

A BIBLICAL HOLISTIC APPROACH TO POVERTY

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ABSTRAK

Secara historis, 'orang miskin' adalah mereka yang mempunyai kebutuhan secara jasmani, dan cara menolong mereka adalah memberikan uang atau barang. Meskipun ada kemajuan pada abad terakhir ini, pengentasan kemiskinan masih menjadi masalah utama di dunia ini. Dari perspektif Alkitab, kemiskinan adalah salah satu konsekuensi dari dosa, tetapi dipahami secara lebih luas daripada sekadar kemiskinan jasmani. Tuhan bertindak untuk memperbaiki akibat dosa dan memulihkan segala sesuatu, yang mencakup semua bentuk kemiskinan.

Dalam Perjanjian Lama, kemiskinan paling sering dibahas dalam istilah ekonomi, namun ada juga referensi untuk mereka yang memiliki kebutuhan rohani. Prinsip utama adalah bahwa orang Israel harus menolong orang miskin di antara mereka, yang mencerminkan kepedulian Allah terhadap mereka. Namun, mereka sering gagal dan ditegur karena mereka memperlakukan orang miskin.

Dalam Perjanjian Baru, kemiskinan dibahas dengan lebih jelas secara holistik: ada yang miskin secara jasmani, miskin secara sosial, tetapi *semua orang* digambarkan sebagai miskin rohani. Oleh karena itu, cara menolong orang miskin harus mencakup berbagai jenis kemiskinan tersebut. Yang terpenting adalah menolong orang keluar dari kemiskinan rohani, karena hal itu memiliki akibat kekal. Namun, juga jelas bahwa orang-orang Kristen yang memahami dengan baik anugerah Allah kepada mereka, akan merespons secara holistik dan menolong orang dalam kemiskinan.

Pertolongan seperti itu terlihat di gereja mula-mula PB dalam jemaat yang diubah untuk melayani, seperti yang diajarkan dan dicontohkan oleh Yesus. Tantangan yang berkelanjutan untuk gereja-gereja Kristen pada masa kini adalah untuk terus menolong semua

bentuk orang miskin, melengkapi dan memberdayakan mereka untuk menolong diri mereka sendiri, seperti yang diajarkan oleh Yesus.

ABSTRACT

Historically, 'the poor' are those who are in need materially and so the way to care for them is to give financial or material assistance. While there has been some progress in the recent century, poverty alleviation still remains a major issue in our world. From a Biblical perspective poverty is one of the consequences of sin, but it is understood in a broader way than merely physical poverty. God works to reverse the results of sin and restore all things, which includes all forms of poverty.

In the Old Testament the poor are most often discussed in economic terms, however there are also references to those in spiritual need. The primary principle was that the Israelites were to care for the poor among them, which reflected God's care for them. However, they often fail and are rebuked for exploiting the poor.

In the New Testament poverty is discussed even more clearly in an holistic way: there are the materially poor, the socially poor, but *all people* are spiritually poor. Hence the way to care for the poor must address these different types of poverty. Of paramount importance is to help people out of spiritual poverty, for that has eternal consequences. However, it is also clear that Christians who properly understand God's grace to them, will respond by caring for others holistically.

Such care was seen in the early NT church from congregations who were transformed to serve, as taught and modelled by Jesus. The ongoing challenge for Christian churches today is to continue to care for all varieties of the poor, enabling and empowering them to help themselves as Jesus' instructed.

BACKGROUND

Poverty is very real in this world. Indeed throughout history we read of the existence of different classes of people, one of which can often be regarded as “the poor”. Their existence is not debated, but what to do about them and their situation is. The reality is that poverty is detrimental for any society, but more importantly, the people in poverty are the ones who are most in need of help.

The concern for the poor is not a modern phenomena, for throughout recorded history we read of the efforts of people in assisting the poor. The type of help has taken various forms, but mostly revolves around materially helping the poor to physically survive in their daily struggle of life. That is, the most conspicuous form of poverty is economic poverty, and the way to help them is by providing material assistance. We also find in history that much of this assistance comes from Christians and Christian institutions.¹ As the predominant historical religion of the Western world, Christianity has a strong ethical teaching to help the poor. Hence it is not unusual for a faith-based ethic in assisting the poor.

Over the last two centuries, since the Enlightenment period, there has been a move away from religion in many Western countries.² In that time secular organizations, and governments have increasingly been involved in helping the poor. Since World War II, more global organizations which contribute to such development work have been established, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and

¹ For example, see Tim Chester, *Good news to the poor. Sharing the gospel through social involvement* (Nottingham: IVP, 2004), 14-18; Also see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), Referenced in Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts. How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor...and yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 42-43.

² Bryant L Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 969 of 8647, e-book.

the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Hence, in the last seventy years, there has been a more concerted global effort in addressing the problem of the poor. However, the methodological approaches to poverty remained fairly uniform and limited in scope. In essence the general attitude was: There are people in the world who are economically poor and need assistance from others who can provide it.

However, in the last forty years, approaches to such development work have changed significantly, partly due to the failure to alleviate economic poverty but more importantly as a result of significant research results. Hence the issue of poverty has become understood in a much broader way than merely helping the poor economically.

Although Christian research and a formation of a Biblical theology of development regarding poverty has been lagging behind,³ Christian workers have been helped immensely by the general research done in the last few decades. More recently these Christian practitioners have been producing numerous Biblically-based “holistic” development models and frameworks.⁴ That is, Christians claim that a truly holistic approach to the poor must be based on a spiritual (or theological) foundation which emerges from the Bible’s teaching about caring for the poor.

To discuss such developmental frameworks is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead we want to focus here on the Biblical understanding of poverty, out of which these new holistic approaches emerge. The simple concept that people in poverty are those who are deprived economically and physically and hence need help in those areas only, has been shown to be inadequate. Hence, in this paper we want to discuss key elements of a Biblical perspective on dealing with poverty. We are not claiming to produce a Biblical Theology of

³ Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God* Revised Edition. (Acorn Press: Melbourne, 2011), 1859 of 4965, e-book.

⁴ For example: Christian 2011; Corbett and Fikkert 2012; Myers 2011.

poverty,⁵ nor are we discussing how people in the Bible came to be poor. Our focus is rather on how the Bible describes poverty in its various forms and specifically on the teaching about how the poor *were* cared for, and how they *should* be cared for.

GOD ACTS FOR RESTORATION

To properly understand the Bible's teaching on poverty we must first consider God's purposes for this world: God created all things orderly and according to his perfect plan. When sin came into the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, all the perfect relationships were no longer perfect. All relationships were thoroughly damaged, with resulting consequences: Adam and Eve realize they were naked before God (Genesis 3:10). This shame is a sign that their relationship with God was no longer perfect,⁶ which is also seen in the fact that they could no longer live forever (Gen 3:19) perfectly existing in the very presence of God in the garden of Eden (3:23-24); Secondly, there would be ongoing strife between Adam and Eve, each trying to exert ungodly power over the other (Gen 3:15-16); Thirdly, the rest of creation was also cursed, resulting in difficulty for humans in caring for it (Gen 3:17-18).

Because humans are trapped in sin they cannot find a solution to the problem of sin. (Ps. 14:3; John 8:34; Rom 3:23). Therefore, if a solution is to be found, it must be God who takes the initiative to act. This he does because he loves his creation deeply, especially his image-bearers (John 3:16), so he acts throughout the Bible and throughout history to restore all things to perfection (Rom 8:22-23; 2 Cor 5:2) into a state where sin and imperfection is not possible again (Rev 21). The most important part of that restoration is human relationships with God himself. This restoration is taught throughout the Bible, beginning most prominently with the promises made to Abram (Gen

⁵ For an example treatment of this topic see Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1999).

⁶ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1:1-11:26, The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 240.

12:1-3). Among the promises made to Abram are promises about blessing: Abram will be blessed, become great in order to be a blessing, and in him all the families of the earth will be blessed.⁷ The promises are partially fulfilled in the descendants of Abraham becoming a nation, receiving the Law so they know how to relate to God, and eventually being given the promised land. This storyline of God choosing, and saving people for the purpose of restoration can be traced through the Bible.⁸ However, the people of God never fully obey God and so their relational breakdown with God remains.

The solution is not found until the New Testament, when Jesus, God's only Son, dies in the place of all humans to take the punishment they deserve for all their sin (1 Pet. 2:24). Through acceptance of this forgiveness, and a life of faith in Jesus with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, people are in right standing before God (Rom. 10:9; Col. 1:22-23). This also enables them to live in a way which is more pleasing to God (Col 1:10). So Christians are able to do good works, such as caring for the poor, from a perspective of love through faith (Eph. 2:10; 2 Pet. 3:11; 1 John 4:19).

According to the Bible, humans cannot completely eradicate poverty because they are not capable of removing sin, which is the root cause of all poverty. So God acts in restoring humans to himself, ultimately providing a solution to their relational poverty through faith in Jesus. As people are renewed into the image of God, the people of God respond to this work by living lives of love. Among other things this means treating all people as equal because they are all God's image bearers, and caring for all people, which includes the poor.

CARING FOR THE POOR FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

⁷ Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*. (Nottingham: IVP, 2002), 53-60.

⁸ For example, Roberts 2002. Also Tim Chester, *From Creation to New Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

With this foundational teaching about God acting for restoration, we can now consider some key Biblical teaching about how the poor should be cared for.⁹

1. Poverty in the Old Testament

There are numerous terms used in the Old Testament for the poor, and they almost all refer to the economically poor or destitute. After discussing the various uses of the word, Ronald Sider concludes that “the primary connotation of ‘the poor’ is economic,”¹⁰ and most often this is the case because of calamity or exploitation.¹¹ For example, in thirty-three different Psalms the poor are mentioned in their various forms as lowly, weak or socially oppressed. These descriptions come from a number of different Hebrew words,¹² and the general emphasis is on people who are needy and helpless. Similarly, in the prophets, the poor are most often those “who were utterly destitute,”¹³ and all have “an acute sense of powerlessness.”¹⁴

However, in some Psalms there is an element which connects poverty and spirituality.¹⁵ Physical and spiritual health can be seen as intimately connected, as Blomberg explains: The psalmists “saw quite clearly that physical and spiritual well-being before God were two sides of the same coin.”¹⁶ The key here is that material poverty was not the only issue – people’s spiritual state before God was also related to poverty.

⁹ Due to the limited length of this paper only select key passages will be discussed.

¹⁰ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹² See Blomberg 1999, 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61. For example Ps. 40:17; 86:1; 109:22.

¹⁶ Blomberg 1999, 61.

John Stott also comments that the psalmist calls himself “this poor soul”, and his cries were heard by the Lord so that he was “saved from every trouble” (Ps. 34:6). He was not saved out of material poverty, but out of his afflictions from which he is unable to save himself.¹⁷ Similarly, the Israelites are referred to as “poor” (e.g. Isa. 61:1), not because of their economic poverty, but because they are “in need of God’s acts of mercy.”¹⁸

So although poverty is understood in the Old Testament predominantly in economic terms, we cannot always assume that this is the only way it is being referred to. There are mentions also of other aspects of poverty, such as lack of spiritual well-being, or “being afflicted” in some way.

2. Caring for the Poor in the Old Testament

The example of how to love and care for people in a sinful world is given by God himself immediately after the fall. Despite their sin, God shows his love and care for Adam and Eve by clothing them (Gen. 3:21), and instead of punishing them with death as their sin deserved he sent them out of his perfect presence in the garden of Eden and gave them the blessing of life and children.¹⁹ Even though humans are all still sinful, their responsibility towards fellow human beings is not negated, because they are still made in God’s likeness with roles and responsibilities. Hence we read of God commanding his people to care for others in need.

This is clearly seen in the book of Deuteronomy, when the Israelites are about to enter the promised land and begin a new phase

¹⁷ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, BST (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 38-39. For similar comments about verses in Isaiah, see D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 20 ; R.T. France, *Matthew*, TNTC (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 109; Leon Morris. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 95-97.

¹⁸ H.Kvalbein, “Poor/poverty.” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T.D.Alexander. and Brian S. Rosner. (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 689.

¹⁹ The blessing of children was possible before the fall, but the point here is that this blessing was not taken away from them because of their sin.

of life. They needed reminding about how God wanted them to live under his rule in his land, and, as part of this teaching, Moses explains their responsibility to the poor. The key chapter is Deut. 15 regarding the “seventh year” (Deut. 15:1-11) which begins: “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts”. The principle behind this law is that there *is* enough wealth among them for all to have enough. God’s ideal is that there be “no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land” (Deut. 15:4). God’s people should also not remain with permanent obligations or be trapped in poverty.²⁰ The ideal was that all Israelites had their own land, which was part of the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham about the promised land.²¹ However, even though there *was* enough for all, God knew that the reality and effects of sin meant that there *would always* be those in need: “There will never cease to be some in need on the earth” (Deut. 15:11a). Therefore as a society, the Israelites were instructed to care for one another, especially being responsible to others who were a part of the people of God and in need.²²

More specifically, God commanded generosity and love towards others in need: “do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward the needy neighbor” (Deut. 15:7), and when you loan money, “give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so” (Deut. 15:10a). While this teaching is most likely related to the giving of loans which require paying back, the foundational principle is generosity to the poor. This generosity of heart is also seen in other miscellaneous laws regarding

²⁰ The laws in Deut. 15 were designed to prevent endemic poverty among the Israelites. Debts were pardoned every seven years, especially so that those who struggled to find a way out were given one. Similar principles are found with the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25.

²¹ This is in contrast to other kingdoms in their day where there was a markedly unequal distribution of land, and hence considerable poverty. However, being given land (which is only leased to them from the true owner God, Lev. 25:23), they had the right to both protect it as well as doing all they could so that others who didn’t have land *could* obtain some. Blomberg 1999, 40.

²² Chris Wright, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996), 191-2.

the poor and needy (Deut. 24:10-15, 17-22). A repeated refrain is to “remember that you were a slave in Egypt” (Deut. 10:19, 24:18, 22) which reminds them of the character of God who rescued them from *their* dire situation - so they should have the same attitude towards their neighbors who are also in need. “The Israelites had been poor, racial outsiders in Egypt. How then, Moses asks, could they be so callous to the poor, racial outsiders in their own midst?...The logic is clear.”²³

A specific example is given about leaving raw food materials²⁴ which could be collected by the alien, the orphan and the widow. These were three categories of “the poor” who were the most vulnerable and needy people in their society - most often because they had no-one to help support their livelihood.²⁵ We see this principle being implemented when Ruth, (who is both a foreigner and a widow), is allowed to “glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers” (Ruth 2:7). Furthermore, Boaz shows his generosity and allows her to “glean even among the standing sheaves...You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean” (Ruth 2:15-16). Here we have an example of generosity to the poor, while also allowing Ruth to work to contribute to her livelihood. The principle here is instructive: After the workers glean a field, the poor do not ask for and receive some produce. Instead they do the work themselves, and as such, contribute to their own welfare.²⁶

This empowering principle is seen also when a slave is released and given some “bounty” (Deut. 15:13-14). Keller comments: “God directed that his former master send him out with sufficient grain, tools, and resources for a new, self-sufficient economic life.”²⁷ Again,

²³ Timothy J. Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace makes us just*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2010), 93.

²⁴ This food included leaving sheaves of wheat (24:19; also see Lev. 19:9; 23:22), olives (Deut. 24:20) and grapes (Deut. 24:21; also Lev. 19:10).

²⁵ Kvalbein 2000, 687.

²⁶ Keller 2010, 30.

²⁷ Ibid. 114.

this is not merely helping with the immediate needs of the poor, but providing ways for them to develop economically themselves.

We see from these passages that even though God's ideal of no-one in poverty was not achieved because of the Israelites sinfulness, they were reminded of their obligation to help and care, and to do it willingly and generously. Over the centuries Israel constantly sinned and failed to live up to the requirements of the law, including caring for the poor. Blomberg says that over this time the situation became even more exacerbated: "With the later development of the monarchy, the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' grew, and more often than not those with wealth gained it at the expense of the powerless and needy in the land."²⁸ Hence we read of numerous prophets urging the Israelites to repent of their mistreatment of the poor and needy.

Amos was one such prophet²⁹ who spoke numerous times against wrong attitudes and actions towards the poor. In Amos 2:6-11 we read of the Lord's declaration against the sins of Israel, most of which relate to the oppression of the poor.³⁰ The poor cannot pay trivial debts (2:6-7), they are "pushed out of the way" (2:7b), "trampled on" (2:7a), and possibly sold into slavery (2:6b). There are Israelites who keep the garments of the poor overnight – garments which are the guarantee of paying a debt, but which meant the poor have nothing to sleep in (2:8).³¹ Similarly in Amos 5:11-12, they deliberately oppress the poor for personal gain: They "trample on the poor" in order to make a personal profit,³² they take bribes, they are deceptive to righteous people, and they "push aside the needy in the gate."

We see clearly from Amos, one of the major sins of Israel was not just the neglect of the poor and vulnerable, but the deliberate and

²⁸ Blomberg 1999, 55.

²⁹ Others include Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah and Malachi.

³⁰ These sins were "crimes of social injustice." Paul Barker, *The Roaring Lion, An Exposition of Amos* (Singapore: Genesis, 2013), 13.

³¹ This is in direct contravention of Deuteronomy 24:10-13

³² Also see Ezek 22:29; Micah 2:2.

ongoing oppression of them: “Israel has rejected its calling, and that rejection is shown primarily in its injustice toward the helpless, in the corruption of the courts in the gates of the towns and cities, and in insincere and meaningless worship.”³³ Because of these sins, God, who had been patiently waiting for repentance and a life of faith, would bring about his just judgment. Sider comments that “God destroyed Israel and sent his chosen people into captivity...because of mistreatment of the poor.”³⁴

From this brief study of some relevant passages in the Old Testament, there is a consistent teaching to the Israelites about caring for the poor: “As in the Torah and wisdom literature, a recurring refrain throughout the Prophets calls on God’s people to treat with justice the poor, oppressed, fatherless, widow and alien in the land.”³⁵ The Bible teaches that God is a God of justice who wants fairness for all people. As all people are equal as his image bearers, albeit having a distorted image, the ideal for God’s people is that there are no poor or helpless people among them. God’s instructions in the Old Testament therefore, are for his people to do all they can to help the poor. However, this care must be done from the heart - willingly, generously, in ways which can empower them. They are to care for the poor and needy, because this reflects God’s own heart and desires.³⁶

3. Poverty in the New Testament

Even though it is claimed that “the abundance or lack of material possessions was not a dominant concern for Christians of the late first and early second centuries”,³⁷ there is considerable teaching about the

³³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets 1. NIBC* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 169.

³⁴ Sider 1990, 41-2.

³⁵ Blomberg 1999, 77.

³⁶ Alan Cole, *Exodus, TOTC* (London: Tyndale Press, 1973), 174.

³⁷ T.E.Schmidt, “Riches and Poverty.” In *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, eds. Ralph P Martin and Peter H. Davids. (Leicester: IVP, 1997), 1051.

economically poor in the New Testament.³⁸ πτωχός (*ptōchos*) is the most common word used in the New Testament for “poor”. It occurs thirty seven times, and is “often a collective term for all the disadvantaged.”³⁹ The most natural and common way it is used is to refer to those who are materially poor or utterly destitute.⁴⁰ For example, when Luke uses the term in his gospel,⁴¹ it is most often used for people who experience economic misery, and sickness.⁴²

However, it is also a social category in Luke: Sider discusses that whenever Jesus spoke about those who suffered, “the poor” were placed either at the start or the end of the list: “This seems to indicate that the poor were an all-embracing category for those who were the victims of society.”⁴³ This correlates well with Jesus’ categories for outcasts, such as the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. All such people live with a form of powerlessness within their society. However it must also be noted that the outcasts include rich people such as tax collectors.⁴⁴

As well as the poor being economically poor and socially outcast, the New Testament also mentions the spiritual poverty of all people. This is crucial, for “the way we define poverty...plays a major role in determining the solutions we use in our attempts to alleviate that

³⁸ There is even more teaching directed at the rich. For example, T.E.Schmidt, “Riches and Poverty.” In *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid. (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 827.

³⁹ Bosch 1994, 99.

⁴⁰ Blomberg 1999, 128. Also “πτωχός, ἡ, ὅν: pertaining to being poor and destitute, implying a continuous state.” Louw and Nida, 1989 in Accordance Software 5.6.1c.

⁴¹ Luke uses it more than the other gospel writers.

⁴² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 99. There is debate about who the poor were exactly in Luke’s gospel, (see Blomberg 1999, 221-222).

⁴³ Ibid. 436.

⁴⁴ From a sociological, cultural background, “the poor are those who are *outcast* within Israel.” Blomberg 1999, 222.

poverty.”⁴⁵ Blomberg argues that both the material and spiritual elements of poverty are included in the use of πτωχός. Hence, when Luke says “blessed are you who are poor” (Luke 6:20), and Matthew says “blessed are the poor in spirit” (Mat 5:3), there is no contradiction, for “each brings out a different emphasis of a term that had both a material and a spiritual dimension to it.”⁴⁶ Jesus blessing to the poor and outcast “refers to the fundamental position of human beings before God, not to economic conditions or social position.”⁴⁷ Others have written similarly that the emphasis of “poor in spirit” in Matthew is on spiritual bankruptcy.⁴⁸ Despite the lack of specific references to the word “poverty” in this spiritual sense, the New Testament often does refer to it in the context of salvation.

In summary, the New Testament refers to the poor as all people who are considered “outcast” from society, (including the material poor and the rejected rich), as well as all those who are not in right standing with God, (and so are spiritually poor). We shall see that the New Testament teaches that Christians are to care for the poor both materially and spiritually, for it does not separate the physical from the spiritual but approaches poverty holistically.⁴⁹

4 Caring for the Poor in the New Testament

4.1 Jesus brings Challenges, Reversals and Transformation.

As mentioned earlier, God’s solution to sin (and hence the solution to poverty in all its forms), is through the death and resurrection of Jesus. One important way the New Testament describes this, is that the work of Jesus brings about transformation through reversals.

⁴⁵ Corbett and Fikkert 2012, 52.

⁴⁶ Blomberg 1999, 128.

⁴⁷ Kvalbein 2000, 690.

⁴⁸ Carson 1984, 39; France 1985, 109; Leon Morris. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 95-97; Keller 2010, 101.

⁴⁹ Blomberg 1999, 145.

In an unexpected way, Jesus, God's only Son, was sent as a baby into a seemingly insignificant family, to destroy sin (1 John 3:8; Heb. 2:14). In this world, power is considered important and a common way to produce solutions - so God's solution through Jesus can be considered a "reversal" of expectations. Right from the start of the accounts of his life in the Gospels, we read that this lowly baby would bring about great blessings, which originate from the promises through Abraham (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79). This theme of challenging worldly ideas continued in Jesus' life and teaching, especially as he challenged the power status in that culture.

In the Roman world, power was often with rich "patrons" who helped needy people in the community, in return for favors and honor and esteem. Jesus challenged this pattern of relating, which included the issue of helping the poor. For example, "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35). Similarly, Jesus challenged the authority, actions and teaching of the spiritual leaders of the Jews: He denounces the scribes and Pharisees for tithing but neglecting justice, mercy and faith. What appears to be good works actually comes from an unclean heart full of greed and self-indulgence (Matt. 23:23-25). This corrective teaching about attitudes is also found in his teaching about giving alms:⁵⁰ It should not be done in front of others in order to receive praise, but done with sincerity from the heart. It is also instructive, for Jesus says "when you give alms," implying that his followers would do it. The parabolic story in Matt. 25 is also about caring for the poor and connects it with every person's ultimate accountability before God.⁵¹ The references to "hungry", "thirsty", "stranger" and "naked" are all words which describe the plight of the poor. How believers respond to them, especially those who are "brothers" (Matt. 25:40), again shows their true heart. Blomberg says we can learn similarly from many of Jesus' parables that "one prominent way of demonstrating one's spiritual concern is

⁵⁰ Matthew 6:2-4. "Meaning a deed of mercy or pity." Stott 1986, 128,

⁵¹ Morris 1992, 633.

through material help...Charity for the poor becomes ‘an expression of what is inside’.”⁵²

There are further challenges in Jesus attitude towards the temple (Luke 19:45-48), the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-11) and the Law (Luke 11:37-41), indicating he is opposing the status-quo. He suggests that real love in action is very different from common practice. For example, “you ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14), and “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed” (Luke 14:13-14). Keller argues that in such teaching of Jesus’ “a lack of concern for the poor is not a minor lapse, but reveals that something is seriously wrong with one’s spiritual compass, the heart.”⁵³ All these challenges indicate that Jesus’ brought a significantly new approach to life and faith at that time. It may be said that such reversals can be summarized in his teaching that “the first will be last” (Matt 19:30).⁵⁴ Although Jesus’ own attitude towards poverty is sometimes not clear,⁵⁵ from early in his teaching ministry we see that he showed “his concern and compassion for the outcasts of this world,”⁵⁶ often challenging the status-quo with new, radical teaching, which included reversals of different kinds.

Such reversals are emphasized in his teaching about true power through service. Jayakumar Christian explains that power in the kingdom of God is never self-serving⁵⁷ or leads to pride, for that could bring about a new power dynamic about who could be the most pious. For example, in washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus *did* gain a moral advantage, but he did not use this for his own advantage. Instead he

⁵² Blomberg 1999, 136-137. Similarly, Keller 2010, 53-54.

⁵³ Keller 2010, 51.

⁵⁴ Also Matt. 20:16

⁵⁵ Kvalbein 2000, 690. He was welcomed and supported by rich people who had homes (Luke 8:3; 10:38-42). His ministry and healing were for both poor and rich. He sent his disciples out in poverty (Matt. 10:9-10), but later they could take material goods (Luke 22:35-38).

⁵⁶ Blomberg 1999, 114.

⁵⁷ Christian 2011, 4139 of 4965.

instructs them: “you also ought to wash one another’s feet...you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15). These actions of Jesus have redemptive intent, for instead of just doing something for his disciples, he follows it with the instruction to go and serve others. We see here a very different approach to the default method of development, where “powerful people” often just want to serve the poor and powerless - which can easily lead to those powerful helpers feeling good about themselves. Jesus shows how inadequate that attitude is by encouraging and empowering those he has served to become agents to serve others: “In this understanding of transformation the ‘powerless’ servant is a key agent. The powerless are not on the margins of God’s agenda for transformation,”⁵⁸ but are very much a part of God’s plan.

It is not only what Jesus teaches, but also theological explanations about the cross the New Testament which teaches about reversals of power and subsequent transformation. To begin with, Jesus chooses the apparent powerlessness of the cross, and submits to his Father’s will (John 10:18; Phil. 2:6-11). The cross looks foolish and weak, but because of the resurrection⁵⁹ Paul confidently says that it is “the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus defeats sin (Heb. 7:27) and so makes relationship with God possible (1 Pet. 3:18; Col. 1:22), although full restoration will not occur until the New Heavens and the New Earth. The reversal here is that through Jesus’ death, comes life. Therefore, Jesus died for humanity, not so that powerless humans (Eph. 2:1,5) can be passive recipients of his free gift, but so that they can be transformed to respond rightly and live for him. The aim is that people are served and saved by Jesus in order to do “good works, which God prepared beforehand to be

⁵⁸ Ibid. 4140 of 4965.

⁵⁹ 1 Cor. 1:18 “The message about the cross” includes the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[their] way of life” (Eph. 2:10). This enabling only occurs through the work of God by his Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6,18; Gal. 5).

The New Testament teaches that the work of Jesus makes this transformation and restoration possible for all people. Just as Jesus often welcomed the poor and the outcast,⁶⁰ so too is the gospel an inclusive message for all people, including the poor⁶¹ (Eph. 2:11-22). Poverty is often a result of powerlessness, which is difficult to overcome, but in the Bible, the powerless are offered restoration with God and a subsequent transformation. So in giving the poor equal status with respect to salvation as anyone else, God drastically changes the worldly concept of power.

The concept of a transformed identity is also important for the poor, whose powerlessness can contribute even further to their poverty. From a Biblical perspective, if they can know and experience a new identity in Jesus, then this can have a significant impact on other aspects of poverty in their lives. If they can understand life from God’s perspective, and know the long term goal and destination of his true followers, then the most important step according to Biblical development has been achieved.⁶² A new understanding “from a perspective of the One who has special concern for the poor and marginalized...enables the powerless to reread history from God’s viewpoint.”⁶³ Such transformation for the poor can also be empowering for how they regard their own lives as well as their attitudes to others.

⁶⁰ Tim Chester, *Good news to the poor. Sharing the gospel through social involvement*. (Nottingham: IVP, 2004), 130. For example, Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, (Luke 7:34), he allows his feet to be washed and anointed by an outcast (Luke 7:36-50), he heals lepers (Luke 5:12-13).

⁶¹ Christian claims that the only group Jesus singled out to receive the good news were the poor - for they had nowhere else in this world to put their hope and security except in God. Christian 2011, 3825 of 4965.

⁶² Christian 2011, 4034 of 4965.

⁶³ Ibid., 4029 of 4965.

4.2 Caring for the Spiritual Poor and the Economic Poor.

If the Bible prioritizes the restoration of spiritual poverty, we must ask what role is given to caring for the economic poor.⁶⁴ There is a long history of debate relating to the different aspects of Christian social justice and evangelism. In the early part of the 20th century, Christians were becoming less involved in helping the poor, and, according to Corbert and Fikkert, “the evangelical church’s retreat from poverty alleviation was fundamentally due to shifts in theology and not – as many have asserted – to government programs that drove the church away from ministry to the poor.”⁶⁵ At that time the evangelical church was experiencing strong theological attack, and as addressing theological issues was the focus, it meant there was less effort and time spent on development. It may also have been that the huge increase in secular development work at the time also played a role in this decrease in Christian development work.

Evangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s regarded evangelism as the main focus of Christians and the church, and it was not until the highly significant Lausanne Conference in 1974 that the importance of social justice began to gain adherents again.⁶⁶ After that time it is claimed that evangelism and social justice were largely seen as two sides of the same coin in the 1980s,⁶⁷ and in the 1990s, they became almost integrated under titles such as “holistic mission”, “integral mission” and “transformational development”. Since then, according to Myers, “among evangelicals today the issue of social action versus evangelism is largely a historical footnote.”⁶⁸

To talk about social justice *versus* evangelism, therefore, is the wrong approach. They are intrinsically interconnected concepts because they are both at the heart of God. However, the Biblical

⁶⁴ Or doing social justice in general.

⁶⁵ Corbert and Fikkert 2012, 44.

⁶⁶ See discussion in Chester 2004, 59-64,

⁶⁷ Myers 2011, 1439 of 8647.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1456 of 8647.

priority must be dealing with spiritual poverty, for that has eternal consequences. Therefore, while caring for the economic poor is part of serving God, “the doctrine of sin and the offer of salvation means that to engage in culture and creativity without evangelism is indulgent...to fail the people we profess to love.”⁶⁹ To do evangelism without caring for people’s physical needs is not loving them holistically, and caring for people materially without the underlying aim of evangelizing is not loving them as God does.⁷⁰ Good works by themselves can easily point to the people doing them, and not Jesus, and so the message is most likely not received clearly.⁷¹ The two approaches must be integrated because they reflect the holistic nature of the gospel. As Blomberg says: “The good news of the gospel is consistently holistic, according to the teaching of Jesus. Material sustenance without spiritual salvation proves meaningless, but the liberation that God in Christ grants regularly includes a physical or material dimension to it as well.”⁷²

4.3 Transformed Churches Care for the Poor. Not only is holistic development work the role of individual Christians, but more so it is the role of the people of God and the church, for the New Testament is mostly directed to churches.⁷³ As with restored individuals, the church is also given a new identity and role: as the bride of Christ being made ready for the bride to come (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7). Like her individual members, the church is not perfect but being transformed, (Eph. 2:22, 4:11-16) and, aware of such brokenness, is “to be a place of welcome for the marginalized.”⁷⁴ In fact it can be argued that the “shaping of humans into the image of God is accomplished in the context of the church (that is,

⁶⁹ Chester 2004, 55.

⁷⁰ Corbert and Fikkert 2012, 90.

⁷¹ Chester 2004, 65.

⁷² Blomberg 1999, 145.

⁷³ Most of the New Testament letters are written to congregations and not individuals.

⁷⁴ Chester 2004, 135.

community).”⁷⁵ Following on from Jesus example and teaching to bring about such restored images, we also find teaching and practice in the New Testament church about caring for the poor.

While spiritual poverty is not mentioned explicitly, the early church in the NT was clearly concerned about the spiritual state of others. This is seen in the vitality of their members’ faith, as well as obeying the imperatives in Jesus teaching (Matt. 28:18-20), which resulted in much evangelistic effort and growth (Acts 2:47, 5:14, 42). However, in most of the letters, the emphasis is more on rectifying internal church problems, so there is not a large amount of direct teaching about being concerned with spiritual poverty. Even so, the churches are encouraged to continue evangelizing (2 Cor. 3-5; Phil 2:15; 1 Thess.1-2).

While addressing spiritual poverty was important for the early church, they were also involved in economic development. Galatians was probably one of the earliest books to be written, and in it, with the support of the apostles in Jerusalem, Paul conveys the message from Jerusalem leadership that “we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do” (Gal. 2:10). “Remember” in this context is more about “bringing a gift” than just “keeping them in mind,”⁷⁶ so Paul is actually wanting them to care for the poor materially. It is important to note that such teaching was accepted at this relatively early stage in the formation of the church: “While theology and territory for ministry were still being hashed out, no debate centered around the need to help the poor.”⁷⁷

Similarly in 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul appeals to the church and encourages them to be financially generous towards fellow Christians in need in Jerusalem.⁷⁸ The example he uses is that of the Macedonian

⁷⁵ Christian 2011, 2848 of 4965.

⁷⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 60.

⁷⁷ Blomberg 1999, 178.

⁷⁸ Ibid.,191. We will only be giving a summary.

church, who were most likely suffering persecution⁷⁹ and hence experiencing a form of powerlessness and poverty themselves. That church had already given willingly and generously to a collection for others in great need,⁸⁰ but it was not merely an altruistic act, for they were doing it “first to the Lord” (2 Cor. 8:5). Paul uses this motivation, (and other reasoning), so that the Corinthian church will “excel also in this generous undertaking” (2 Cor. 8:7). He wants them to give “according to your means” (2 Cor. 8:11), not so that they then are also in need, but so that there is “fair balance” (2 Cor 8:13) and God’s ideal of all people being provided for is met. A similar exhortation to give out of abundance is found in 1 John 3:17. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” Not only is the concept of fairness seen here, but also the equality of people as God’s image bearers.

Paul also points to the delight God has in people willingly helping others: “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). This connects with the teaching of Jesus about helping those in need and having the right attitude.⁸¹ In contributing to this collection, the Corinthian church would be participating in this ministry for other Christians (2 Cor. 9:13), with the whole basis that it produces thanks and glory to God (2 Cor. 9:11-13). So the recipients praise God for the gift, and the givers are also encouraged.⁸²

While the churches have a responsibility to care for the poor, those who are in need should also have the right attitude, according to the Bible. In both 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Paul is addressing lazy people in the church who were not “profitably employing their time”.⁸³ It seems that there “were some

⁷⁹ Blomberg 1999, 192.

⁸⁰ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, TNTC. (Leicester: IVP, 1987), 151. There is another reference to them and their generosity in Romans 15:25-26.

⁸¹ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*. (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 153.

⁸² Verse 11 “indicates that the experience of enrichment precedes and preparatory to the art of benefaction.” *ibid.*, 336.

⁸³ F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC. (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 209.

who were not working and therefore were inappropriately dependent on the generosity of others to care for them.”⁸⁴ Paul is using a principle from Genesis about human responsibility and work in order to instruct them to stop being lazy, and instead to work and earn their own living. It is not considered right for people to receive free assistance without doing anything to contribute to their own well-being. The implication is that the poor and needy have a God-given responsibility to do everything they can to improve their situation. The church can do much development work, but if the poor do not take responsibility also then it is not likely that they will get out of their neediness and dependency. Like all people, ultimately the poor are accountable to God.⁸⁵

In these key examples, we have seen that the New Testament teaches that churches must care for the poor both spiritually and materially. From the material aspect, God is a God of justice and generosity, and requires his followers to also be willing and generous to give of their abundance to others in need, especially to fellow believers.⁸⁶ The goal is that material blessings are shared so that there are none among them in need. In doing this they are participating in ministry with others which produces mutual strengthening and encouragement, and gives glory to God. What should be clear is that the church tangibly cares for the poor, both believers and others. To those who are still in material and spiritual poverty, the church should appropriately assist them materially, with the underlying aim of helping them out of their spiritual poverty.

3.5 Summary of Caring for the Poor in the New Testament.

Jesus showed love and concern for the poor and outcast and challenged common attitudes towards the poor. He taught that people

⁸⁴ Blomberg 1999, 180.

⁸⁵ The same can be said about offering the solution to their spiritual poverty. If they don't accept the good news about Jesus, that is their responsibility.

⁸⁶ For example, see Gal. 6:10; Matt. 25:39. “Christians ought to care in some way for all of the needy of the world, but they have a particular obligation to care for their own.” Blomberg 1999, 246.

are to willingly serve others from the heart, and not do it to make themselves look good. This reversal of showing humility instead of pride is taught and modelled by Jesus. In a more drastic reversal, God brings true life (John 10:10) and real power through the seemingly powerless death of Jesus. As a result of Jesus death and resurrection, God brings new life to those who humbly receive it. This pattern of reversals continues, as Christians do not live for their own benefit, but are empowered by God's Holy Spirit to serve others.

This attitude is taught in the New Testament churches as they faced issues concerning caring for the poor and needy. The church is to generously care for the material poor as best they can, especially for fellow believers. Similar to the teaching in the Old Testament, they are to do it because all people are made in the image of God, and also because they want to respond to the work of God in their own lives in tangibly loving others. These seem to be the two main motivations the Bible gives for being involved in caring for the poor: caring for people because they are also God's valuable image-bearers, and responding to the grace of God in a person's own life.

However, it must be emphasized that the most important role for the church and her members, as people who know the grace of God, is to do all they can to share this gospel of Jesus with others to try and alleviate people's spiritual poverty.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the understanding of 'the poor' in the Bible is variegated, relating to both physical, spiritual and emotional need. Jesus' death and resurrection makes it possible for any person to have their spiritual poverty restored, which is the poverty that all people inherit as human beings. To not have spiritual poverty means foremost to be in right relationship with God and live in response to his grace. Similarly God does not desire that anyone live in material or any other form of poverty, and this is reflected in Biblical principles of how to care for people in such situations. Primarily, humans are to treat all others with respect and dignity as fellow creatures made in

God's image, and to care for them as God himself does. The Israelites in the Old Testament were called to care for those among them who were in need, but also to care for the poor who were not part of the chosen people. Since the coming of Jesus, the church and her people are called to follow the example of Jesus who reversed the status quo and used his power to serve those in need. Christians are still called to primarily work at helping people out of spiritual poverty, for that has eternal consequences. However, a holistic approach is also needed in trying to alleviate material poverty, which reflects the generous love of God.

Christians need to ensure that their understanding and approach to poverty reflects this holistic nature, seen throughout the Bible.

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