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POVERTY: GOOD NEWS FOR AFRICA

Samuel Waje Kunhiyop

The Christian Church in Africa is rapidly growing in an environment of abject poverty among the masses. Christian theology in Africa, if it is worth anything, must address itself to this deep, festering sore which plagues not only African societies but African churches. We need to develop a theology of poverty and riches, a theology that teaches God's will for his people in societies where poverty is all pervasive.

Truly, Africa's hope is in the Christian Church. Dr. Samuel Kunhiyop is among those evangelical pioneers who are reflecting on poverty with a biblical world view. The following paper by Dr. Samuel Kunhiyop was originally presented at the Seminar on "Christian Witness in the Public Arena" which was organised by the Institute for Christian Impact, held in Kampala, Uganda, on May 23-27, 1999.

INTRODUCTION

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because
He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor (Isa. 61:1).*

"We are very, very, very poor" said one Harber Sabane, an elected mayor of Timbuktu, Mali, a few years ago (*Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1995). This description of one of Africa's oldest cities could as well portray the reality of the whole African continent. As a matter of fact, according to the 1997 *World*

Dr. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop earned his BA from ECWA Theological Seminary in Jos, Nigeria; his MA from Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon; his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. He now serves as Lecturer and Provost of ECWA Theological Seminary in Jos, Nigeria.

Indicators, the five poorest countries in the world are Niger, Madagascar, Guinea Bissau, Senegal and Zambia, all of which are located in Africa. During the last decade the quality of life for most Africans has been steadily but surely eroding. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, "Africa is the only part of the developing world where living standards have fallen over the past decade". For example, the Economic Intelligence Unit noted that in Nigeria 41.8% of the population were poor in 1992, 46.3% in 1996, but 65% of the Nigerian population are poor as of 1999. This is based on \$1 per household per day. Life expectancy is now at 54 years, infant mortality at 77 per 1,000 births, the child malnutrition rate is 35% for children under five, only 43% of the population had access to safe water, and 43% of the population is illiterate. Poverty manifests itself in many ways such as "prostitution, exposure to risks, corruption, robbery, street life, increased unemployment, living in squalor, shanties, shackles, high infant mortality, acute malnutrition, short life expectancy, human degradation, living in overcrowded and often poorly ventilated homes etc." (Nigerian Human Development Report, 1996:31).

I am sure most other African countries can sing the same song. From the tip of the horn of Africa to Namibia, poverty pervasively dominates the African continent. On television the viewer is bombarded with pictures of weak, hungry and emaciated human beings all over the continent. In the streets of most of our cities, one sees beggars roaming, begging for coins in order to feed their families and their stomachs. What should the Christian do in light of these grim statistics? Is there good news for the poor in the African continent?

To respond appropriately to this question it is necessary first of all to review some of the harsh realities facing the African continent. Secondly, as always, it is necessary to examine the biblical materials, for this is the starting point for any meaningful Christian discussion of our problems in Africa. Thirdly, we should critically examine some current approaches to the problem of poverty in Africa. Finally, we can make some recommendations on this problem of poverty.

John Stott recommends that the Christian should practice a double listening,

We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathise with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.

We need to listen humbly to the reality of poverty and listen humbly to God as He speaks to us in order to bring the Good News to them. The Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches reminded us of the need for this listening by stating. "We heard the cry of those who long for peace; of the hungry and exploited who demand bread and justice; of the victims of discrimination who claim justice; of the increasing millions who seek for the meaning of life" (WCC 1968:5). In this very painful situation, we must seek to listen to the problem of poverty in Africa, and listen to the Word of God. Indeed H. O. Brown has reminded us that "In true Old Pietistic fashion, a personal faith in Christ necessarily had to be accompanied by a *praxis pietatis* of very practical dimensions" (Brown, *The Problem of Poverty*, p.20).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO POVERTY IN AFRICA

There are several factors that have contributed to the problem of poverty in the African continent. These could be listed as overpopulation, inadequate health care, illiteracy, war, civil unrest, corruption, and famine.

Overpopulation: In Africa, it is obvious that African population is growing faster than the continent can sustain. For example, the average woman south of the Sahara will have 6.3 births in her life. Women in North Africa average 4.5 births and American women average 2.1 births. Though the African is poorer compared to other continents, he is the one that is producing more children that he cannot feed. The Nigerian Human Development report states that "From all observations, the sexual propensity of the core poverty group to reproduce themselves far exceeds their capacity to feed

many mouths" (p.31). The saying is true that the rich continue to get richer, while the poor continue to get children – and of course, therefore, continue to get hungrier and poorer.

Inadequate health care: There is also the issue of inadequate health care. Infant and maternal mortality is higher on the African continent. HIV/AIDS is claiming millions of lives. Tropical diseases, such as the deadly Ebola fever, malaria, and pneumonia, are the order of the day. Inadequate health care has a negative effect on workers' productivity.

Illiteracy: The African continent is still illiterate; many adults cannot even read or write. Women suffer more from illiteracy than the men do, because the children and women are forced to shoulder a considerable part of the economic burden.

War: As for war and civil strife, again Africa takes the lead. War now consumes Africa from the Horn to Namibia. Nearly a third of sub-Saharan Africa's 42 countries are embroiled in international strife or internal civil wars, and more and more African rulers are seeking military solutions to political problems: at least 13 have sent troops to neighbours' wars. Other countries are plagued by gangs of armed criminals, who can be as disruptive as political rebels. The cost is alarming (*The Economist*, November 16, 1998). Within a very short period, Laurent Kabila has survived as president of Congo, though this has cost the Congolese government \$5 billion. How many billions of dollars are spent on the purchase of weapons of warfare which are used to kill young men and women, leaving behind orphans and widows with a devastated economy? Rebels intentionally block supplies to the rest of the country. The rebels usually want food for themselves and to help them gain political support from displaced local people, so they prevent food to reach the masses. This was clearly illustrated in Congo where the militia men reserved food for themselves and their families and controlled the distribution of aid so as to maintain their power over the other refugees. One wonders, for example, if the money that Nigeria has sunk in the ECOMOG involvement in Liberia, and now in Sierra Leone, had been invested in the nation's economy, how it might have contributed to the easing of the economic problems of Nigeria.

Ethnic Strife: The ethnic strife so common to Africa also contributes to its impoverishment. The people of Rwanda and Burundi, 85% of them Hutus and nearly all the rest Tutsi, have been quite literally at each others' throats for years. Again the article in the *Chicago Tribune* got it right, "The potential for sudden outbursts of violence exists in most African countries, as rising populations meet falling living standards, and as weak governments confront regional or ethnic movements". Poverty has been a key factor that has fuelled these wars and internal strife.

Drought: Closely allied to wars and conflict are the constant droughts and famines in African countries. Drought often leads to destruction of crops, livestock and human life. Famine and starvation follow with deadly results.

Corruption: There is no doubt that one of the greatest factors contributing to poverty in Africa is corrupt governments and leaders. Corruption has clearly infected politicians and the various governmental systems in Africa. Transparency International last year identified Nigeria as the most corrupt country in the world. The World Bank in 1999 noted that Nigeria has gained the reputation as a country whose ample resources are wasted due to corruption and where corruption poses a formidable barrier. For example, \$250 billion was earned from oil proceeds since the early 1990's, but due to inflation of contracts and diversion of funds very little development has been achieved.

Corruption indeed has been elevated to the level of a crooked art. General Mainasara of Niger Republic, who was assassinated by his own personal bodyguard, left behind one of the five poorest countries in Africa. During his tenure political promises were broken and abused, workers' salaries went unpaid for five months, and the economy left citizens unable to provide for their basic needs of life. Many African countries can tell the same story.

Unfortunately, Christians have become part of these corrupt practices. For example, though it is estimated that in Congo 96% of the population is Christian, the church appeared helpless as Mobutu together with his aides stole and plundered the country's resources. In Burundi where the population is 92% Christians, most of the people participated in the genocide. In Nigeria a panel report

indicates that between September 1988 and June 1991 \$12.4 billion of oil revenues disappeared into special accounts (*The Economist*, October 22nd 1993). The late Head of State and dictator of Nigeria, General Abacha, together with his cronies, stole billions. And there were Christians who were implicated in this naked theft and ruin of the Nigerian economy. In Liberia most governments have been Christians. Sources report that at one time all the cabinet members were not only Christians but had been pastors, elders or at least lay readers in the church at one time or the other. One may say then that the African church has lost its role of being salt and light in the world.

All of this justifies the following sobering assessment of Africa's current situation: "Falling living standards, environmental degradation and high population growth rates risk pushing already impoverished communities to the brink of their capacity to survive, and into competition for scarce resources" (*Chicago Tribune*). As the rest of the world is progressing, getting richer, and having better living standards, Africa is rapidly deteriorating, getting more children and of course getting, poorer, hungrier, sicker, less clothed, and less sheltered. As the countries are consumed in war, men are killed and widows and orphans are created daily. This to me is the index of poverty.

Having familiarised ourselves with this picture of African realities, let us now listen to what God says in His Word with regard to poverty. We shall be asking ourselves the question: "What hope, indeed what Good News, is there for the poor of Africa?"

THE POOR IN SCRIPTURE

A proper view of the poor must begin from the beginning. When God created man, the ground was good and man was to plough it in order for it to produce. Apparently, it produced in abundance, but this changed as a result of the Fall. When man sinned, God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground" (Gen. 3:18-19). It

is therefore the result of sin that poverty entered and is present in the world. In this paper, we shall make a quick survey of the poor as revealed in the Scriptures.

In Scripture the term "poor" can have both a spiritual and a material meaning. The "poor" in the spiritual sense denotes "the humble and the meek". But for the purposes of this discussion, I shall limit myself to referencing poverty in the material sense. "Poor" in this paper refers to "one who is destitute of wealth and material goods, lacking in even the necessities of life".

The Old Testament

In the Old Testament, there are many words that are used to describe the poor. Some of the more common words include *ani* (71 times), which denotes "a person who is bowed down, who occupies a lowly position. He has to look up to others who are higher than he He is the man bowed down under pressure and finds himself in a dependent relationship". *dal* (48 times), meaning "physical and material poverty", comes from the Hebrew root *dalal*, meaning "to be thin, weak, sickly". *ebhyon* (sixty-one times) means "one who begs". He is both a poor person and a beggar. *rush* means "the needy; to be poor". It indicates not only a need, but also an expectation and a request (Ex. 23:6-11).

Amos 2:6,7 has all these words except *rush*: "Because they sell the righteous for money and the needy (*ebhyon*) for a pair of shoes; they trample on the head of the poor (*dallim*) and turn aside the way of the afflicted (*anawim*)". In most references, the poor include orphans, strangers, aliens and widows, because all of these have to depend on others to provide for their livelihood (Ex. 22:3-24). I shall now give a quick survey of the Old Testament witness concerning the poor.

Before Israel went into the Promised Land, God had promised them prosperity if they would obey. He said thus in Deuteronomy 15:4, "there shall be no poor [*ebhyon*] among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess. If only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you."

However, since they were rebellious, there were many poor and needy in the land who required help. God in his love and mercy made provision for the poor and the needy. The books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus contain God's laws to help the poor. Within the judicial system the poor person in the community of Israel is not to be favoured (Ex.23:3) nor disfavoured (23:6,7). Concerning loans (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36; Deut. 23:20), there is a prohibition "not to exact interest on a loan made to a poor man; and if a poor man's cloak has been taken as a pledge that he will repay a loan, to restore it to him before the sun goes down".

The laws of gleaning (Law of Holiness) in Leviticus 19:9, 10, also required of the Israelites "that gleanings are to be left deliberately for the poor and the aliens" (23:22). The farmers, however, had the power to grant "gleaning rights to certain of the poor and sometimes favoured an especially deserving person, as Boaz did Ruth". The Jubilee and the Sabbatical years (Ex. 23:10ff; Lev. 25:1-7; 25:8-10; Deut. 15:1-11) dealt with situations in which "improvident Israelites burdened by debt and sometimes men beset by adversity, sold themselves as bondsmen". The law required that the "bondservant was not only to be well treated, but he was to be discharged with a liberal pay for his services. The Lord God promised the Israelites that He would bless them and there would be no poor in their midst if only they would obey his commandments (Deut. 15:4). However, as we move into the Monarchical period, one notices that these laws were disregarded.

During the monarchy, there is evidence that Israelite society had undergone dramatic political and economic changes. One notices, for example, the rise of urban civilisation with kings amassing wealth and enlisting people into the army. The wealthy landowners also took advantage of the depression and wars to oppress the poor. Colin Brown notes also that during the monarchy, "the economy changed from one of barter to one using money, and many of the farmers became financially dependent on townsmen".

This is the background against which the prophets spoke (Amos 4:1, 2:4; Isa. 10:1-2; 11:4). At this time, being poor became synonymous with being oppressed. The most prominent cause of poverty is the injustice and exploitation of the poor by the rich. The

blame lies with the traders who exploit their customers (Hos. 12:8; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10; Is. 3:14; Jer. 5:27f, 6:12), with corrupt judges (Amos 5:7; Jer. 22:13-17; Mic. 3:9-11; Is. 5:23; 10: 12), and with the seizure of property (Mic. 2:1-3; Ezek. 22:29; Hab. 2:5). The story of Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21 demonstrates the injustices that were practised against the poor by the rich.

Wisdom Literature and the Psalms also reveal interesting and diverse information about the poor. In Proverbs, "virtue was linked with poverty, wealth with wickedness (Prov. 19:1; 28:6; 19:22). One finds in the book of Proverbs that poverty is caused by laziness (Prov. 10:4; 19:15; 24; 20:13; 21:17ff), foolishness (Prov. 11:14; 10:14-16; 13:18-1) and short-sightedness (Prov. 21:5).

Job, on the other hand, emphasises the fact that he had helped the poor and needy. In 29:12-20, Job states that he had responded to their pleas for help (19:12), had helped the handicapped (29:12) and he was a comfort to widows (29:13). He was a father of the poor (29:16) Job explains the fact that he had been compassionate and caring for the poor and needy.

In the Psalms, the enemies of the poor are the wicked (*rashim*). They are referred to as the wicked (10:4-7; 140:5,9), despoilers (35:10), plunderers (109:11), creditors (109:11), and perjured witness (35:11; 109:31) Because of their condition, the poor turn helplessly and humbly to God in prayer. It is in the Psalms that the poor began to be associated with those who turn to God and seek his help (Ps. 72:2; 4, 12ff).

With this brief survey, one can see that the Old Testament testifies that God cares for the poor and that He desires His own people to care for them. He made special laws to enable His people to care for the poor adequately. To oppress the poor was to incur divine displeasure. A compassionate and caring attitude to the poor was regarded as the will of God, the virtue of kings, and the duty of the common people. Having looked at the Old Testament, we now turn our attention to the New Testament teaching concerning the poor.

The New Testament

While there is no extended treatment of the poor in the New Testament as in the Old Testament, there is abundant concern and attention paid to the needs of the poor. There are two Greek words which describe the poor. *penes* (34 times) refers to the man who cannot live from his property but has to work with his hands. It is used for the economically and legally oppressed. *ptochus* (34 times) occurs mostly in the Gospels (24 times), and of these, 10 times in Luke. It signifies utter dependence on society. As a noun it means a beggar and stands in contrast to *plousios*, meaning "rich, owning property".

The life and ministry of Jesus indicate that the poor had a prominent role throughout his earthly life. He himself was poor, for though "the birds of the air have nests, and foxes have holes, the son of man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20; Lk. 9:50). Early in his ministry, in the Sermon on the Mount he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:23; Lk. 6:20). The point here is that "the poor served as a particularly apt metaphor for those who had no hope except in God". In another instance, Jesus praised the poor widow's generosity over against the scribes who exploited the poor (Mk. 12:38-40). Yet in another context Jesus made the comment that "the poor you have with you always" (Mt. 19:16-21; Mk. 14:1-9). He was not saying that the Church should disregard the poor but was simply echoing the passage in Deuteronomy 15:11, "there will always be the poor in the land".

He certainly wanted this to be an "incentive for generosity as a result of which there will be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4). "What Jesus said, can be taken to be a statement of fact that the succeeding centuries continue to bear out". The entire teaching and life-style of Jesus supports this interpretation. Compassion and care for the needy is central in most key parables that Jesus gave. The rich man was condemned, not because of his riches but because he neglected the poor man Lazarus by the gate (Lk. 16:19-31). The story of the Great Supper (Lk. 14:10-24) indicates that the poor matter. When others declined the invitation to the supper, the maimed and the poor were invited instead. On a particular occasion Jesus demanded that the young rich ruler sell his possessions and

give to the poor (Mk. 10:21; Lk. 18:22; 21:2). Zacheus promised to sell his possessions and give some to the poor as a sign of his conversion (Lk. 19:1-10).

Jesus not only taught about the need to help the poor, He was also compassionate to the poor and provided for their needs. He fed the crowd (Mk. 6:33-44; 8:1-9). It is worth noting that when Jesus saw the crowd he was moved with compassion because they had nothing to eat (8:2). He also raised the only son of the widow at Nain (Lk. 7:12). It has already been mentioned that in the Old Testament widows, orphans and poor are usually mentioned together. By raising the widow's son, Jesus was deliberately helping a needy person. In the final days of his ministry, Jesus declared that caring for the sick, needy, and homeless was actually caring for him. Failure to care for the needy was equally neglecting him (Matt. 25:31-36). Later, Peter said of Jesus that "he went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). Jesus then provided a good example for his disciples in terms of a compassionate and caring concern for the poor.

The birth of the early Church as recorded in the book of Acts also demonstrates that the poor and needy were taken care of (Acts 2:44-45; 4:33; 34-35). Also in the epistles the churches were involved in collecting gifts for the other churches in need. Paul personally conveyed these gifts and urged the churches to remember the poor (Rom. 12:13; 15:2; 1 Cor. 16:1,2, 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1-2). In the book of James, the unfair treatment of the poor in the church is condemned (Jas 2:1ff).

Summary of the Biblical Data

The teaching of Scripture demonstrates that God cares for the poor. For the Israelites He made special laws to cater for the needs of the poor. According to the Old Testament, the person "who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God". Similarly, in the New Testament any disregard for the poor is considered a sin. Thus the rich man was condemned not because of his riches but because he disregarded the poor man by his gate. The rich are condemned in the Epistle of James because they maltreat the poor in their midst.

The Scriptures therefore bear a consistent testimony to the fact that compassion and care for the poor is a divine command for the believer and for the Church of Jesus Christ. To be charitable was considered a virtue throughout biblical history.

Given the abundant biblical teaching on the topic, one might well expect that Christians would agree with how they should view and approach the problem of poverty. Not so, unfortunately. We turn our attention now to some current approaches that must be assessed as inadequate in the light of biblical witness.

SOME INADEQUATE APPROACHES TO POVERTY

Some approaches to poverty must be judged unacceptable for the believer because, however sincere, to one degree or another they misrepresent the teaching of Scripture on poverty. We must all be sensitive to bias and theological prejudice when it comes to problems of poverty. Literature on this topic frequently demonstrates a bias and makes Scripture defend a particular stance.

In her excellent article, "Why Do We Argue Over How to Help the Poor?", Judith Lingenfelter observes that there are four groups of people who come to the issue of poverty with a particular bias. Some represent an authoritarian/fatalist bias, some a hierarchical bias, some the individualist bias, and others the egalitarian bias. Each of these approaches takes a different perspective on the factors of economic growth, on who is blame for poverty, on how to manage resources, and on the willingness to take risks in order to produce change. The authoritarian/fatalist blames poverty on fate. The hierarchist does not really know who to blame, and claims that it is easier to place the blame on deviants who must be re-educated. The individualist thinks it is bad luck or personal incompetence. And the egalitarian blames the corrupt system. Each of these, of course, generates a specific way to help the poor, based on its particular grid.

God "Sides" with the Poor

Almost all literature on the proper Christian approach to poverty demonstrates a consensus that God has a concern for the poor. The critical question is, "How is God's concern then portrayed as compared with what is revealed of His concern in Scripture?" Ronald Sider, an evangelical scholar who is well known for fighting for the cause of the poor, has this to say about God and the poor:

But in a mysterious way that we can only half fathom, the Sovereign of the universe identifies with the weak and destitute (Prov.14:31). Even more moving is the positive formulation: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord" (19:17). By contrast with the way you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favor of the poor. But He is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern... God is not neutral. His freedom from bias does not mean that he maintains neutrality in the struggle for justice. God is on the side of the poor. The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is at work in history casting down the rich and exalting the poor because the rich are wealthy precisely because they have oppressed the poor and have neglected to aid the needy.

Even though it would take a whole book to respond to some of the issues that Sider raises here, it would be appropriate here to outline at least briefly some serious problems with what he has raised. One of the points in Sider's argument is the assertion that the rich oppress the poor, that the rich gained their riches by exploitation. Consequently, God is siding with the poor to liberate them. In response, our study has indicated that people are poor for various reasons, not for one. Some are poor because of their own lack of discipline and initiative. Other people are genuine victims, suffering from injury, diseases, or catastrophes such as famine and earthquakes. Still others are poor because of economic exploitation. Slavery is a historical example of this. South African Apartheid and the East Indian caste system are contemporary versions.

The crucial point is that economic victimisation is not the only cause of poverty. There are other factors as well. These include famine, bereavement and wars. In Africa and many parts of the

world the many civil wars not only result in destruction of property but also the countless loss of the lives of young people who are needed to work on the farms. The consequences of these are numerous. For example, more widows and orphans are left behind.

In response to Sider and others then, it is more accurate to state that some people and nations are poor because of oppression. An example would be in South Africa, where equal opportunities were denied to native Africans. Here we would agree that God would answer the prayers of such oppressed people and judge their oppressors. But what about nations such as Ethiopia, the Sudan, Congo, Niger and many others, where the causes of poverty are civil war, natural disaster or corruption by public officials? It seems to me that Sider has made a sweeping generalisation which cannot stand the test of Scripture or of reality. The conclusion, therefore, is that God is not indiscriminately identified with the poor. David Chilton rightly states, "Whose side is God on? Not the rich; not the poor; not any social or economic class; not any race." God does not take sides. He is just and compassionate.

Equal Distribution of Wealth

Another misconception that has been advanced is that justice demands the equal distribution of wealth. The gap between the rich and the poor is seen as sinful and therefore must be eliminated. Sider appeals to 2 Corinthians 8:13-14 in which he claims that "Paul clearly enunciates the principle of economic equality among the people of God to guide the Corinthians in their giving." But careful attention to the context indicates that the point is not a Pauline demand for equal distribution of wealth among the churches of Macedonia, Greece and Asia Minor and the church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16; 2 Cor. 8:9). The passage speaks of these gifts as a "gracious work" (8:7), compares them with "the gracious gift" (8:24), and terms them "the proof of your love" (8:24), "a bountiful gift" (9:5), done by each "as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion" (9:7). The passage goes on to say that true generosity springs not from a sense of duty but from the surpassing grace of God (9:14). It is obvious that "the equality envisioned is not that of economic condition but of proportionate

giving – giving in proportion to what one has, not what one does not have, and of needs being met.” A clear principle that emerges from this passage, and the New Testament as a whole (to be developed later), is that Christians need to respond to the poor. Giving to alleviate poverty is part of a Christian life-style.

Others have also argued that the real problem of poverty is the wealth of rich nations. Jeremy Rifkin, for example, states that, without a fundamental redistribution of wealth, "all talk of lowering energy flow and heeding our planet's biological limits will result in nothing but the rich locking the poor forever into their subservient status." Sider similarly declares "God sides with the poor because He disapproves of extreme wealth and poverty. His passion compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals that oppress the poor and neglect the needy. The rich neglect or oppose justice because justice demands that they end their oppression and share with the poor. Therefore, God actively opposes the rich".

Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, speaking in a Latin American context says, "the northern hemisphere, the developed area of the world, the 20 percent who possess 80 percent of the world's resources, are of Christian origin. The 20 percent who are keeping the 80 percent in a situation which is often sub-human – are they or are they not responsible for the violence and hatred which are beginning to break out all over the world?" Contrary to Helder's observation, there are nations whose wealth is not responsible for the economic hardships of other nations. A case in point is Japan, one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Japan is neither a Christian nation nor did it obtain its present wealth by exploiting another country, yet within a span of a century it moved from "under-development to a full-blown modernity".

Though we must not ignore external exploitation of Africa by richer nations, we must note that there is also the internal exploitation by the rich. Government officials are more interested in enriching their families and their own tribal communities. Similarly, their own townsmen expect special privileges from their own sons and daughters. In most African countries what creates an immense barrier in successfully combating poverty is the fact that the ethnic and tribal factor takes precedence over national

commitment. Okwudiba Nnoli, writing from a Nigerian perspective, succinctly declares,

Most Nigerians have come to believe that unless their 'own men' are in government, they are unable to secure those socio-economic amenities that are disbursed by the government. Hence governmental decisions about the citing of industries, the building of roads, award of scholarships, and appointments to positions in the public services, are closely examined in terms of their benefits to the various ethnic groups in the country.

The problem of tribalism really describes the situation facing many African countries. Tribalism or ethnic conflicts are the main causes of civil war in Africa (Rwanda, Sudan, etc.). And it is almost impossible for any economic system to succeed in such an environment. The problem suggests more than just a tribal issue: it is a symptom of moral problems. What is needed critically and urgently in these countries is not a different economic or political system (as important as those are), but rather a moral and ethical foundation in the hearts of people to be able to sustain these systems. It is precisely at this point that the Church can influence the development of a strong and a viable economy. The point is, any attempt to deal with poverty must deal not only with the external causes (bad economy, famine, death), but also with the internal moral issues. Moral and spiritual solutions are basic in any attempt to deal with the problem of poverty. The observation of Brown is appropriate,

If scarcity and want are caused first of all by external conditions, and secondly by defects in human wisdom, character, and desire to deal equitably with one another in sharing this world's limited resources, it is apparent that we cannot hope for a full and lasting solution to the problem of scarcity and resultant poverty unless we have a means to repair those defects. We do have such a means, but it is spiritual, not social, in nature. Social remedies are not worthless; indeed, they can have great value; but they cannot solve the problem in any fundamental way.

Overthrowing Corrupt Structures

Following from this false assessment that "God is on the side of the poor", and the demand for "equal distribution of wealth", is the idea that there must be a violent revolution to overthrow the rich in order to achieve such objectives. This tendency is characteristic of third world countries, especially in the African continent.

The idea that a violent revolution is the means of alleviating poverty can be illustrated very easily in third world countries. In Nigeria, for example, in its 29 years of independence, there have been fifteen years of military rule. There were military coups in 1966, 1976, 1984, 1985 and 1993. Some of these were bloody and violent. Intelligent and promising military officers were executed. In the 1976 abortive coup, 31 senior military officers were executed by a firing squad on one day. Ghana and Liberian military coups were also bloody and violent. The reason usually given for a military coup is that government officials are enriching themselves while the poor are getting poorer. In all these military coups there are promises that they are for the good of the poor, yet they usually only make matters worse for the masses. Experience has shown that once a class has ended a party, it also becomes a rich class and the poor continue to suffer. Violent revolutions do not seem to be a biblical or practical solution to helping the poor masses. Even in non-violent situations, the attempt to overcome inequality by confiscating the wealth of the rich to give to the poor has not worked either. Brown observes that,

Seldom if ever can poverty be eased by confiscating the wealth of the favored. . . If one seeks to prevent inequality, one most inevitably stifle productivity and harm the least favored. At least that has been the universal or all but universal experience of every society that has seriously tried it.

Guilt Manipulation

Another false approach is that of assigning guilt to the wealthy. Sider writes: "All the rich and developed countries are directly involved. We are participants in a system that dooms even more people to agony and death than slavery did". If the case can be made that wealth has been accumulated through exploitation of the

masses, then those responsible should be called to account for their actions. However, if some people are not directly or indirectly responsible for the poverty of some other people, how can they be guilty for something for which they are not responsible? Furthermore, from a biblical and Christian point of view, manipulation of guilt is never given as an appropriate motivation for helping the poor.

PERSPECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON HELPING THE POOR

In order for the Church in Africa to respond adequately to poverty, we need to ensure that we have sound biblical perspectives. These in turn can enable and justify specific recommendations to help the poor in our own continent today.

The Christian as Salt and Light

It has been noted with numerous examples that corruption is one of the major contributions to poverty in Africa. Unfortunately, Christians in many of these poor stricken countries have contributed in exploiting the poor. Jesus commanded Christians to be salt and light in society. John Stott identifies four truths which are inherent in these powerful symbols of salt and light. First, Christians are fundamentally different from non-Christians. Secondly, Christians must permeate non-Christian society. Thirdly, Christians can influence non-Christian society. Fourthly, Christians must retain their Christian distinctions. The one who brings the good news to the poor must reflect that goodness in himself. When Christians are involved in the rottenness and darkness that enmesh the poor, then it is very pathetic indeed.

In 1997 Christians in Nigeria so strongly felt that they were implicated in the moral decay in society that they met in the capital city Abuja for a historic meeting, a "Congress on Christian Ethics" (COCEN). At the end of a five-day meeting, Christians came up with the NIGERIA COVENANT, which was a powerful pledge and tool for halting Nigeria's downward moral spiral. Christians were to bind themselves before God and themselves to be distinct, to be

righteous and make a difference. African Christians should come with an AFRICAN COVENANT in which they study the moral impasse that is affecting the African continent, and should come with a covenant through which all Christians, whether in government or in the private sector, can commit themselves to be honest and uncompromising Christians. The Nigeria Covenant reads in part,

We, the Christians of Nigeria, believe that God in Christ is the Master of our lives and that He has revealed His will in the Holy Bible. Therefore, we pledge to submit to the Lordship of Christ, leadership of the Holy Spirit, and authority of God's Word in every part of life. We pledge to acquire property only in legitimate ways and refrain from stealing or defrauding. We believe God gives positions of leadership and responsibility for service. We pledge to uphold and defend truth, regardless of its source and to resist lying, cheating or other distortions of truth. We believe that without justice, there can be no peace in any human society. We pledge to be just in our dealings with others and to resist all forms of injustice and corruption in society, including giving or receiving bribes of money, positions, material possessions, sexual favour or intangible assets. We will also resist any form of injustice or unfairness in the law enforcement or judicial systems. We pledge not to exploit, abuse, steal, misuse or mismanage any of these public assets. We believe that God has ordained governments to safeguard the well-being of their peoples and resources. We reject sectarianism, commercialism, extravagant lifestyles, neglect of the needy and all other evils that weaken the testimony and purpose of the Church. We solemnly pledge to fulfill these commitments, no matter the risk, and to support all others who join us in our stand for Christian ethics. In the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen. [Adopted at the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria (COCEN) held at the Abuja International Conference Centre, November 3-6, 1997].

The Church in Africa could bring Good News to the Poor if it were to covenant before God and before each other not to exploit the poor, but rather to defend the poor, support the poor and do all it can within its power to better the life of the poor. That way, the Church can be a source of Good News to the poor within her midst.

Human Dignity

The poor, though lacking in material possessions, are created in the image of God. Based on this Scriptural teaching, the poor should be treated as persons, not things. Believers especially should have compassion towards the poor, especially as "hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings who like us have been created in the image of God ... live in conditions of appalling deprivations". In order to respond properly to the poor, it is necessary that the poor be seen and appreciated as human beings created in God's image. God loves and cares for them.

The Example of Jesus and the Disciples

The early ministry of Jesus demonstrated God's concern for the poor and needy. His primary mission was to die for the sins of many (Mk. 10:45), but He also demonstrated God's mercy and compassion by healing the sick, casting out demons, providing for the physical needs of the people. "Jesus came to preach the good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, and oppressed" (Lk. 4:18-19). Though He himself had little, Jesus made a regular practice of giving to the poor (Jn. 13:29). He taught his disciples to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44), an extension of the second great commandment of the Old Testament, to love our neighbours as ourselves (Lev. 19:18). Love in this context is not essentially a feeling, but rather concrete acts that meet a person's needs. Christ's entire ministry could be characterised as a life dedicated to serving the true needs of men and women. Randy Alcorn reminds us that "Giving to the poor and helpless and caring for them is so basic to the Christian faith that those who don't do it are not considered true Christians. Indeed, Christ himself says if we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, invite in the stranger, give clothes to the needy, care for the sick, and visit the persecuted, we are doing those things to him" (Matt. 25:34-35). Peter could summarise, "Jesus went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts. 10:38). We are equally enjoined to "do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:4).

A Whole Gospel

In order to respond properly to the poor, the whole gospel must be presented. Too often the gospel has been presented in half a manner. Beisner is right when he observes that many people object to evangelism as "pie in the sky bye-and-bye" when theologically conservative Christians insist that evangelism takes a higher priority than giving charitably to the poor. Typically our evangelism has been truncated, divorced from the true discipleship that must follow if we are to obey the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20).

Harold O. J. Brown also demonstrates the social implications of Jesus' charge to his disciples in Matthew 28. He states that Matthew 28:20 "is an essential part of the Great Commission – and if it is, then a substantial part of the evangelical community must be out of commission, because while we are engaged to make disciples, we are slow to teach them to observe". David similarly remarks,

Salvation in Scripture is no liberation from the body – as in Platonic thought and much eastern religion – but salvation of the whole person, body and soul. For the sake of our salvation the Word was made flesh (John 1:14) – the Son of God assuming our true and entire human nature, while at the same time retaining his divine essence. The Christian hope beyond this life was for the resurrection of the body, not merely for the immortality of the soul. God made us as whole persons, redeemed us as whole persons, cares for us as whole persons, and will finally glorify us as whole persons.

John Stott states,

especially those of us who are called 'evangelical' Christians need to take this New Testament emphasis to heart. We have to beware of magnifying faith and knowledge at the expense of love... For saving faith and serving love belong together. Whenever one is absent, so is the other. Neither can exist in isolation.

The biblical concept of evangelism and discipleship is well demonstrated by Paul and the Christians in the early Church. He not only made sure they were strong spiritually, but he also taught

them the joy of working in order to feed themselves. With confidence he could write,

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labour and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, but you might follow our example. If anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good (2 Thes. 3:6-12).

This passage warns against laziness and encourages the hard work that prevents poverty. It is therefore significant that in sharing the gospel the new believers should be taught to mature in their understanding of work. For those of us who are the children of first generation Christians, we can see the difference in Christian homes that received Christ even in one village. The missionaries taught them how to work and improve their crops. This is an example of presenting a whole gospel which has both spiritual and physical implications.

Charitable Giving

One thing that is clearly taught in Scripture is that believers, whether rich or poor, are to practice charitable giving. The believer is expected to give from a willing and generous heart. It is not by compulsion. In the New Testament Church there was regular, systematic congregational giving to meet the needs of the poor (Acts 4:34; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8-9; 1 Tim. 2:5-6). If there is one thing that can be learnt from the early Church it is that Christians should respond to the needs of the poor especially in their midst. As already noted, Galatians 6:10 states this explicitly, "so then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially

to those who are of the household of the faith". Augustine comments well,

That bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession, to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground, to the needy. Wherefore, as often as you are able to help others, and refuse, so often did you do them wrong.

It is appropriate that every church and individual Christian must ask, "What are we doing to feed the hungry and help the poor? What are we doing to secure justice for the poor? What are we doing to uphold the cause of the needy?"

Government Policies

It is possible for Government policies to hurt the poor. Beisner lists some policies that could do so: "minimum wage laws, occupational licensure laws, restrictive trade laws, legally enforced union pay scales, tight immigration restrictions, regulations that tend to raise the cost of living". In Nigeria the mismanagement of the economy led to introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), which in turn led to high cost of goods and services, while the income of the Nigerian worker depreciated. Thus the government can itself be responsible for introducing policies that have weakened the economy and harmed the poor. Labour too is really very cheap in most African countries. Someone has well remarked that people work in Africa as much as elephants but eat as little as ants.

The international community should give third world countries a break with regard to their heavy debts. National governments should also provide programmes that would reduce the economic hardships of their citizens. To me this is an excellent way for addressing the problem of poverty in Africa, and it can be based directly on the principle found in the divine provisions to give relief to the poor in the Old Testament. Such action should be motivated not by a demand for equality but by a commitment to help alleviate distress and give the poor opportunities. Target groups such as the rural poor, civil servants, widows and orphans should be identified

and specific programmes and/or aid should be directed to solving their problems. In Nigeria the government established the Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP) to provide loans to families to start small-scale businesses. Also recently the Women Rights, Advocacy and Protection Agency (WRAPA) has been established especially to protect the rights of women who are usually degraded and abused in the Nigerian society.

**Church Programmes and
Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs)**

Church programmes and the non-governmental agencies (NGOs) play an important role in helping the poor. As a matter of fact, mission agencies in the past were often the sole developers of assistance for the poor in most African countries. They introduced education, medical care and improved agricultural production so that the farmer was able to take care of himself and his family. The establishment of these agencies was aimed at raising the living standards of the less privileged and the poor. Some of these that have met with remarkable success include Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN), People Oriented Development of ECWA (POD), ECWA Rural Development of ECWA (ERD), AMANA Rescue Mission, and Daughters of Abraham. Amana Rescue Mission is aimed at helping widows who are normally abused and exploited by the family and society. Daughters of Abraham also aim at reaching out and helping the many prostitutes who are exploited. CRUDAN states in its brochure that,

Most people are unable to adequately meet their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. Malnutrition, which is the most acute physical expression of poverty, is on the increase and is mostly manifested in children. Mortality rate among children is very high. Poor people are oppressed, exploited and treated unjustly by politicians, the police, businessmen and government officials. Hence they are powerless. Projects meant for the people are poorly executed and poorly maintained. These projects are not usually sustained mainly because of lack of participation of the people in the planning and implementation of the projects. The poor are poorly organised ... Because of their

powerlessness, they are forced to tolerate corrupt and unjust leaders and officials.

What is exciting about these programmes of non-governmental organisations in Africa is that they target specific groups in need, and then direct their efforts to meet those needs. The mission of CRUDAN, for example, is "to promote holistic development by enabling the church in Nigeria to empower the poor in the name of Jesus Christ." POD also in its brochure notes that it started because it had the rural poor as its target group. The overall goal of POD is "to facilitate the process of meeting the needs of the underprivileged people in Nigeria in a holistic manner (physical, social, spiritual), so that they are enabled to improve their quality of life by taking increasing responsibility for themselves and others". The Church in Africa will do well if she identifies these groups in each context and tries to develop programmes to meet their needs. Richer churches overseas should also come to the aid of these agencies and churches in order to support their efforts.

God Cares for the Poor

We have already established the fact that God, as He is revealed in biblical history, cares very much for the poor, and He wants his children to care for them. As a matter of fact, care for the poor is a major theme throughout Scripture. Failure to care for the poor would bring God's judgement, especially if they are mistreated. The Christian needs to adopt a similar compassionate attitude. That the believer is to be compassionate to the poor is demonstrated in biblical history. Christians should be very careful of being insensitive toward the poor, callous to their plight, pretending their condition isn't so bad, that they are irresponsible. As Jacques Ellul states, "Each of us must face up to the poor. We must either do so now, or when we stand before the Judge".

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

This paper began by looking at the problem of poverty in Africa. Poverty is real, pervasive, degrading and dehumanising. In dealing with the problem of poverty, the Church must accept its reality in order to be able to respond adequately. The Bible clearly establishes that God cares for the poor, and He requires that believers also care for the poor in their own midst. In the Old Testament we saw that God prescribed specific ways for providing for the poor and needy. Failure to follow these prescriptions brought divine displeasure and judgement. In the New Testament also we saw that a similar concern and care for the poor is demonstrated.

We then noted some inadequate approaches to the problem of poverty. First, God is not indiscriminately siding with the poor and opposing the rich. He is just and compassionate. Secondly, equal distribution of wealth is not biblical. Confiscation of wealth either by a peaceful political process or by violent revolution in order to bring about equality creates more problems than helping the poor. It was especially emphasised that effective solutions to the problem of poverty should concentrate not only on better economic remedies but also on spiritual and moral solutions. Thirdly, we stated that guilt manipulation as a means of getting people to help the poor is unbiblical and unchristian.

We then presented what we understand to reflect biblical and Christian principles. These include: (1) God loves the poor and commands believers and the Church to act accordingly; (2) The Church, in proclaiming the Gospel, has spiritual and social responsibilities; (3) The government can also help the poor by policies that relieve their distress and give them a chance to recover; (4) Church sponsored agencies or non-governmental organisations can start programmes and projects to help target groups; and finally (5) Charitable giving is a divine mandate and should characterise the Christian life-style.