

# The Bible on poverty and wealth and our task as Christians

B.J. van der Walt

(Dept. of Philosophy, Potchefstroom Campus, North-West University)

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In traditional Africa a person has been regarded as "poor" when he/she does not have a family or is not socially accepted. By contrast, a person has been regarded as "rich" when she/he is married, blessed with many children and also part of an extended family and tribe. The economic aspect is not totally excluded, but it is not of primary concern as in the West where poverty is regarded as a lack of money, and wealth as material abundance.

Unfortunately we have to survive in an increasingly commercialised and globalised world today. As many Africans no longer live in an agricultural environment, they experience a new kind of poverty of an economic nature. Economic poverty is one of the main reasons for (as well as consequences of) Africa's contemporary crisis. In the light of the fact that poverty is the main problem in Africa, as well as the fact that Christianity in Africa has not been very effective in dealing with this problem – least of all the Prosperity Gospel – we will have to listen again carefully to the Biblical message about poverty and wealth.

## The reality of poverty in Biblical times

In the Bible poverty is presented as part of reality. In Old Testament times God took care that every Israelite owned a piece of land in the Promised Land, because it was an indispensable way of survival in an agricultural society. When someone for some reason or other lost his land, he had to sell his labour to others, and became a day-labourer.

Already in Biblical times those who had nobody to take care of them – widows and orphans – suffered. In the New Testament the Greek words *endees*, *penes* and *ptochos* describe the downward spiral of poverty: need, poverty and destitution. According to sources more than 70% of the population in Israel lived below the breadline (the pay of a day-labourer) during the time of Christ.

## Neither acceptance nor optimism is the solution

It seems as if the Biblical perspective implies that we will have to accept the reality of poverty. Because of the fact that mankind fell into sin, only two periods in history can and will be regarded as free from poverty: The brief period in paradise and when Christ will return again and the world will be renewed. Between these two periods of time not much hope exists that the phenomenon of poverty will not be part and parcel of human existence (cf. Deut. 15:11 and Mark. 14:7).

Biblical texts like the afore-mentioned should, however, not be understood incorrectly. They do not imply that poverty should be accepted fatalistically. In many instances (like Deut. 15:11) God commands his people to be open-handed towards their brothers and towards the poor and needy. In the case of Mark 14:7 (cf. also John 12:8) some commentators are of the opinion that when Christ says, "... the poor you will always have with you", He does not mention a *rule* but merely states a *fact*. There is no implication that poverty *should* necessarily always be part of human existence, or that we should accept it as a *norm* for life on earth. Jesus's statement also includes a reproach: If you live a selfish life – you will always have the poor among you.

Therefore, instead of merely accepting poverty, it is regarded as one of the terrible consequences of man's sinfulness and should be opposed and alleviated. To combat poverty is an echo of paradise as well as a sign of God's coming Kingdom.

While resignation or acquiescence does not represent a Biblical approach, neither does over-optimism. No political or economic system could in the past or will in the future be able to eradicate poverty in its totality. Socialism could not do it and it is already clear that capitalism only benefits the already rich. The Bible does not ignore various structural causes of poverty,

but the Word of God cautions against utopian dreams of a world of plenty for everyone because new structures are also not immune against sinfulness.

### Neither poverty nor wealth advocated by the Bible

During the history of Christianity two extreme viewpoints have been encountered again and again: either an emphasis on poverty or on wealth.

Christ's words "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20) over against "But woe to you who are rich" (Luke 6:24) lead some astray to idealise poverty, viewing it as a higher, holier state. This happened in the past when Catholic friars joined mendicant orders. It is also the case in (some types of) liberation theologies that communicate the message that God unconditionally takes sides with the poor, irrespective of how sinful their behaviour may be.

The opposite error is that of the present-day Prosperity Gospel, very popular among poor Africans. According to this viewpoint a person will automatically become rich when he/she truly believes in God. This point of departure uses Scripture in a selective way to prove its point. Other sections of the Scriptures, that clearly indicate that sincere believers sometimes have to bear the burden of poverty, are simply ignored.

The Bible itself has a balanced view on poverty and wealth, as is clear from Proverbs 30:7-9: "Two things I ask from you, O Lord ... give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God" (cf. also James 1:9 and 1 Tim. 6:6-10). The Biblical message is that of contentment with what God gives us in his wisdom.

The danger of being rich (cf. 1 Tim. 6:9,10) is that people are not contented, but the richer they become, the more they desire. The love of money is the root of all evil.

In the same chapter (1 Tim. 6:17-19) Paul warns rich people not to be arrogant or to put their hope in wealth but in God, who richly provides us with everything. Paul commands the addressed to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share and in this way preserve a treasure for themselves. To be rich is not a sin as such. What is important is what a rich person does with his wealth.

In this light we should also understand Christ's remark (Matthew 19:23) that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. In James 2:6

and 5:1-6 wealth as such is not condemned, but the wrong conduct of the rich towards the poor.

In everyday life, we find divergent reactions on richness and poverty: either flattery of the rich and scorn of the poor, or sympathy for the poor and abuse of the rich. Jesus Christ did not indicate preference for either the rich or the poor. He chastised *both* for their sins, because both poverty and wealth can be a curse. When He, however, reprimanded the poor, He did it in a gentle way, but when He called the rich to account, He used much harsher words.

Viewed in the light of God's Word the excessive wealth of the Western world over against the extreme poverty of Africans has to be called a glaring injustice. Similarly, the huge gap between a small group of very rich elite and the masses of dirt-poor people in Africa has to be condemned.

### Biblical motives for fighting poverty

It has already been indicated that an attitude of resignation towards poverty is unacceptable to God. He Himself is the Helper of those who have no one to help them (Deut. 10:18-19). The Biblical motives for alleviating and, if possible, eradicating poverty, should also be our motivation. They are the following:

#### • We should be followers of Christ

Our King was born in a stable (Luke 2:7); after forty days his parents consecrated Him to the Lord by bringing the sacrifice of the poor (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev. 12:18); He often slept in the open, was hungry (Matt. 4:2), made bread for others (Mark 6:35-44 and 8:1-9), but never for Himself; He blessed the poor and the hungry (Luke 6:20-21) and the night before his death He did the work of a slave by washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-17). Why? Why was Christ himself poor?

One reason was that He had to carry the burden of poverty – a result of sin – in our place. Another reason was that He provided us with an example to be followed. Christ identified Himself to such a degree with those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, without clothes, sick or in prison, that what we do to them is regarded as done to Him (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). Apart from Christ as our example, the Bible also provides two clear principles to guide us: love and justice.

#### • Love

Aid for the poor that is not inspired by true love, is regarded "only a resounding gong or a

clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1). According to the same chapter (verse 4) love is not proud, it does not boast or act out of own interest. These images may explain why so many development projects for the poor have failed in the past: they were not sparked by compassion but were exercised in a paternalistic way and were initiated for own benefit.

When efforts to promote development are initiated by true love, these efforts will not be forced upon the poor. The poor will consequently be permitted to decide themselves what their needs are. Their human dignity and own initiatives will also be respected. If this approach is not followed, the best development efforts will be a failure. Charity does not yet imply Christian love – charity may be regarded as offensive to the poor. We have to give ourselves – not something of ourselves – like our time and expertise, to solve the problem of poverty. God's judgement on aid for the poor not motivated by genuine love is harsh: "If I give all I possess to the poor ..., but have no love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

Mother Teresa, who devoted her life to the poor in India, once said: "Hunger is not only for bread, it is for love. Nakedness is not only a lack of clothes, but of human dignity. Homelessness is not only lacking a brick house, but being unwanted in a big city full of riches".

### • Justice

That the kind of love required does not simply imply favours, goodwill or kindness from the side of the rich, is evident from the second Biblical principal, viz. justice. Charity does not imply that justice has been done. The Bible emphasises the *right* of the poor, the widow and the orphan (cf. Ps. 82:3). We have to maintain and defend their right for a better life.

The fundamental motive for aid to the poor is therefore not "goodness" or philanthropy from the side of the rich, but the right of the poor to be helped. If this was not the case, it would have been difficult to understand why Christ could have condemned those who did not take care of the poor to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41).

A true follower of Christ, driven by love and motivated by justice, does not help the poor to earn something, like the blessing of God or eternal salvation. Neither because God clearly commands us to do so, but simply because we cannot do otherwise (cf. 1 John 3:17; James 1:27 and 2:26).

## How poverty was alleviated in Biblical times

The Word of God does not merely motivate us to fight poverty. It also provides examples of how to do it.

### • A comprehensive approach

Already in Biblical times it was realised that poverty was not simply a financial problem that could easily be solved by providing money.

Even before Israel entered the Promised Land, in many laws and regulations (cf. especially the book Deuteronomy), the Lord gave detailed instructions, encompassing the entire life of the people. Examples are the Sabbatical Year, the Year of Jubilee, laws concerning the possession and inheritance of land, emancipation of slaves, remission of debt, interest-free loans, prescriptions not to harvest everything from your land or vineyard, but to leave something for the poor, etcetera. Read, for instance, Deuteronomy 15 for the Lord's instructions about cancelling debts and freeing slaves, and think about the implications for present-day Africa. We cannot, however, directly apply all these measures to prevent, alleviate and eradicate poverty today, in a totally different world. We can, however, learn a lot from the ways in which God's central commandment of love was positivised or concretised for the socio-economic-political life of his people. It may serve as an inspiration, in a specific way and relevant for our own time, to do likewise.

In the New Testament the book of Luke and the letter of James should be studied carefully. What, for instance, is the implication for today of Christ's command to lend without expecting to get anything in return (Luke 6:35)? Or His advice not to invite your rich neighbours for dinner because they will repay you, but rather to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, who will not be able to repay you? Probably a huge gap developed between the rich and the poor already in early Christianity. Therefore James (cf. Chapter 2 and 5) was forced to expose it mercilessly.

Often development work is merely intended to *alleviate* poverty. We should learn from the Bible that we should try our best to *prevent* it from occurring. And if poverty is a fact, we should also try to end or *eradicate* it to enable the poor to make a new start, because the dependency-syndrome among the poor is a destructive phenomenon.

## Prinsipiële besinning

- **Nothing is too small to make a difference**

It is a fact that the economies of African countries as well as the world economy are responsible for much of the nature and extent of poverty. Individuals, organisations and churches should not be silent about this injustice. They should, however, not only talk but do something themselves. If giving a cup of cold water to a child can have eternal significance (Matt. 10:42), nothing can be too small or insignificant.

The situation of “you will always have the poor among you” (John 12:8) should be reversed to “there were no needy persons among them” (Act 4:34; cf. also Acts 2:44 ff.) In different instances (Acts 11:29-30; Rom. 15:25) we also read about the aid of early Christians to the poor congregations in Jerusalem and Judea. There is no reason why this cannot happen today. If we have real love and are concerned about justice, such kind of help can today be given much easier.

Thus the lesson from the Word of God is that development and aid need not be undertaken on a huge scale. Small-scale projects are often more effective, because the human aspect is acknowledged and people do not lose their own initiative and identity.

- **The poor themselves should not be excluded**

We usually think of the poor as people who should *receive* and not *give*. However, the Bible does not exclude even the poor of their responsibility towards poverty. If we absolve the poor from their responsibility, we do not recognise them as human beings and we encourage self-destructive dependency. Therefore the Bible emphasises that the poor should, as far as possible, take care of themselves and that they should also be willing to help those who have even less than they themselves.

Concerning the first point, listen to the following command: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Tes. 3:10). Keep in mind that this reminder applies to those who are not *willing* to work. Today there are many who are willing, but they *cannot* find a job. 1 Timothy 5:3 ff.

emphasises the same principle and concludes (verse 8): “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

With regard to the second point (that the poor have to help others who are poorer), listen to the following command of John the Baptist: “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same” (Luke 3:11). The poor widow did not ask to be excused to give (Luke 21:1-4) because of her financial position (she donated two copper coins), but she also did not perish from hunger because she gave everything she had. Also the poor congregations in Macedonia had good reasons to be exempted from collections for the poor in Jerusalem. They, however, gave beyond their ability (2 Cor. 8:2, 3).

We should never take away the responsibility – and joy – from the poor to give to those who are even poorer. We should also not underestimate the knowledge and resourcefulness of the poor to solve their own problems. Our own “solutions” should not be forced on them. Such an approach is bound to fail, because the poor will experience it as something strange to them – even as offensive paternalism.

### Only the beginning

We have learned a lot from the Bible about poverty and wealth. We should never think that we have learned enough – much more can be learned. We should also not be satisfied about what we have heard. The Biblical message about poverty is very clear: we have to do something about it!

Africa lost much during the previous century – land, dignity, peace. Let us as Christians, however, not succumb to Afro-pessimism. Africa can be reborn, it can experience a real renaissance in the 21st century. The president of South Africa, Mr. Thabo Mbeki, is fully aware of the numerous problems we are facing on this continent, but, in spite of that, he dared to declare at the end of the previous century: “Africa’s time has come ... the new century must be an African century!”