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**Christian Ministry in the Context of Poverty of the  
Majority and Affluence of the Minority**

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## ABSTRACT

The economic and social divide between the majority poor and the minority rich has been a concern for the church and Christian ministry. This divide continues to widen. In the context of the majority poor and the minority rich, the Bible is an invaluable source of guidance for effective mission. Questions relating to the biblical perspective on wealth and poverty are important to Christians and the ministry of the church. A biblical view of wealth is important if we are to live godly lives, avoid moderation on the one hand and avarice on the other. Also, a biblical view of poverty is vital if we are to fulfill our Christian mission of love and care of the poor.

## Introduction

A clear understanding regarding the economic and social divide between the poor and rich, and the responsibilities of the church is essential to the Christian faith. In general, wealth and poverty are asymmetrical social realities that portray an unjust distribution of material resources and power in varied scales. They are realities used to measure particular standards of living in societies and cultures worldwide. The gap between the majority poor and minority rich keeps widening. Of the seven billion people in the world, fifty percent are living on \$2.50 a day, and three billion on less than \$2.50 a day.

Even though the concepts of wealth and poverty are generally understood from a strictly economic perspective, they are often packed with value-loaded implications. Wealth is most times identified with power and happiness. Poverty is often identified with powerlessness and unhappiness.

Emmanuel Clapsis states:

Wealth is a multivalent concept loaded with multiple ideological complex meanings. It evokes difficulty to disengage attitudes of prosperity, power, social status, security and personal success. It decisively contributes to people's assumption of self-worth. Poverty on the

other hand is a concept that refers to 'pronounced deprivation in well-being.'<sup>1</sup>

In Christianity "wealth and poverty are mostly embodied notions. The Church in its biblical and patristic tradition addresses rich people, who often in their avarice have accumulated excessive wealth at the expense of the poor, and also poor people, who in their destitute are homeless, starving, sick, illiterate and suffering."<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the majority poor and the minority rich, the Bible is an invaluable source of guidance for effective mission. Questions relating to the biblical perspective on wealth and poverty are important to Christians. A biblical view of wealth is important if we are to live godly lives, avoiding moderation on the one hand and avarice on the other. Also, a biblical view of poverty is vital if we are to fulfill our Christian mission to the poor.

The material in the Gospels about the rich and the poor is set against a background of the society in Jesus' day and the manner in which the Jews were reacting to the world (Davids, 1992: 701).<sup>3</sup> The world of first-century Judaism was very different from ours today, and was not made up of the social classes we have today. In fact, the majority of the first-century Palestinian world was made up of two groups: the rich and the poor.<sup>4</sup> There was hardly a middle group.

Further, the religiously and socially wealthy were divided into two main groups: "the observant Jewish leaders and those associated

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<sup>1</sup>Emmanuel Clapsis, "Wealth and Poverty in Christian Tradition," 1. <http://www.iocc.org/orthodoxdiakonia/content/revclapsis.pdf>. Accessed 30 September 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Clapsis, "Wealth and Poverty," 1.

<sup>3</sup>Peter H. Davids, "Rich and Poor," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green et al, eds (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 701.

<sup>4</sup>Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 17.

with the Herodians and Romans who were accepted for their power but made outcasts for their lack of morality."<sup>5</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, significantly poor minorities existed in the larger part of society.

Although a very small number of middle class individuals, composed of skilled and vocational workers, artisans, medium land farm owners, and merchants existed, almost everyone outside the two major groups of wealthy people was considered poor.<sup>6</sup> The poor would include everyone from small land-owners, tenant farmers, and traders such as fishermen and carpenters down to those who owned no land, did not possess artistic skills, or were even slaves or beggars.<sup>7</sup>

The issue of wealth and poverty was more important to Luke than to any of the other three gospels as part of both the tradition of Jesus, and as a message for the Christian communities to whom he is writing.<sup>8</sup> Luke is socially conscious and this consciousness "is generally supported in five significant emphases: (1) his considerable focus on the rich and the poor, (2) prominent inclusion of women, (3) acceptance of religious and social outcasts, (4) healing as a noteworthy part of Jesus' ministry and that of His followers, and (5) exhortations to and examples of almsgiving."<sup>9</sup>

Luke has "proportionally more material than the other Gospels dealing with the rich and the poor"<sup>10</sup> and he is "particularly fond of exhortations to and examples of almsgiving."<sup>11</sup> Luke gives us "a vast

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<sup>5</sup>Davids, "Rich and Poor," 702.

<sup>6</sup>Davids, "Rich and Poor," 702.

<sup>7</sup>Davids, "Rich and Poor," 702.

<sup>8</sup>Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Samantha R. Brewer, "Wealth and Poverty in Luke's Gospel and Acts: A Challenge to the Christian Church," *Encounter: Journal for Pentecostal Ministry*6 (2009): 2.

<sup>10</sup> S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor*, 16.

amount of information involving economics for the Christian community.”<sup>12</sup>

## **Biblical Perspectives on Wealth**

Our carnal and materialistic culture is luring many Christians into questionable economic lifestyles that do not glorify God. Christian believers are bombarded with unbiblical views of wealth. At one end of the spectrum we have those who preach a prosperity gospel of "health and wealth" for all believers. At the other end are radical Christians who condemn all wealth and imply that wealth is a corrupting agent that estranged the Christians from God as buttressed in Proverbs 30:8-9 and Hosea 13:6 which state that wealth often tempts people to forget about God.

Persons with this radical view further support their argument with 1Timothy 6:9-10 that states: "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”

The Bible seems to teach that wealth is evil. It even appears to condemn the wealthy. For example, James 5:1-6 states that:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries

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<sup>12</sup> Brewer, "Wealth and Poverty in Luke's Gospel and Acts," 2.

of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

Both Jesus and the Old Testament prophets cautioned against material possession. But a closer look at the appropriate passages reveals that a biblical view of wealth is more complex. In Genesis 13:2 we read that Abraham had great wealth. In Job 42:10 God once again blessed Job with material possessions. In Deuteronomy 8: 28, Proverbs 22:2, and Ecclesiastes 5:19, wealth is seen as evidence of God's blessing, and is not condemned.

Among the people in the Gospels that were involved with Jesus:

A number can be identified as wealthy and even upper class people. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and very rich. He was honored to have Jesus as his guest (Lk 19:1-10). Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, came to Jesus seeking help for his daughter (Lk. 8:40-56). Joseph of Arimathea was an early convert and very wealthy (Mt. 27:57). Joanna, the wife of Chuza who was steward of Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee, also was an early convert and a generous contributor to the support of Jesus and his disciples (Lk. 8:3). Susanna was another wealthy woman who helped finance Jesus (Lk. 8:3). In Mt. 26: 6-11, we learn that while Jesus was seated for dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee (Lk. 7:36), 'a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment and poured it on his head.' When his disciples became indignant because it could 'have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor,' Jesus responded to them, 'Why do you trouble this woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you will always have the poor with you, but you

will not always have me.’<sup>13</sup>

However, though wealth is seen as evidence of God's blessing, Christians are not to trust in it. Proverbs 11:4, 28; Jeremiah 9:23; 1 Timothy 6:17; James 1:11, 5:2 teach that the Christian should not trust in wealth but in God.

When wealth in the Bible was condemned, it was done so because of the means by which the owner obtained his riches, not because of the wealth itself. In the Old Testament, Amos 4:11, 5:11 preached vehemently against the injustice of acquiring riches through oppression or fraud. Micah 6:1 spoke against the unjust scales and light weights with which Israel defrauded the poor. Amos and Micah did not condemn wealth as such; they only criticized the unjust means by which it was obtained.

No doubt, Christians are to be concerned about the effect wealth can have on their lives. Many wealthy persons no longer look to God for their provision because they can meet their basic needs. Wealth often leads to pride and arrogance (Prov 28:11 and Jer 9:23). So, the Bible does not condemn those who are wealthy. But it does warn us that if God blesses us with wealth, we must keep our priorities straight and guard against the seductive effects of wealth. In summary:

Wealth in the biblical...tradition is not in itself a wicked thing, or necessarily either the result or sign of an idolatrous pattern of living. This is particularly important given the tendency that we have to shift imperceptibly from the concept "rich" to the concept "rich oppressor." Generally, wealth is good (Eccl 13:24) as long as it does not result from the oppression of the needy (Prov. 10:2; 11:16-18; 14; 31) or become a

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<sup>13</sup> Rodney Stark, "Early Christianity: Opiate of the Privileged?" *Faith & Economics* 54 (Fall 2009): 5.

false source of security or hope (Ps. 33:16; 49:6-8). In Wisdom, we also find the perception that wealth and poverty are each in their fashion a testing of faith from God.... Job when destitute declared: "the Lord gave to me, and the Lord has taken away; blessed is the name of the Lord". Job did not get his wealth by oppression (31:13-22), nor did he confuse his great wealth with the true center of his being (Job 31:24-28). This refutes the haste and misguided judgment that the suffering of the poor, the needy, and the sick is generally a punishment from God and the wealth and prosperity of the rich is blessing, a reward for virtue.<sup>14</sup>

### **Biblical Views of Poverty**

One of the causes of poverty in the Bible is oppression and fraud. In the Old Testament many people were poor because they were oppressed by individuals or powers. Most times, the authorities established unjust laws or promoted measures that resulted in the exploitation of individuals.

Misfortune, persecution, and wrong judgment were also causing of poverty. God allowed Satan to test Job by bringing misfortune upon him (Job 1:12-19). Misfortune or God's judgment are brought on disobedient people (Ps 109:16; Isa 47:9; Lam 5:3). When the children of Israel disobeyed God, God permitted foreign nations to take them into captivity as a judgment for their disobedience.

Proverbs 10:4; 13:4; 19:15; 20:13; 23:21 reveal that some people are poor because of improper habits and apathy. The culture of poverty is also a cause of poverty. According to Proverbs 10:15: "The ruin of the poor is their poverty." Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken. People who grow up in an impoverished culture

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<sup>14</sup>Clapsis, "Wealth and Poverty," 4.



usually lack the nutrition and the education that would enable them to be successful in the future. Irrespective of the causes of poverty:

God made special provisions for specific groups of poor people (Exod 23:6; Lev 19:9-10; Deut 15:11; 24:19-22; Prov 22:22-23; Isa 25:4). God kept the plight of the poor in mind when giving instruction for sacrifices. The regulations regarding the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee were meant to keep any individual or group from oppressing another group. The issue of poverty was addressed to the people as a whole rather than to individuals, and unified Israel was promised to avoid poverty if they were obedient to God.<sup>15</sup>

### **The marginalised in society:**

The poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens-become the scale on which the justice of the whole society is weighed. When the marginalized ones are exploited or forgotten that is a definite sign that God is forgotten and/or is not authentically worshipped. In Deuteronomy 15:4-5 the promise is given that: 'there will be no poor among you (for the Lord will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess), if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God'... The hard reality is also noted, 'The poor will never cease out of the land' (Deut. 15:11). Israel received the mandate: 'therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hands to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land' (Deut. 15:11). In the context of this mandate, the perversion of justice and oppression of the most vulnerable could be primarily an offense against the neighbor, but Lev. 6:2 calls all

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<sup>15</sup>Allen C. Myers et. al, "Poor," in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 341.

manner of oppression and deception a 'breach of faith against the Lord.' The prophetic critique against the oppressors of the poor and those who pervert justice in Israel is expressive of this truth. The prophets consistently maintained that breaking with Yahweh leads to the oppression of the poor and the needy, aliens and laborers, orphans and widows. Those who choose to close their ears to the cry of the poor will find God's ear closed to their own pleas (Prov 21:13; cf Eccl. 4:8).<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusion**

What do the biblical views of wealth and poverty have to say about our Christian ministry to the poor and rich? To start with, we must teach believers to recognize and avoid the dangers of wealth. Greed is not an exclusive attribute of the rich, nor is covetousness an exclusive attribute of the poor. In our Christian mission we must help our flock to guard against the effect of wealth on their spiritual lives. They should know that it is not wrong to own possessions. However, the problem is when their possessions own them. Money is not evil. It is the love for money that is evil. When money owns a person, it controls and dictates his or her behavior. To have control over money is to use it for good, to help the poor and needy.

They should recognize the freedom that comes with simplicity. A simple lifestyle can free them from the dangers of being owned by material possessions. It can also free them for a deeper spiritual life. While simplicity is not an end in itself, it can be a means to a spiritual life of service. Let the rich look for opportunities to give the resources God has blessed them with prudently.

Regarding the poor, it is our Christian mission to care for them and restore their dignity. According to Proverbs 19:17, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deeds" (19:17).

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<sup>16</sup>Clapsis, "Wealth and Poverty," 5-6

The people of God are expected to share their possessions with the poor through almsgiving. God rewards and blesses those who practice almsgiving (Eccl 17:22, 7:32). It provides the best security for life (40:24); it endures forever (40:17), for it is an act of worship to God: "He who gives alms offers thank-offering" (35:2). Faith demands an active love towards the poor and the needy (James 2:15-17).

Pope Francis' calling for 'a poor church' in *EvangeliiGaudium* ("Joy of the Gospel")<sup>17</sup> states that the church's social mission to the poor is to be based on the "Trinitarian model of mutual relationship-intrinsic openness to the other, communion and shared existence, solidarity, autonomy and divergence which uphold each individual-while at the same time allowing our mutual involvement in each other's lives."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*EvangeliiGaudium* is a 2013 apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis on "the church's primary mission of evangelization in the modern world."

<sup>18</sup>Stan Chu Ilo, "The Church of the Poor: Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerable Mission," *Ecclesiology* 10 (2014): 235.

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