

Christian Ministry in the context of Poverty

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One of the most challenging contexts of the modern world is endemic poverty, inter-generational poverty passed on from parents to children, and seemingly embedded in the life of many communities.

1. What is Christian ministry in such contexts among poor people?

Jesus ministry, was **to bring "good news to the poor"** (Luke 4.18)

In the Bible, the term 'poor' means what it means in common sense English - the economically and socially disadvantaged. When John the Baptist sends his messengers to Jesus to find if he is the one to come or whether they should look for someone else, Luke records that Jesus answered "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." (Luke 7.22)

Jesus is referring to those whose physical conditions in life are of deprivation and suffering when he refers to the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf and the dead - and the poor. An international biblical study concluded "The poor (in scripture) refers to the manual worker who struggles to survive on a day to day basis, the destitute cowering as a beggar, the one reduced to meekness, the one brought low....those weak and tired from carrying heavy burdens, and very often the common people."ⁱ

The "poor in spirit" refers to those who because of their condition in this world are dependent on or have turned to God. The term does not refer to spiritual deadness, atheism or humility. For many poor people the good news of Jesus has been that in societies where they are marginalised and treated as outcast "nobodies", they have an identity as daughters and sons of God through the free grace of God in Jesus.

2. What then is the good news to the poor?

It is

"that God has established his Kingdom of righteousness and peace through the incarnation, ministry, atoning death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. The Kingdom fulfils God's purpose in creation by bringing wholeness to humanity and the whole creation. In the Kingdom, people receive by grace alone a new status before God and people, a new dignity and worth as his daughters and sons, and empowerment by his Spirit to be stewards of creation and servants of one another in a new community. The Kingdom will come in its fulness in a new heaven and earth only when Jesus returns.

3. Mission and Poor People

In Acts the gospel and the church relate to the poor:

Acts 2.45 Distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need

Deut 15.4 Fulfills the promise of there shall be no poor among you.

This was the goal of the Mosaic law - to prevent the injustice of Pharaoh's Egypt ever arising among God's people.

Acts 6. 1 Specific care and attention to poor Greek widows in Jerusalem.

Appointment of deacons

People in middle class churches can find the issue of the poor quite threatening. It makes them feel guilty and they think the poor want their money

Yet good news to the poor opens up the meaning of so much in the New Testament and so encourages us to look at what the Bible actually teaches about the poor.

4. The poor as the focus of God's work:

When God addresses the deformation that human sin brought into the world, he begins with those suffering most deeply from greed, selfishness and the exercise of wrong dominion over others - Hebrew migrant labourers in Egypt. He rescues them from Pharaoh's oppression. "Let my people go that they may serve me" (Ex. 3-5.) It was not possible to serve God as full human beings in the oppression of Pharaoh's Egypt.

God's deliverance of Israel focused and defined what he was doing in the world (Dt. 26:1-10) It identified some aspects of rebellion against God e.g. Pharaoh's ruthless oppression. It showed what God cared about - that all people together should be stewards of the resources of the earth.

To understand the biblical teaching on the poor we have to understand the biblical teaching that humanity was created to be **the steward of creation**. To be the image of God. Genesis 1.27-28. To be his image. To have dominion. Not oppressive dominion, but mirroring the dominion of God of the shepherd king. To be the image of God is to have dominion.

Images in the Ancient Near East.

Representative of God.

What we should be seeking for all is that they be stewards.

Jesus focus was on the poor:

He himself became poor. 2 Cor 8.9

His ministry in Galilee (a place of the dispossessed and outcast) was a judgement on the powerful of Jerusalem ; his ministry was with the sick, the Samaritans, those

branded as “sinners” and the socially rejected. It was not confined to such, but he identified its nature by reference to them; his proclamation and demonstration were good news to the poor (Lk 4.18).

Repeated by Paul

Paul says that not many of the Corinthian Christians were wise or powerful or of high social standing. This demonstrated the nature of the gospel.

James writes “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him.” Jas 2.7

In Paul’s letters the meaning of faith was determined by the Gentiles. They helped the Jews recover the meaning of Abraham being saved by faith. Message of the Book of Romans and of Galatians. Galatians 3-6-9

Parables. Of the great feast. Refers to the Gentiles Called to go and call the maimed, the lame and the blind. Luke 14: 15-24

Maimed cannot marry

Lame cannot plough

Blind cannot look over a new field

Of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

How a tax collector (socially poor and marginalised) experienced forgiveness was to determine how the Pharisee was ought to experience forgiveness. Luke 18.9-14 - not vice versa.

The self-righteous Pharisees would learn the true nature of the gospel only as they too ate with sinners, and learnt what the gospel meant to them.

The good news of the whole gospel of the kingdom is to be introduced to a whole community through the poor.

Look where Jesus started. Not in Jerusalem. In Galilee.

How a community treats its poor is for the Bible the acid test of its life. James 2 1-7. “If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts.”

The grace of God is universally available to all. But in the OT its reality and nature are revealed through what it means to Israel. The OT concentrates on what it means in economic relationships. (e.g. the Jubilee).

In the New Testament the poor replace Israel as the focus of the gospel. As the poor experience the good news of the kingdom, the real nature of the gospel becomes evident to others. So the New Testament gives special attention to what that means in terms of children, women, Samaritans, social outcasts, the sick, the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”.

5. What is good about Good News to the Poor?

The gospel brings the following powerful antidotes to the view that they are victims of the past and have no choices for the future.

Part of the culture of poverty, which enables poor people to cope psychologically with the harshness of their existence, is that it is their fate, that they are paying the price for somebody's action somewhere. In religious terms it may be the price for the past sins of their family; or in anticipation of future blessedness. In secular terms it may be the price for past structural oppression, or in anticipation of future national economic recovery. The impact is to reinforce in the poor a sense of being victims at the hands of forces they cannot control. Creativity and responsibility are stifled. This false consciousness is an expression of sin and death that destroys God's purpose of life.

The atonement announces that the price is already paid for the past and that the price of the future is secured. This releases in people a new sense of identity. They are somebody. By grace they are not damned or damnable or useless people. They are called to be sons and daughters of God. As his creation they are called to have dominion over the earth and are accountable to him. As his children they are forgiven and restored to this position despite their supposed and real demerits, because of the cross. Indwelt by God's Spirit, they have access to the power of God through prayer, to the armoury of God against evil, and to the resources of God which are far more than economic.

Evangelical theology based on the atonement, frees people from the destructive power of sin and death on their own perception of who they are; it gives assurance of a new identity and creative responsibility in contrast to the identity of economic powerless victimisation which can be resolved only by victory in conflict with the powerful. Those who were no people become God's people, children of God, heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ.

All these aspects are the prerequisites for addressing poverty. They come from faith in Jesus. When God sent his son into the world, he did not send an economist, as though all our problems were economic; nor a politician; nor a businessman. He sent someone to bring his kingdom, to break the chains of the past, to give hope for the future, and build an international cross-cultural community of care.

Many analyses of poverty and prescriptions for dealing with it set the poor in conflict with the non-poor. In Christian terms it is the work of evil (the principalities and powers) to create division out of difference, whether in race, gender, class or material resources. The work of Jesus Christ is to break down the barriers between separated and hostile groups. This is the clear teaching of Ephesians 2-3. The dwelling place of the Holy Spirit is a community where such barriers have been broken. Jesus spoke of the destructive power of mammon in people's lives. It is a

rival divinity to God, which leads people to get their priorities wrong, and prevents them from entering God's Kingdom where they would find fulfilment of their humanity. It blinds people to the needs of others. To enter the Kingdom people need to renounce wealth (Mark 10:27); love for riches is a major obstacle to spiritual growth (Mark 4:19), and fields, oxen and marriage arrangements lead people to refuse God's invitation. The cross made community between hostile groups possible. So the reaction of biblical Christians to those different from themselves should be to seek partnership. Vinay Samuel points out

“Because the prime categories [are] those saved by Christ and those as yet unsaved, the biblical Christian does not think of rich and poor as the primary divisions or categories. The understanding the poor has of the rich is not of a powerful oppressor, but of a person. The evangelical never feels powerless against the rich. He still feels he has the gospel to share with him. The slum dweller may lack much, but he has the priceless treasure of Christ in him, the hope of glory. Therefore the poor need never accept the rich as people who cannot change. They can confidently, not arrogantly, share something with the rich that the rich need.”ⁱⁱ

6 What has the church provided?

It is not obvious in modern societies that the church and the gospel is regarded as good news to the poor. The Church and the Gospel are not regarded as central to bringing about a better society. People believe that secular humanism will provide the way forward.

But a major World Bank Study called Voices of the poor discovered that poor people trust the Churches most of any other organizations apart from their own.

So what has the church provided?

First, the church in the two-thirds world is where the poor are.

They are people of faith. They have the resources of faith. Those resources make a great deal of difference to their lives.

1. They have hope. In their difficult situations they are related to one who is Lord of the situation. To one who says that at the end of the world he will establish a kingdom of justice and peace, which he has begun to establish now. So they have hope for a better future because of their faith in God.

2. They are empowered. They are related to a powerful almighty God who is sovereign. Who hears their cries and their prayers. They are not victims of circumstances in which they have no choices.

3. They have dignity. They are not useless and hopeless. They are sons and daughters of God by the grace of Jesus.

4. They know they are responsible and accountable to God and that everyone else is.

5. They belong to a Christian community which cares for them and which they care for.

6. They are willing to sacrifice for the good of others, because that is the way of Jesus.

7 What change has spiritual conversion brought to communities of the poor?

Stage 1: Conversion brings a lifestyle change; especially and in particular men desist from drinking and are more committed to family life; they return to work and support their families.

This first phase produces freedom from the misery and violence of poverty. Lifestyle change brings some financial savings, but economically they are still poor. Their income level has not improved much, but they are far more able to cope with poverty. Hopes for economic lift centre on their ability to send their children to school to pick up the skills that they lack. They are lifted out of the misery of poverty but not out of poverty. It would be improper to call this therefore a process of redemption-lift.

Stage 2: Lift out of poverty: this sees the development in people and families of the right kind of work habits, of a work culture, of a biblical work ethic, of a biblical attitude to money and of the right skills. A priority is given to work and discipline. Weber was right that the 'Protestant work ethic' is necessary for people to be able to move out of poverty and reach a level of sustainable growth. There is little evidence that this happens automatically. This issue needs to be addressed by the church.

Christian social vision affirms that the poor will also have a work ethic, and a discipleship that builds Kingdom values. It is difficult to build kingdom values as part of the values of the poor. Once they are converted it is not automatic for kingdom values to come through to integrate with life and character unless they are specifically addressed through teaching, modelling and mentoring. This is a larger and tougher process of discipleship.

Stage 3: Poverty is virtually eradicated and people are lifted out of poverty through the development of a strong law-governed state with individual freedoms, property rights and civil society institutions. People can trust other people to fulfil their responsibilities. A culture of trust and co-operation emerges that includes enterprise, rights to individual property and a state that is governed by law. This is amply shown in the work of Hernando de Soto in *The Mystery of Capital* and by Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom*.

8. Good news to the poor and Good News to the Rich

In the process of their sharing the rich also can develop a new basis for their identity - the grace of God in Christ.

Wealthy people are not free to help the poor because they believe they need all their wealth to ensure their own security. The sin of the man who planned bigger barns is similar to the sin of the man who hid his talent in the ground. (Matt. 26: 14-30). Their strategy was based on self-centred fear. The sin for which “bigger barns” is condemned is not his concern for material things. Jesus affirms that God knows we need food and clothes. The rich fool did not care for the poor, because he was anxious to ensure that he had bigger barns in which to store all his goods so that he could enjoy life. If such a person is counselled to share with the poor, the real hurdle he/she must overcome is anxiety about their security. Jesus equates giving alms to the poor with providing treasure in heaven. Paul does the same in I Timothy 6. 7-10. Alms to the poor was the dominant form of social relief in Jesus' time. Thus those who invest their time and their resources in activity which benefits the poorest, who are showing compassion in a world which only thinks of winners and losers, where people are in slavery to greed or fear, according to Jesus, will reap treasure in heaven. Treasure in heaven is using resources to enable the poor to have their full place in society. Earthly treasures are of use in the Kingdom.

Giving to the poor is saving up treasure in heaven (Luke 12.33) and enables trust in God to be expressed. Jesus points out that people are to seek first the Kingdom of God, and everything else will be added to them. Once people seek their security in the right place, they are freed from pouring their resources into the bottomless pit of seeking security in riches. They are then free to give alms to the poor.

So the non-poor who become poor-in-spirit receive a true dignity replacing false pride in riches and are liberated to be truly human with a passion for justice for the poor. They are to trust in the power of God's Spirit which enables them to serve rather than to control. They enter a new family that accepts them for who they are rather than for their achievements - in material prosperity or status. The task of evangelisation among the majority of the unreached who are poor will be carried out primarily by those who are poor, with appropriate support from those economically advantaged who are poor in spirit.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is good news for the rich. Jesus sets people free from anxiety about their security to devote their attention and wealth to the concerns of God's Kingdom, God's right relationships, and especially the poor. This new basis for their identity and security as good news to the rich derives in part from the meaning of the good news to the poor which gives the poor a new identity. Rich and the poor experience this new identity together because both have been accepted in grace at the Cross of Christ.

When this understanding is lacking, a process sets in of blaming and fearing others and ignoring the sins in their own communities which contribute to the problem.

Christ's atoning death needs to be central as the basis of forgiveness. God has forgiven us all an unpayable debt so that we may forgive the debts we owe one another. If a sense of Christ's death is not present, people cannot easily let go the sense of the wrongs they have suffered or that they have been party to inflicting on others. Victims continuously present themselves as victims. They take on an heroic, even Messianic role. A competition emerges to demonstrate that one particular group is undergoing the worst suffering. The guilty have continually to express their guilt and atone for it by keeping silent or by a self-righteous posturing on behalf of the oppressed.

9. Summary and Conclusion

Christian organisations engaged in ministry with the poor can be signs of the new identity that God gives the poor and the rich. They may serve as partners that express the new sharing in one community between people separated by one of the major causes of division in society - Mammon.

Assisting poor people to fulfil their calling to be stewards, depends on a particular view of humanity. This view sees human beings as more than objects of charity; human relations as defined by more than economics; the division between human communities brought by Mammon as an evil power that holds people in its grip which can only be fully addressed by the cross of Christ that overcomes such evil and such divisions; human rights as applicable to the community relationships of people; and the differences between people and groups as occasions for working in partnership rather than divisions to be overcome through conflict.

The critical issue in addressing poverty is how people identify themselves and their hopes for the future. If they have no sense of their own worth and no expectation that anything can or will change, then nothing lasting will happen. Programmes and funding cannot change people's own sense of identity or their vision and goals. The Church of Jesus Christ brings the message and reality that people are the good creation of God who has a benevolent purpose for his creation which He will establish.

Economic development should be one of the components of the overall development of churches as they seek to be more effective in bringing people to Christ. Central to ensuring this is to start from the premise that the local church has to be a partner in development activities. Development carried out, even by Christian agencies, that does not primarily work with the church can cease to bear any significant witness to Christ.

In establishing His purpose through the coming of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus Christ, God offers people a new identity as sons and daughters of God irrespective of their past, history or status. God also promises the experience of the new future of the kingdom of God, expressed in and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Church is uniquely charged and

empowered to share this news as the basis for economic empowerment of poor people.

ⁱ17. *Christian Witness to the Urban Poor* published by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation from their consultation in Thailand in 1980; reproduced in *Evangelism and the Poor* edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Paternoster, Exeter, 1982).

ⁱⁱVinay Samuel in personal conversation quoted in “Jesus Christ, Saviour and Liberator” by Chris Sugden in *Sharing the Good News with the Poor*, edited by Brice Nicholls and Beulah Wood (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1996) p. 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ Report of the Social Concern Track of Lausanne II at Manila, June 1989, published in *Transformation* July 1990. Also in “What is Good about Good News to the Poor?” in *AD 2000 and Beyond - A Mission Agenda* edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Oxford, Regnum, 1991).