). They belong to families like us; their needs are the same as ours. However, unlike most of us, they have been born into circumstances that have given them little or no opportunity to escape from the humiliating cycle of poverty in which their community is trapped.

I will begin by highlighting three important aspects of this theme, which will set the direction for all that follows. First, the reality of the poor is taken seriously in the whole of the Bible. It might be an exaggeration to say that they appear on every page. Nevertheless, as we shall see, their plight is seen as a major concern in every strand of literature,¹ especially in the ministry of Jesus Christ (see, for example, Lk. 4.18; 6.20; 11.41; 12.33; 14.13).

Secondly, from its very beginning the Church has shown a special care for the poor. Early in its life, the diaconal ministry was given prominence. The main task of the deacons was to attend to the sick and aid the poor. In the second and third centuries, churches cared for the sick during plagues that afflicted significant portions of population in the Mediterranean basin. Later, “monasteries were well known as places of hospitality and refuge during the cataclysmic events of the great migrations during the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries”.² Most of the oldest established educational institutions in Europe, sponsored by Christian communities, began their life by giving free tuition to children of the poor. In its origins the Pietist movement of the 17th and 18th centuries paid special attention to the social responsibility of Christians. People like Philipp Spener and Hermann Francke raised awareness among rulers, Church leaders and ordinary people of their responsibilities towards those living in conditions of extreme poverty. Francke, in particular, created many institutions for the alleviation of poverty, not least those that promoted education. The modern mission movement has spent much time and energy in attending to excluded and oppressed peoples, such as lepers, outcasts, abandoned children and young girls exploited in religious prostitution.

¹ The Law, the Prophets, the Wisdom literature, the Gospels and Epistles.

² See, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 369.

Thirdly, in the last 40 years or so, Christians of all persuasions have moved noticeably from just having a concern to alleviate poverty to issues of justice and liberation. Thus, whilst continuing to serve the immediate needs of people for health care, adequate supplies of nutritious food and clean water, proper drainage, solid housing, ante-natal and post-natal care of young mothers, and for the acquiring of skills (such as carpentry, electrical work, agriculture, book-keeping and clothes' manufacture), they have also stressed issues of economic exploitation, political corruption, lack of fair trade, long-term debt and the paucity of capital spent on infrastructures that will benefit marginalised communities. Charity has become a suspect word; whilst justice is rhetorically approved.

The Nature of Poverty

As we live in a technical world, given to measuring reality by means of statistics, we tend to create definitions in terms of figures. Thus, to be categorised as poor, a person needs to belong to a household whose annual cash income is less than 50% of the national average.³ Within this group there are further categories, of which the largest is called the 'ultra poor' or the 'vulnerable poor'. These are people who cannot work – the elderly, the disabled and children – or those who are dependent on seasonal work, because they have no productive resources of their own (land, skills, capital, or tools) to earn for themselves an adequate income.

Usually, the poor are spoken about in terms of *quantity of life* criteria; they are judged to be poor in terms of an absence of life-sustaining goods and services – such as adequate food, housing, clothing and health-care. There are, however, also important *quality of life* factors, which are both the cause and the result of material deprivation. Some of these are proper access to decision-making processes, redress against violence and bureaucracy in a properly respected process of law, opportunities for education and training, a healthy environment, regular paid employment, physical and social security. Important as material circumstances are, social conditions may be even more fundamental in describing the character of poverty. 'By "the poor" is meant all suffering people condemned to live under inhuman conditions with little or no opportunity to influence their fate themselves.'⁴

So far, definitions of the poor tend to stress impersonal, external factors. However, when we turn to Biblical references, we are confronted with a different set of criteria. In the Old Testament, there are five words in Hebrew translated into the Greek version (the Septuagint) with the one word *ptochos*, also the preferred designation of the poor in the NT. In each case, the word carries a strong ethical implication. The poor are needy, destitute, having to beg, because they have been dispossessed of their rightful place in the social community to which they belong:

“The word becomes generally synonymous with the socially poor, with those without land. That such poverty has been caused by disinheritance or unlawful

³ J. Remenyi, *Where Credit is Due* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1991), p. 3. Clearly, the national average depends on the relative wealth of the country in question. Thus, this indicator measures inequality rather than absolute poverty. An example of a standard measurement of poverty, applicable to all situations, would be a daily intake of food less than is required to sustain the human body (approximately 2000-2500 calories for an adult male).

⁴ Risto A. Ahonen, *Mission in the New Millennium* (Helsinki: The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, 2000), p. 236.

injury and not by the person's own fault is shown by its being contrasted with violence, not riches.”⁵

This is why God lays upon his people a special responsibility to ensure that there are no poor in the land (Deut. 15.7-11). As poverty is caused largely by some people's desire to gain excessive riches at the expense of others, it can be ended by people's determination to share resources equitably. The poor exist, because they have been deprived by others of the means of livelihood.

There is another kind of poverty recognised in Scripture – being ‘poor in spirit.’ (Matt. 5.3). This is depicted in two contrasting ways. The poor are those who consciously yearn for God's coming reign of justice (*mishpat*) and well-being (*shalom*) and for God's gift of salvation from sin and failure. They are those who humbly cast themselves upon the unfailing care and compassion of God as the only one guaranteed to protect them from destitution and despair (Psa. 146.7-9; 147.6). However, those who ignore God and live for pleasure are also poor (Prov. 21.17). They are those who trust in their possessions, but are never satisfied (Lk. 12.15). They accumulate wealth through excessively hard work or through speculative ventures, only to see it evaporate (Eccl. 5.10-14).⁶ Their lives are described as ultimately meaningless, a chasing after wind.

The Consequences of Poverty

The poor generally have no power in society to influence the important economic and political decisions that could change their situation. They suffer the effects of the policies decided and enacted by those who control the organs of power, the ruling classes. In ancient Israel, these were the retainers of the royal court, the large landowners, the money-lenders and the military. Unequal possession of the means of production led to a stratified society, with deep divisions between the permanently poor, the seasonal poor, the small landowners and artisans and those who had amassed considerable wealth for themselves and their families.

Poverty causes a waste of human resources. The poor are not allowed to benefit properly from their substantial contribution to the creation of wealth in society. They are not so much marginalised or peripheral, pushed to the very edge of society, as excluded:

“It is more clearly seen now that, from the point of view of the way economies are run today, the poor are unimportant, if not irrelevant. Whether they are inside or outside the system is of little consequence.”⁷

Where societies recognise their plight and the obligation to save them from utter destitution through some kind of welfare scheme, they become a burden on the public finances, taking away resources that could be used to increase investment in productive processes.

Here we have a situation of catastrophic proportions: perhaps some 75% of all human beings living on the planet are shut out from the normal life of a civilised society. We see them as effectively disabled by their economic and social circumstances, unable to

⁵ Colin Brown (ed.), *Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volume 2*, Article, ‘Poor’ (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1986/2), p. 821.

⁶ The turmoil through which the banking system has gone during the last few months of 2008 shows the prescience of God's word.

⁷ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission: Theological Explorations?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), p. 99; see also, Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998).

participate meaningfully in the construction of a flourishing human community. This is one of the greatest tragedies of poverty: the knowledge that the presence of the poor does not count for anything, that, at the best, they are the object of charitable donations; at the worst, they are despised and condemned.

The Causes of Poverty? (In current thinking)

Ultimately, the fundamental cause of poverty is lack of income that would enable households to acquire the necessities of life. This is why some economists insist that asking about the causes of poverty is the wrong question; rather, we should be investigating the reasons for an absence of wealth, or conversely we should try to discover the optimum conditions for its creation. This is a valid way of looking at the problem. However, it only moves the question one stage further back: what are the circumstances that prevent the majority of humankind from receiving an income sufficient to be able to afford the basic goods and services necessary for a dignified existence?

There is a tendency in the discussion of the causes of poverty to polarise around extreme positions and seek to gain the 'moral high ground' by means of rhetorical language and ideas. On the one hand, it is said that there can be no liberation from poverty unless one type of economic system is replaced by another. The existence of private property and the working of a competitive, profit-seeking, market-economy inevitably produce inequality of opportunity and deny many people access to the benefits of wealth-creation. The system in practice discriminates against the weak, denies openings to the disadvantaged and prevents people escaping from the spiral of poverty. Even in nations where there has been a rapid increase in gross national product (such as Brazil or India) this has hardly affected the situation of the majority poor. The much vaunted 'trickle down theory' doesn't work, the extra wealth created does not percolate through all strata of society – not even crumbs fall from the rich person's table.

Poverty is caused, according to this reading of the situation, by the flight of capital from the South to the North, by the manipulation of markets by the economically powerful, by grossly unfair trading arrangements, by paralysing debt burdens and by the imposition of programmes of austerity by international financial institutions which further depress economic growth. Moreover, the present international economic situation is said to be morally repugnant, because it is based on self-interest, the necessity of ever higher levels of consumption and the unsustainable exploitation of the environment. Indeed, it is difficult to see how two equally admirable goals are reconcilable: the drive to 'make poverty history' and the campaign to reverse the damage caused to the environment by rapid developmental processes.

On the other hand, it is claimed that there will be no end to poverty, unless individuals and communities change their attitudes. Poverty is primarily the result of deeply-rooted cultural attitudes: for example, accepting a fatalistic view of life, believing that the spirit-world, rather than natural causes, is directly instrumental in creating ills, refusing to accept blame, practising nepotism and bribery, not pursuing a policy of thrift. Liberation from poverty, therefore, has to come through renouncing and removing the cultural and religious factors inimical to wealth-creation. Wealth can only be created, thereby raising the levels of income, where there is a favourable environment (i.e.,

where the belief-system is conducive) for creating a self-sustaining, productive capacity.

During the time of the cold-war between East and West, it was difficult to move far beyond the ideological rhetoric of the extremes. Neither side seemed prepared to admit that there was any truth in the other's interpretation of the situation.

The Causes of Poverty (according to the Old Testament)

The Old Testament Scriptures, with predictable realism, state that poverty may be the result of any of three circumstances. First, unfavourable natural events (storms, floods, soil erosion, drought, blight or insects) may lead to the failure of harvests (as in the case of Jacob and his family in the book of Genesis and Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, in the book of Ruth), people become ill, or husbands die, leaving vulnerable widows and children behind. In a fallen world, unpredictable, calamitous events just happen. There does not appear to be any rhyme or reason. These natural events are much more serious, however, in places where marginal economies are already creating conditions of extreme vulnerability.

Secondly, the wisdom literature in particular recognizes that in some cases poverty is the result of the refusal to work. Some scholars have seen this alleged cause as an ideological defence by the prosperous, urban elite of their own wealth by arguing that poverty is the fault of those who prefer not to earn a living. More recently, some preachers have insisted that wealth and poverty are the direct result of either God's blessing or affliction, depending on the spiritual state of the people concerned. There appear to be some verses in the Psalms and Proverbs that might suggest such an interpretation. However, this prosperity teaching ignores the whole balance of Scriptural teaching concerning the issues; it insensitively raises false expectations and promotes a highly distorted message about God and his offer of salvation.

Idleness, refusal to work and the squandering of resources may indeed be causes of impoverishment: "Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty" (Prov. 20.13); "laziness brings on deep sleep; an idle person will suffer hunger" (Prov. 19.15); "a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber" (Prov. 24.33-34). At the same time, the Wisdom literature also recognises that people may be poor, in spite of their hard labour: "the field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice" (Prov. 13.23). Often, it is not the lack of a desire to work but the absence of opportunities that bring deprivation.

Thirdly, by far the most acknowledged cause of poverty is exploitation of the socially and economically weak by those who have gained status and power in society. It is generally agreed among historians of ancient Israel that the beginning of a sharp differentiation of wealth began with the advent of the monarchy. Samuel was the first prophet to point out how poverty would be generated by exploitation. It would happen as the direct result of the centralisation of political power and the means of production through the creation of a standing army, the establishment of state industries, which took people from the land to work as wage-labourers, and taxation to maintain a state bureaucracy (see 1 Sam. 8. 11-17).

The narrative makes explicit that the people of Israel in choosing to have a king, in order to be like all the other nations, had broken the terms of the covenant with

Yahweh. Subsequently, God sent prophet after prophet to denounce the injustices being committed against the majority of the population, to warn the rulers of the dire consequences of their policies and to announce the coming of a righteous king who would restore again the terms of the covenant and end idolatry.⁸ It is highly significant that “the classical period of biblical prophecy corresponds to the time of the monarchy, from the tenth to the sixth centuries BC...During the centuries of the monarchy, it was the prophets who kept alive the tradition of Yahweh as the God who took the part of the poor in a society dominated by a ruling class dependent on the court.”⁹ One might say that the coming of the monarchy brought with it a centralisation of political, economic and political power. The countervailing power was invested mainly with the prophets, who were independent of the royal court and risked their lives to remind the rulers of the nature and requirements of the God, who redeemed his people from slavery and gave them the liberating laws of the covenant. Ultimately, the whole system of monarchy was brought to an end in the exile, from which Israel had to reinvent itself once more as a covenant people (Ezra and Nehemiah).

Economic Life as intended by God

The Biblical narrative recognises two opposite facts about the poor. On the one hand, their existence in every society seems to be endemic. So much so, that Jesus, echoing the statement in Deuteronomy (Deut. 15.11), declared what appears to be obvious from human history, “you always have the poor with you” (Mk. 14.7 and parallels). We should not understand this verdict in fatalistic terms, as if the division of societies into the rich and the poor was somehow woven into the very fabric of human life; rather, it is to be seen as a comment on the reality of a world that has gone seriously wrong, perhaps in the manner of the observations of Qoheleth, the Teacher: “If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter” (Eccl. 5.8).

On the other hand, there is what today we might call a ‘vision statement’ about God’s final purpose to bring in a totally new ordering of human society in which poverty and all injustice will have been eliminated. The ultimate horizon, in which we are to view the issue of the poor, is God’s mission to create “new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet. 3.13). Throughout Scripture we catch intriguing glimpses of what one day will be brought to pass, not just in the eschatological and apocalyptic passages of the two Testaments, but also in God’s blueprint for the daily life of his people.

Thus, when reflecting on what God is calling his people to do today, the place to begin is with the pattern of economic life that God laid out for his people yesterday. Here, I will follow the excellent summary of the law set out by Christopher Wright.¹⁰ He emphasises four distinct precepts.

- i. *The natural resources of the earth are designed for the well-being of all peoples:*
“Ownership of land and resources does not entail an absolute right of disposal, but rather responsibility for administration and distribution. The right of all to

⁸ See, J. Andrew Kirk, ‘Mission as Prophecy’ in *Mission under Scrutiny: Confronting Current Challenges* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 157-160.

⁹ Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 41.

¹⁰ *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2004) chapters 3 and 5.

use the resources of the earth seems to be morally prior to the right of any to own them for exclusive enjoyment” (p. 148).

This principle can be illustrated by a story of the 17th century European settlers in North America. When some of them encountered the indigenous population, one of their first questions was, ‘who owns this land?’ The reply ‘no one’ greatly surprised them, for they had completely failed to grasp the proper implication of the indigenous peoples’ attitude to the land and property rights. For them, ‘no one’ meant ‘everyone’. The immigrants interpreted the response to mean that they were free to possess it for themselves. This was a fatal misunderstanding with disastrous consequences for future community relations and the continuing economic well-being of the indigenous community. This was later justified by John Locke on the grounds that

“it was only those who, in obedience to this command of God (to work the land), subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it who had a right, therefore, to annex it to their own persons as their own property and to hold title on it.”¹¹

A somewhat similar fate befell the indigenous population in Northern Argentina at the hands of the creoles.

ii. *Work is a God-given task.*

Part of the meaning of being created in the image of God is to follow God’s creative activity, “thinking, planning, deciding, executing, and evaluating” (p. 148). It has been suggested that the pattern of creation is that God worked for six days putting in place all the elements that have made the world a wonderful place to live in. He rested on the seventh day. On the eighth day, and subsequently, humans took on the task of looking after the earth (Gen. 2.15):

“This means not only that we ourselves have the moral duty to work...But it also surely means that we have a responsibility to enable or allow others to work” (p. 148).

iii. *Economic Growth is a natural consequence of the abundant resources of the world.*

“Growth in numbers...requires growth in material production and provision. God provided for that need...through the astounding and incalculable riches of the legacy that God put at human disposal in the earth’s crust, and...through the equally incalculable endowment of ingenuity and adaptability God gave to human beings themselves” (p. 149).

Within the economic activity of human beings, necessary both for survival and for material comfort and enjoyment beyond survival, the exchange and trade of commodities is a consequence:

“All such economic activity at every level comes within the sphere of God’s concern and moral scrutiny” (p. 149).

iv. *The products of economic activity are to be shared equitably among all people:*

“Just as the right access to and use of the *resources* of the earth is a shared right that sets moral limitations to the right of private ownership of resources, so too the right to consume or enjoy *the end product* of the economic process is limited by the needs of all” (p. 149).

This means that

“there is no necessary or ‘sacrosanct’ link between what one owns or invests in the productive process and what one can claim as an exclusive right to consume as income in return” (p. 149).

¹¹ See, Michael Northcott, *An Angel Rides the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 48.

In other words, the basic needs of the other always make a prior claim upon our conscience and action, before we spend on ourselves.

Responses to poverty in Biblical perspective

In the final part of his chapter on 'Economics and the Poor', Wright turns his attention to solving the perennial problem of poverty. He shows the importance of community solidarity, of welfare provision, of proper legal representation for the poor, of the inviolability of the family inheritance (as in the case of Naboth's Vineyard, for example), of the link between true worship and responsibility for equitable economic practices. He sums up the general Biblical approach to the poor with three broad concepts: *compassion*, *generosity* and *justice*.

Compassion

“Perhaps the major contribution of the prophets, and the major lesson we can learn from them in terms of the prophetic responsibility of the church today, lies in the fact that *they saw what was going on*” (p. 176).

In other words, the plight of the poor must never be allowed to become invisible. Compassion means first that the poor are treated as full human beings. Exploitation of their labour-power, because of their perilous circumstances, is abhorrent to God. Therefore, practices like child-labour, bonded-labour and high interest loans have to be eradicated. Compassion implies eternal vigilance against all forms of abuse, and the advocacy of laws that successfully protect the interests of the vulnerable. It has to be distinguished explicitly from paternalistic or condescending attitudes. The best way to achieve this is by supporting the poor in their struggle for recognition by helping them to gain a measure of control over their own destiny.

Generosity

In many ways this is the principle response that the New Testament gives to the question of the poor. The teaching is set within the realities of the life of the early Christian community, emerging as a new, small religious group making its way within the mighty power of the Roman or other empires. Although the system of wealth disparity based on the exploitation of markets and slave-labour by Rome is seemingly denounced in the prophetic passage of Revelation 18, the first Christians were hardly in a position to challenge the economic injustices perpetrated by the system of empire, except (and it is an important exception) by living out a different kind of economic regime within their own community.

Jesus teaching on wealth would have been a decisive factor in the way they approached economic matters. It may be summarised by considering some of the special material that Luke incorporates into his Gospel:

The Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4.16-21).

Jesus was anointed by the Spirit, in fulfilment of prophecies in Isaiah 61.1-2 and 58.6, “to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

If not actually declaring the inauguration of a jubilee year of the remission of debts, there are certainly allusions to the provisions of the jubilee in his teaching here and elsewhere (compare Matt.11.2-6, 18.21-35; Luke 14.12-24).

The Beatitudes and Woes (Luke 6.20-25).

The Lucan version of the Sermon on the Mount connects a great blessing for the poor, when the kingdom comes, with a reversal of fortune for the rich. The disciples are commended for acts of generosity (Luke 6. 30-34). They are told that such attitudes towards the needy are the result of God's grace (*kai ei agapate tous agapontas humas, poiaumin charis estin...kai ean agathopointe tous agathopoiontas humas, poia umin charis estin*).

The Parable of the Rich Landowner (Luke 12. 13-21).

The story is designed to illustrate the folly of amassing wealth, as if this was the main purpose of life:

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Life and material goods are gifts from God. He will require of us an account of how we have used them.

Hospitality to the poor and disabled (Luke 14.12-14).

Generosity is measured by how we respond to those who could never repay our giving. If the giving is reciprocal, it becomes calculating in the expectation of a reward. True giving is unselfish and unselfish.

Rebuke to the Pharisees (Luke 16.14-15).

The Pharisees were castigated for scoffing at Jesus' assertion that human beings cannot “serve God and wealth”. When the accumulation of wealth is made the object of existence it becomes the god whom we revere.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31).

The point of this story is that the rich man did not live by the word of God in his relationship to the poor: “they have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them”. As he did not heed God's word (for example, Deut. 15.10-11), he cannot expect to have fellowship with God, when he dies.

The example of Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1-10).

Zacchaeus, on the other hand, did listen to God's word. Once convicted of the deception and corruption by which he had become rich, he obeyed the injunctions of Deuteronomy 15.10-11 concerning generosity to the poor (“Half of my possessions I will give to the poor”) and those of Exodus 22.1-2 (“If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much”).

Generosity was the key to the economic practices that took place within the early Christian communities. From the sharing of material goods by the Christian believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2. 44-45, 4.34-37) to the relief of the famine-stricken Christians in Judea by the church in Antioch (Acts 11.27-30) to the organised collection that Paul made in the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (1 Cor. 16.1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9), the Christians showed that they strove to live according to the principle of generous giving that reflected the new life of the kingdom they were called to embody:

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (food, drink and clothing) will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6.33).

Generosity springs from the heart of people who know that they owe their salvation and new life to the generosity of God (2 Cor. 8. 9; James 2. 5, 14-17; 1 John 3.16-18).

Paul even goes so far as to state that generous giving is a way of confessing the gospel (2 Cor. 9.13), for it is a reflection of God’s abundant grace in giving up his Son as a sacrifice for the world. It is also an expression of worship:

“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God...Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9. 11-12, 15).

Justice.

“Both the basis for and the meaning of justice spring from the nature of who God is. Justice is what God does, for justice is what God is. ...So we know justice through God’s acts of deliverance, through his laws and through the kind of relationships between human beings that he requires (Mic. 6.8; Isa. 58. 6; Psalm 72. 1-4).”¹²

The meaning of justice is best illustrated in the New Testament by the condemnation of exploitative practices made by James (5. 1-6):

“the references to ‘riches’, ‘gold and silver’, ‘treasure’, ‘luxury’, ‘pleasure’ and ‘fattened hearts’, in the immediate context of defrauding workers of their wages, suggest not just that the wages have not been paid, but that the employers have made excessive profit out of the wealth created in their agri-business by not paying adequate wages.”¹³

The point here is that the just wage is an instance of the meaning of justice:

“The just wage is one that enables the worker to be respected as a member of the community, not dependent upon further welfare benefits, and which does not create enormous disparities of wealth among people. In this concept of justice there is a strong element of grace: the requirements of compassion take precedent over the requisites of the law.”¹⁴

This means that what is legally required, for example to pay the minimum wage demanded by the law, is not necessarily just to do. Justice does not ask a question about profit-margins, but about the dignified life of the worker in terms of earnings enabling him or her to afford all the basic necessities of life, not just food, clothing and accommodation, but also entry into the benefits of culture – education, access to the arts, sport and other recreation facilities. In other words, the just wage will probably exceed the minimum wage in most societies.

¹² *What is Mission?* p. 104.

¹³ *What is Mission?* p. 107.

¹⁴ *What is Mission?* p. 107. See, also Jerold L. Waltman, ‘A Just and Living Wage’ in Robert B. Kruschwitz (ed.), *Global Wealth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2007), pp. 71-79.

Mission in relation to the Poor

An option for the poor means that the Christian community mobilizes its resources to inspire people to work for a society where everyone's basic needs are met, and where the vulnerable – minority groups, children, women, the disabled, the elderly and the unemployed – live in hope and without fear.

As ending poverty is not a simple matter, including as it does intense debates about complex economic matters, Christians should beware of being overly idealistic or naïve about how this may be achieved. Above all, they should avoid ideologies (of whatever hue), which promise unqualified success if certain economic and political directions are taken. Overcoming poverty is not merely a matter of making the correct political decisions regarding the material conditions of life; it also has strong cultural, moral and spiritual dimensions. Poverty is about the situation of human beings not just about abstract economic structures.

Therefore, mantras about such matters as free-markets, competition, entrepreneurship, the profit-motive, structural adjustments, or about the collective ownership of the means of production and a centrally-planned economy, spring from a simplistic analysis of the problems. This does not mean, however, that Christians become cynical or despairing about the possibilities of substantial change. There is a divine obligation to care for the poor in the best ways possible; the best way being to bring about conditions in which they can escape the cycle of poverty.

The specific contribution that the church might make to ending poverty may vary according to circumstances. However, in general it will probably include the following:

Be a model of a sharing community.

Churches will learn in practice the meaning of costly giving. Particularly in societies heavily oriented to consumerism, Christians will need to learn a proper balance between spending surplus income on themselves and on others. Irrespective of the intense commercial pressures to 'shop until you drop,' Christians should be conscious of what constitutes an acceptably modest lifestyle under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Teaching will include the meaning and blessing of generous giving. One might call this the practice of the 'widow's mite' (Lk. 21.1-3).

Be an agent of empowerment.

The general principle here is that of helping the poor in appropriate ways to be genuine shapers of their own history, sharing resources and skills in such a way that there is a genuine transference of power. Means are to be found to treat people as responsible agents and to give them the resources by which they can take their own economic decisions. On a small scale, one of the most successful ways of doing this has been the creation of micro-enterprises by making available low-interest loans for the creation of small-scale businesses or industries and imparting all necessary skills to enable them to be run successfully.

Be involved in political advocacy.

Churches will either initiate or join forces with campaigns to rectify specific injustices and abuses: for example, the debt trap, bonded and child labour, discrimination against women (including unequal educational opportunities, female circumcision, the dowry

system, the exposure of female babies and unequal pay), the tyranny of war-lords, child soldiers, wage exploitation by multinationals. It will also involve a continuing struggle for fair trade, national debt relief, a vast reduction in the arms trade, ethical investment and an exposure of political and economic corruption by political leaders and businesses.

Good News for the Poor?

In his public ministry Jesus singled out the poor as the recipients of the good news (*ptochoi euangelizontai* - literally 'the poor are evangelised') (Lk. 4.18). The phrase comes directly from one of the many messianic passages in Isaiah. The extract speaks of the 'year of the Lord's favour' (Isa. 61.2, Lk. 4.19), and pictures this in terms of restoring to all God's people the enjoyment of a land rich in resources. The context is the end of exile and the repossession of the land God had given them as an inheritance. The year of the Lord's favour means a transformation of the people's life: liberation from captivity; freedom from alien domination and external pressures; the end of mourning (Isa. 61.2-3), because children die young (Isa. 65.20) or fathers and sons are killed in war (Isa. 65.23), and the elimination of despair, because in captivity there appeared to be no future worth living for (Isa. 61.3). In this year, as they rebuild the infrastructure of their country (Isa. 61. 4) and enjoy favourable trading relations with other peoples (Isa. 61.6), prosperity will return to the whole people (Isa.61.9).

This vision of a community at peace with itself and with surrounding peoples is dependent on a number of factors being in place. First and foremost is the belief that God desires to bring complete well-being to his people. Secondly, there is the acceptance of the messenger, who has been specially anointed for the task of conveying the good news of the year of God's favour, and a positive reception of the message. Rejection of the one who bears God's word is a sure sign of continued opposition to God's covenant grace. Thirdly, the people are required to live in a particular way – in the path of righteousness (Isa. 61.3) and justice (Isa. 61.8). This way implies, among other matters, an acceptance of foreigners (Isa. 61.5) who "join themselves to the Lord" (Isa. 56.6-8), a respect for the inviolability of family inheritances (the means of livelihood) (Isa. 65.21-23), and a rejection of the temptation to gain wealth at the expense of others (Isa. 65.22). Fourthly, and crucially, they are to acknowledge the sovereign rule of God (Isa. 61. 10-11) by repudiating all forms of idolatry (Isa. 65.11ff.). This is to be one nation consciously and consistently 'under God'.

This vision is the good news that is proclaimed to the poor. Clearly it is good news, for it heralds an end of all those circumstances that contribute to poverty. In Biblical terms, the state of affairs that produces deprivation and misery is first and foremost the rejection of the ways of the Lord: injustice is the fruit of idolatry (Rom. 1. 18 – *asebeia* (ungodliness) precedes *adikia* (injustice)). The good news is that the sovereign reign of God will be restored and with it his absolute requirements of right relationships between people (Mic. 6.8). It is for this reason that the poor are blessed (Lk. 6.20-21), for the coming of the kingdom of God means that their suffering will be at an end.

However, the blessings of the kingdom or righteous rule of God the Father exercised through God, the Son, in the power of God, the Holy Spirit, can only be available to those who are "poor in spirit" (Mt. 5. 3), those who, in the words of Micah, "walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6.8), or in the words of Isaiah "are contrite and humble in spirit" (Isa. 57.15). No longer will there be any poor in the land, when God is allowed to

walk without let or hindrance with his people. This is, of course, an eschatological vision, when God finally makes all things new (Rev. 21.3-4). So, what is the Christian community's main contribution to making poverty history? It is to bring the whole Gospel to the whole world and to live it out in the midst of a corrupt and suffering generation.

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