

A Biblical Approach and Response to Poverty

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Introduction

Poverty remains a fact of life despite the economic programme by personal and nations. What exist here and there are improvements on economic status. These improvements are not even stable. There have been economic up-turns and downturns. This is what is known from experiences. Jesus' says that "The poor you will always have with you..." (Matt. 26:11, NIV) is historically and globally relevant.

The extent of poverty in the world is described in these words:

Nearly one billion people, almost one out of every four persons on earth live in a state of "absolute poverty". They are trapped in conditions so limited by illiteracy, malnutrition, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be denied the very potential with which they are born. Almost 20 million people die each year of starvation or hunger related illnesses.¹

Poverty is life threatening and should not be ignored.

According to the World Bank report, Nigeria is one of the poorest nations in the world. Six out every ten Nigerians are jobless. The average income per person for a month is N130.²

The above, however, is not to say that poverty is inherent in the nature of man or of the poor. It cannot be blamed on the moral behavior of the poor. It often comes as a result of certain imbalances in social structural processes.

Poverty affects human dignity and poses some challenges to our stewardship of nature. These are part of the reasons why Christians should be concerned about poverty. Man is made in the image of God; but can a poor man reflect the image of God adequately? Poverty inhibits freedom. Freedom is part of the image man shares with God. Poverty therefore affects God's image and plan in man.

“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it...” (Psalm 24:1, NIV). The earth is the Lord’s but he has given the earth to man to manage (Gen. 2:15). Have we managed the natural resources well and are still poor? How should we use the resources? How should it be distributed? Are we to resign to fate as we face and watch others face the issue of poverty and hunger? These are questions which should prick a Christian’s conscience.

The basic truth is that poverty falls within the areas of Christian concerns and as such the Christian church needs a Pentecostal movement response to poverty as a basis for Christian action. So it assumed that orthodoxy will lead to orthopraxis. Right belief is a basis for right action.

Poverty is not limited to one nation or one continent in that poverty is a social reality across nations and continents. The different is only a matter of degrees. He assumes that some realities about poverty at individual levels have some correspondence with realities on large scales among nations. Besides, a Pentecostal Movement response to poverty that is biblically based and socially relevant should be helpful to some extent wherever poverty exists. The writer believes that the every Servants of God can be agents of economic development in any nation or continent.

Poverty is difficult to define because of its relative and subjective nature. Nevertheless, poverty is defined here as “the unfulfilment of basics human needs required to adequately sustain life free from disease, misery, hunger, pain, suffering, hopelessness and fear...”³ This definition is chosen because it describes succinctly the situation of the poor.

Causes of Poverty

It is considered necessary here to briefly itemize the factors that are responsible for human poverty to serve as a basis for reflection. Solutions are not proffered until problems are known.

Population explosion is a major cause of poverty. The problem is aggravated by the fact that population is more explosive in some of the very areas where people are most poor and the hungry. This problem is further compounded because the world’s population was growing approximately 150 percent; the consumption of the world’s most basic food

was growing 650 percent.”⁴ Land remains a static means of production while human beings continue to increase.

Poor economic management and structural imbalances are related factors in causing poverty. Misuse of resources, unjust economic order and unfair distribution of resources are manifestations of poor economic management and structural imbalance.⁵ When there is “manipulation of prices, of the terms of trade and monetary system, the exploitation of cheap labour, natural resources and the overt and covert transfer of capital from the poor to the rich section etc”⁷

The free market economic system that is operating in many societies is intended to serve the bourgeois at the detriment of the poor and the peasants who are in the majority of world’s population. The desire for gain and meeting human needs are conflicting issues in free market economy. A good economic system should favour the satisfaction of human needs; and not purely on the desire for profits.⁸

Low wage is a contribution factor to poverty. In some countries, salary of civil servants and company employees are so low to the extent that they cannot afford a decent living. This is part of structural problem. Wages should be measured relative to the condition of living existing in an environment.

Debt servicing is sometimes with exorbitant interest rates that use up resources that can be used for social services that can improve the lives of people thereby institutionalizing poverty. The Bishops of England and Wales, in 1996, noted that “development has been halted and reversed by the debt service obligations of some of the poorest countries to their foreign creditors.”¹⁰

Wars have ravaged nations; displaced people and created refugee camps with their attendant problems. For example, “civil war, (sic) natural disasters and economic mismanagement have contributed to the general impoverishment of the (African) continent. More people are now below the poverty line (in African) than was the case thirty years ago.”¹¹ These wars have led to the purchase of ammunitions instead of using the same resources in preventing malnutrition. There are an estimate of six million refugees in Africa as a result of wars and politico-economic problems.¹²

Attitude to work is another major factor causing poverty. To some work is laborious and is a curse: a consequence of the fall. But the truth is that wealth must be created before it can be distributed and utilized.

Natural phenomena such as flood, drought and conflagration also cause poverty. Any of these is very dangerous and has destroyed properties worth of billions of Naira (Nigeria currency). They cause irreparable damages to economic objects.

Other causes of poverty include what Ronald J. Sider describes as “sinful personal choices” and “unbiblical Worldview”. Sinful personal choices that result into poverty include laziness, misuse of drugs, alcohol and sex (Prov. 6:6-11; 14:23; 23:21; 24:30-34). A worldview that legitimizes poverty or “nurtures fatalism among the poor and complacency among the powerful” will eventually condone poverty without taking steps to overcome it. Some who idolize aspect of nature like rivers and tree may not be willing to dam rivers for hydroelectric power or cut trees to manufacture paper or furniture because trees are living spirits.¹³ What all these factors reveal is that poverty may and may not be as a result of the Poor’s action or inaction; and that efforts must be made to respond approximately and positively to the issue of poverty.

Biblical and Christian Approach Backgrounds for the Study

The Bible affirms the reality of the problem of poverty in the world. Deut. 15:11 (NIV) says, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. This truth is reechoed, in part, by Jesus in Matthew 26:11, saying, “The poor you will always have with you...” (NIV).

The Old Testament recognizes property right of an individual (Exo.20:15, 17; Deut.5:19, 21; 27:17; Prov.22:28). It therefore “rejects and prevents usury and other methods of robbery and social oppression....”¹⁴ The Old Testament views “poverty as an involuntary social evil to be abolished, not tolerated, and represented the poor (who included widows, orphans and aliens) as people to be succoured; not blamed.”¹⁵ It has specific provision for the poor. The poor are allowed to glean from the field (Lev.19:9, 10). They are to harvest crops on the fields in the seventh (sabbatical) year (Exod. 23:11; Gal.2:2, 10). The Bible teaches that materials response to the poor and hungry is a test of

Christian experience, genuine love and authentic righteousness (Isaiah 58: 10; James 2:15-17; I John 3:17, 18). To know God means doing justice to the poor and needy (Jer.22:13-16; Hosea 4:12).

God has concern for the poor (Isaiah41:17); and judges the cause of the poor and needy (Jer.22:16). Jesus himself said that "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). This implied that the salvation Jesus wrought is comprehensive and therefore has deliverance from poverty in view, Paul conceived salvation as holistic and saw God being concerned with material needs of person (Rom.15:25,26; 11 Cor. 8:4;9:1,2,12,13).¹⁶

Paul encouraged the Galatians church to "remember the poor" (Gal.2:10). James holds that "if a Christian becomes aware of the needs of others but does nothing to help, he lacks genuine faith (James 2:14-26)."¹⁷ If it is thus established that there is a biblical basis for a Pentecostal Movement response to poverty, it may be equally relevant to examine a Christian theology of work for the same purpose.

Christian Approach and Response of the work

The Christian understanding of work has a sense of service to God and our fellow human beings. Work gives man dignity and a sense of self-fulfillment. It affirms human worth and serves to meet physical and spiritual needs. These include the production of food, means of protection and development of creativity powers. His life is enriched. He develops his capacities and creates new forms of his being through work.¹⁸ Martin Luther, the reformer, is of the opinion that:

Every Christian whatever his task is called into service of God in his particular form of employment and that, for this reason, the work which he does becomes a divine vocation or calling in so far as it is done in faith and ministers to the needs of his fellowmen.¹⁹

The point here is that any genuine sense of vocation should be socially relevant, service motivated and welfare intended. If work is thus conceived, and rightly so, it means that, through his work, a Christian should be able to fulfill, provide for his need and the needs of his family and be able to give to the cause of Christ in the world.²⁰

He is expecting to work honestly (1 Thess. 4:11f); earn a living to care for himself and others (11 Thess. 3:10ff; Eph. 11:28).

Dishonest work is part of the problem of human societies and is a cause of poverty. Fighting poverty, therefore, requires that every worker begins to “give an honest day’s work for which just and adequate compensation is required.”²¹ Working for profits is justifiable if it serves social and moral ends. However, profit making motive must be subservient to service motive.²² Besides the desire to consume all that one produces is covetousness and can lead to being controlled by possessions rather than by God. God expect the rich to give to the poor.²³

In short, work is worthwhile. It is God ordained. However, it must not be overvalued as to see it as an end in itself; as if man is for work and not work for man. It should also not be undervalued as when it is seen as toil or as a result of the Fall (Gen. 2:28; 3:5). When seen “mainly as a means toward consuming, the focus shifts from service the personal to the pecuniary.”²⁴ This is unbiblical. This Christian theology of work should inform a Christian theological response to poverty.

Christian Approach and Responses to Poverty

God designed the mind to grow and flourish as it’s fed these right things. But if we saturate our thoughts with things that don’t meet God’s glorious standard, the mind begins to react in adverse ways. It was not designed to handle garbage.

There are a number of commands given in God’s Word which spell out things we should do in order to discipline our mind. Philippians 4:8 says, *“Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, **let your mind dwell on these things.**”*

In summary, the following presuppositions serve as pivotal for a Christian theological response to poverty. Man is created in God’s image. Poverty is demeaning to humanity. It affects human worth and creativity. God is concerned with the condition of the poor. He takes side with them. Christians are children of meant to do God’s will; and a Christian church is a place where God’s kingdom must be manifest. God’s resources (Psalm 24:1) are for all men. God is sovereign over the universe. He is the sovereign Lord of history and of all things in history. The economy of every nation forms part of all

that are under his Lordship. Therefore, the issue of poverty and wealth concerns him.²⁵ “God controls human affairs, and Christian social analysis must give greater emphasis to theological categories than social categories.”²⁶ The Bible portrays true righteousness as that which cares for others.

As God’s image, “we are created by God to rule, with moral accountability and authority, in God’s world as God’s representative.”²⁷ Human dominion of creation is characterized by a right relationship with God. It is characterized by stewardship; a basic biblical principle reminds that all talents and abilities are God’s gifts to man to work with; and including the will applied in using energies and talents. A person is responsible to God on how he uses the resources God has given to him.²⁸

God’s desire is to end suffering and injustice. He demonstrated this by freeing the oppressed Israelites from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 3:7-8). He is concerned when people are enslaved or oppressed. He is the liberator of the oppressed and the poor.

Through prophet Amos, God condemned the oppression of the poor by the wealthy in the Northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 4:1); while Isaiah denounced the – maltreatment of the poor in the Southern kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 10:1-3). Prophet Micah condemned those in Judah who “covet fields and seize them; and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance” (Micah 2:2). A century later Jeremiah denounced the rich who exploited the poor (Jer.5:26-29).

Jesus’ mission is to set the oppressed free and restore the sight of the blind. His works are works of charity-healing the sick and the blind; and feeding the hungry (Lk.4:18, 19). He instructs his followers that eternal damnation awaits those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the prisoners. (Matt. 25:31-46).

The rich either oppress or do not assist the poor in their needs; in both cases God is displeased. The rich man did not oppress Lazarus; he simply did not share with Lazarus; yet the Lord was not pleased with the rich man (Lk.16:19ff). This implies that the right to produce and own property does not mean the right to consume all that one has produced. There must be a sense of responsibility to the needy.

If God has concern for the poor, his children should if they are indeed his children by nature. If Christians are truly the disciples of Christ, they will follow Christ’s example by showing concern for the poor: E.C Beisner’s submission is aptly relevant here:

Practical righteousness or justice...require graciously serving the poor – and not only the poor but all people with all kinds of needs. Believers, individually and corporately owe God this gracious service to the needy as a matter of obedience.²⁹

Providing for the need of others is part of God's will for his human creation.

Poverty affects human dignity and challenges Christian stewardship of nature. The effect of poverty pricks a Christian conscience. These include hunger – lack of food or lack of quality food, poor health, inadequate medical care, brain damages as a result of lack of proteinous food for babies, illiteracy, poor living condition, lack of housing or lack of good housing and the like.³⁰ “The gross disparity between wealth and poverty constitutes a social injustice with which the Christian's conscience cannot to terms.³¹ say John Scott

W.David Lockard, director of organization for the Christian Life Commission was quoted as saying, around 1983, that:

It is time for Christians to declare war on ignorance, the indifference, the injustice, which allows approximately 30,000 children to die of starvation each day. Starvation has killed more people in the last five years than all of the wars, revolutions, and murders of the last century because hunger is inevitable.³²

While this was an assessment of poverty almost three decade ago, there is no substantial reason to be very optimistic that the situation has changed for the better. There have been more wars, especially in African, than the period under reference. Even, increase in food production has not guaranteed equal distribution or equal consumption. Some lack purchasing power. Since God is the ultimate owner of all things and is the creator of all human beings, it is therefore approximate that all human beings have access to resources God has provided for basic human needs like food, clothing and shelter so as to maintain their existence in dignity.

It is true that the Old Testament recognizes the poverty right of an individual. This notwithstanding, the idea of private ownership of property and jobs must be within the affirmation of the common good. For the Christian, “property rights always exist only in the context of the common good and are always subordinate to it.”³³ The society must

recognize and protect the right of all individuals to the resources of the community and provide the conditions for the individual to fulfill his/her potentialities and responsibilities. The society must remember always that what she has forms part of God's possession which belongs to the whole world.

The Church as an agent of God in the world has a responsibility to demonstrate its theology of God's love and love for fellow humans; and of the unity of the human race. It cannot afford to be indifferent. It cannot wash off its hands like Pilate (Matt. 27:24) in the face of injustice – marginalization, racism, sexism and classism. It must preach that oppression is sin. He who oppresses others spoils the dignity of the victim of oppression and damages the image of God in himself.³⁴

To fight poverty, education, land and employment should be available to all to prosper with. The poor and the rich must be seriously committed to that end. The church and society must continue to hold that:

God wants every person, or family, to have equality of economic opportunity at least to the point of having access to the necessary resources (land, money and education) to be able to earn a decent living and participate as dignified members of their community.³⁵

The poor also should be equipped to contribute wealth to the society. Since theology serves as the basis for actions. It is pertinent here to recommend some specific actions for the Christian Church in response to poverty.

Some Specific Tasks for the Modern Churches

Some of the actions the modern Churches can take in response to poverty include the following: to proclaim the gospel of God's redemption as revealed in Christ. It must "proclaim the good news of the kingdom to the materially poor, welcome them into the fellowship and share in their struggles."³⁶ Those who exploit the poor and those who became poor as a result of their sinful life style need spiritual transformation that comes through the effect of the Gospel.

The Church must have interest in or concern for the poor and demonstrate philanthropic gesture to them. It must criticize prophetically the unjust social-economic

structures that prevent the poor from rising above their situation (Amos 5:24) and teach the need to have a non-materialistic outlook in life.

Since an example is better than a precept, churches should exercise justice in their economic practices and pay just wages to their employees. They should put less emphasis on things thereby suppressing materialism. Church funds must be invested in socially responsible ways. Christians should have productive ventures to create goods and services so as to have enough to care for the poor.

They can organize training in economic issues because ignorance itself is a major hindrance to self-improvement. If many people know what to do, they will do them and improve their lots with little or no help. This should be preferred to doling out charity to the poor. An adage says, "If you give a man a fish, you feed him a day; but if you train him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime".³⁷ A better approach to giving aid is to assist the individual and the community we serve to be self supporting.

The Church should seek for "economic and social structures which maximize fellowship and cooperation, rather than the autonomy and isolation of the individual and the belief that individual enterprise is the most important goal."³⁸ Pooling resources together have potential to increase production. The Church should recognize, develop and support local abilities within the Church and in the wider community.

Christians should not support economic systems that are profit-motivated to the detriment of the welfare of human beings. Rather, they should support and promote economic systems that meet human needs; that put the poor into consideration as they are objects of poverty; and seek to make them (the poor) producers and not fatalistic consumers or predators of the bourgeois.³⁹

Churches can help the poor and homeless by turning "church basements or meeting rooms into night time shelters for the homeless; organize food pantries; and support relief organizations."⁴⁰ They must take aside with the poor; and call on rulers to fulfill their God-given role of caring for the citizens.⁴¹

Churches and Christians organizations can set up banks where poor people can take loans for investments with little or no interest following the example of Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch, New Zealand. Under the pastoral leadership of Murray Robertson, the Church set up what is called the Kingdom bank. Loans are given to the poor at no

interest. Part of the bank's fund is invested to take care of the cost of operation. The beneficiaries of the loans have budget advisers from the Church working with them on their finance. Since an economy cannot be indefinitely developed, the question of population control is urgently necessary in any honest confrontation with the problem of poverty. The Church needs to give guidance on the issue of contraception because it borders on spiritual consideration of the propriety of family planning

Conclusion

The church should not live and teach as if poverty is a virtue. It is not. Rather, it should teach those who are rich to remember those who are poor. Jesus who in his riches became poor so that sinful man may be rich (11 Cor.8:9) is an example of self-giving that should motivate the church to take care of others. After all, all human beings are to be beneficiaries of God's resources. If it is thus given by God to any, it becomes his responsibility to share this with our fellow human beings as steward of God's resources.

The Church must exercise its prophetic role in denouncing all forms of socio-economic structures and situations that hinder the progress of others toward social-economic freedom. Those who become poor as a result of their own volition through laziness and sinful life need the liberating message of the Gospel. Basically, the problem with man is the problem of sin and the solution to this fundamental problem is spiritual transformation that comes through faith in Jesus the Christ.

Endnotes

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