

## ***EVANGELICAL VIEWS OF THE POOR AND SOCIAL ETHICS TODAY***

Chris Wigglesworth

### I INTRODUCTION

The crisis through which international relations and the world economy are now passing presents great dangers, and they appear to be growing more serious. We believe that the gap which separates rich and poor countries - a gap so wide that at the extremes people seem to live in different worlds - has not been sufficiently recognised as a major factor in this crisis. It is a great contradiction of our age that these disparities exist - and are in some respects widening - just when human society is beginning to have a clearer perception of how it is interrelated and of how North and South depend on each other in a single world economy.

These opening words of the 1979 Brandt Report<sup>1</sup> would themselves be sufficient reason for taking 'The Poor' as the theme of this first Tyndale Lecture in Ethics. Add to that the growing interest shown in the Report since its publication and it becomes clear that world poverty is widely considered to be one of the major moral issues today. However, it is an issue on which there is a wide range of opinions. The first half of 1981 saw the publication of two significant books, both of which reject the Brandt Report and its programme to cope with world poverty, but for opposite reasons.

One book rejects the view that the West is helping the rest of the world to develop and blames capitalism for the creation of world poverty.<sup>2</sup> The other describes the Brandt Report as 'a signpost to political conflict and a recipe for economic waste' and explains poverty largely through lack of contact with traditional Western

1. *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (London: Pan, 1980) 30.
2. Teresa Haytor, *The Creation of World Poverty: An Alternative View to the Brandt Report* (London: Pluto, 1981).

systems and values.<sup>3</sup>

At the risk of some oversimplification, it could be said that we have a North-South issue with Left, Centre and Right attitudes, and that when we look at views expressed in the Church, just as with many other ethical issues, we find a corresponding range of attitudes on poverty. A large proportion of the 10,000 people lobbying Parliament regarding the Brandt Report in May 1981 were apparently Christians, but it would be wrong to assume that all British Christians were equally in favour of that lobby. Certainly many people associated with evangelical relief agencies were not eager to be involved. This might be held to indicate that an evangelical view of poverty is more to the 'right of centre' and that this is explained by a better grasp of biblical teaching on the causes and cures of poverty. This lecture seeks to examine such an hypothesis.

As we examine attitudes to poverty among evangelical Christians an interesting pattern emerges. At the risk of another preliminary oversimplification, it could be claimed that before the formation of TEAR Fund in the 1960s the limited interest in world poverty existing amongst evangelicals was concentrated on alleviating hunger through missionary societies. At that time Christian Aid was concerning itself more with economic uplift through development projects. Interest in TEAR Fund has grown enormously in the last five years and its emphasis has moved to development schemes. Over the same period Christian Aid has increasingly lent its support to programmes concerned with social justice, trade policies, education for development, and the like.

An American evangelical sociologist several years ago propounded the thesis that evangelicals typically attack statements on topical issues prepared by the World Council of Churches and similar bodies 'with the help of clichés, appeals to tradition, and proof texts that fit their preconceived conclusions' but that gradually social pressures build up, forcing evangelicals to make a careful study of the issue with the result that

3. P. T. Bauer, *Equality, the Third World and Economic Delusion* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981) 140.

'eventually they arrive at the same practical conclusions as most other Christians who took a stand ten to thirty or more years earlier'.<sup>4</sup> Was this a valid observation which equally applies to our topic, despite its somewhat cynical tone, and do we explain this phenomenon as conformity to the spirit of the age, as caution, or as cowardice?

## II VIEWS OF THE WORLD

Before we go on to a more detailed examination of representative views of the poor held by Christians of an evangelical persuasion, it will be instructive to look at some of the terminology used about world poverty and at the questions this matter raises.

The term 'South', for example, is comparatively new in discussions of world poverty and international development. It is not found even in recent dictionaries, except as 'the opposite of North' and a 1981 encyclopaedia only squeezed in a passing reference in its entry on 'underdevelopment'.<sup>5</sup> The Brandt Report itself recognises the limitations of dividing the world into two camps, but is clear about its usage: "'North" and "South" are broadly synonymous with "rich" and "poor", "developed" and "developing"'.<sup>6</sup> In fact the history of this terminology throws an interesting light on the history of perceptions of poverty. Some writers see the variety of terms currently in use as equally equivocal. In 1971 Professor P. T. Bauer of the London School of Economics considered that 'underdeveloped', 'developing' and 'less developed' were inappropriate euphemisms, 'induced in part by political considerations but mainly by the emergence and extension of feelings of guilt in industrialised western society. Poor, or materially backward, are the most appropriate expressions'.<sup>7</sup> In his newer book, quoted above (note 3),

4. D. Moberg in 1967 in *The Great Reversal: Evangelism versus Social Concern* (London: Scripture Union, 1973) 40.
5. Not even the 1982 edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary has picked up this usage.
6. *North-South* 31.
7. *Dissent on Development* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971) xxiv.

where he pursues the theme, all the terms are simply accepted as synonyms.<sup>8</sup>

The American Liberal Christian sociologist, Peter Berger, in an interesting study of political ethics and social change, *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, sees more in terminology:

When the West was still Christian in its outlook, the others were "heathen". Then they became "the uncivilized" or more optimistically "the less civilized", as Western imperial power came to be conceived of as a "civilizing" mission. Before the Second World War the most common appellation was "backward". After the Second World War, with the coming of the United Nations, those others began to participate in the naming game. "Underdeveloped countries" became "developing countries." Since the Bandung Conference, in the mid 1950s, the term "Third World" has generated a mystique all of its own.<sup>9</sup>

Berger might have added that since the 1973 Algiers Conference of Non-Aligned Countries with its call for a 'New International Economic Order' the term 'North-South dialogue' has come into use.

I would suggest that there has been a corresponding terminological shift in ecclesiastical language, at a slower pace of course, as our perception of the church has altered - a shift from thinking of sending Church and mission field, through 'mother-church' and 'daughter-church' to 'older churches' and 'younger churches', and now to the term coined by Walbert Bullmann, 'Third Church'.<sup>10</sup>

'Third World' and 'Third Church' can be taken in different ways: 'third' may evoke ideas of 'third class' and 'third division', or else hint at the 'Third Age of the Spirit' of Joachim of Fiore, with 'third' as future.

8. *Equality* v.

9. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977, 23-24.

10. *The Coming of the Third Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977).

Certainly the centre of gravity of the Church has moved from the West and by the start of the Third Millennium probably two-thirds of the Church will be in the 'Third World'.<sup>11</sup>

In any case perhaps most people would agree with Berger's conclusion that 'the basic division is between rich and poor countries, rich and poor not necessarily in possession of natural resources, but in ability to utilize these resources for themselves'.<sup>12</sup>

All the same, people do not all see this poverty in the same light, as to either its causes or its cure. It seems that the fact of poverty needs clearer definition. Certain anomalies exist. In particular, one of the first things a visitor from the rich 'North' notices on arrival in the poor 'South' is the extreme contrast there between rich and poor, especially in the rapidly growing metropolitan areas like Mexico City or New Delhi. That visitor may go on to discover that many of the resident rich seem quite oblivious to the contrast and that even more disconcertingly many of the poor appear fully resigned to the situation. Before very long the same visitor may begin to wonder if the poverty is really so bad after all.

On the other hand, when perceptive visitors from the Third World come to the West they notice evidence here of serious inequality and felt deprivation and even of actual poverty - only to be told by many of the better-off that there is no 'real' poverty here, and by some of those who have lived in poverty for years that apart from their own families there are no poor people around. Sociologists have documented this anomaly.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly some have concluded that there is no poverty in the West and that likewise conditions may not

11. A better phrase now coming into use is 'two-thirds world', with its reminder of where the majority lives.
12. *Pyramids* 24.
13. See especially W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (London: RKP, 1966); P. Townsend, *Poverty in the UK* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), especially 427-431; or more recently, F. Field, *Inequality in Britain* (London: Fontana, 1981) 21ff.

be so bad in the Third World as the relief agencies make out. A more legitimate response is to examine how poverty is actually defined and measured in the various situations,

### III VIEWS OF POVERTY

Any attempts at a definition of poverty involve some study of its nature, its causes and of possible responses to the problems that its existence creates. This has produced the variety of approaches mentioned at the start, not least amongst evangelical Christians, and I have chosen to examine a selection of these views before discussing whether some views of the poor are more satisfactory than others when tested against Scripture and the facts of the contemporary world.

Four approaches have been distinguished for this purpose and these have been labelled somewhat irreverently as 'left', 'right', 'centre' and 'up', at the risk of a degree of arbitrariness and facile oversimplification, which might be defended on the grounds that most thoughtful evangelical contributions to the subject can be placed in one or other of these categories. All four have a history in the Church, coming into prominence at different periods and no attempt is made here to deal with historical questions, beyond illustrative references. Instead, after outlining these approaches, we shall make an attempt at evaluation,

#### A. *An Evil to be Removed*

Let us first look at the view that poverty is an evil and one which should be removed by local and international redistribution of wealth. Poverty, it is held, has been caused by the rich of the world and its removal involves both the political decisions of nations and also the action of individuals. The leading evangelical advocate of this view is the American Baptist theologian, Ronald J. Sider, whose book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977) is sufficiently well-known for awareness of its thesis to be assumed. Instead, reference will be made to Third World sources since this is the dominant view there,

The 1979 Madras Declaration of an All-India Conference on Evangelical Social Action described poverty as a 'systemic evil' and said that God's mission in Christ 'delivers the poor from their destitution, challenges unjust structures and systems and demonstrates new economic, social and political relationships'.<sup>14</sup> In 1981 the Association for Theological Extension in India (TAFTEE) brought out a programmed-learning course, *Poverty and Development*, which gets students to study the available data about poverty in India and the rest of the world and also to become involved in understanding the daily lives of poor people by getting to know some of them. In the process, students might establish the fact that poverty is not explained by special circumstances but by the concentration of power in the hands of the rich. In this approach an explicit appeal is made to the actions of Jesus Christ by which he combatted poverty, oppression and exclusion, to show his overall social and economic stance on the side of the poor. This in turn is held to define the pattern of contemporary Christian discipleship as that of helping the Church to give clear priority to the needs of the socially, politically and economically poor.<sup>15</sup> In the USA this requires that 'we must say that it is a sin for Western politicians to support third world regimes which grind the face of the poor and it is a sin to vote for politicians who do so'.<sup>16</sup>

According to this view the Church and its mission bodies have had a double role, not only relieving poverty but also creating it wherever they have served the economic interests of the rich.

#### B. *A Sin to be Repented of*

A very different view of the matter has been advocated in two recent articles on poverty in *Christian Graduate* (now *Christian Arena*), the magazine of the British UCCF Associates. In an article, 'World Poverty and Christian Responsibility',<sup>17</sup> Michael Alison rejects Sider's views as 'meaningless' and 'invalid'. While agreeing that poverty is at least unfortunate, it is

14. The text is now available as Appendix 3 in C. Sugden, *Radical Discipleship* (London: Marshall, 1981) 184-189.
15. A view expounded by V. K. Samuel in *The Meaning and Cost of Discipleship* (Bombay: BUILD, 1981) 17-19.
16. J. Alexander, writing in *The Other Side*, March 1980.
17. In *Christian Graduate* (December 1979) 13-17.

held that it is caused by 'peoples' economic qualities and attitudes' (a quotation from one of P. T. Bauer's lectures) or, more specifically, by a lack of the Protestant ethic, and therefore by insufficient contact with western, Christian-inspired 'wealth-creating processes'<sup>18</sup>. Poverty, according to Alison, is not as widespread as Sider alleges, since at the most in 1970 only 'a little over 10% of the world's population are severely malnourished' (*i.e.*, 460 million people, but it should be noted that in 1980 the World Bank put the figure of those living in absolute poverty at 800 million, *i.e.*, 40 per cent of the population of Third World countries). Alison also argues that official, government aid has been shown to be undesirable for development, since Britain came up without any such help.

The other article, 'Some questions about structural sin',<sup>19</sup> asserts that it is misleading to say God is on the side of the poor since he is against those whose poverty is their own fault and those who are idolatrous. The removal of poverty is a good work but it should not be confused with Christ's redemptive work. Poverty is therefore best not to be termed structural sin but structural injustice which 'relates to the sphere of law rather than of grace'.<sup>20</sup>

Stronger statements by evangelical Christians of this second view that poverty is the fault of people themselves, or their culture, or their own rich neighbours, or the accidents of nature, and that poverty is not a central issue in the Gospel, can be found in the publications of the American writers, Rousas John Rushdoony, Gary North and their colleagues. According to the former, 'in naturally rich India millions go hungry because in their religious folly they refuse to kill and thereby perpetuate animal life'.<sup>21</sup> He believes

18. *Christian Graduate* (December 1979) 17.

19. D. P. Kingdon in *Christian Graduate* (June 1980) 10-13.

20. *Ibid.* 13. In the succeeding issue, September 1980, O. R. Barclay accepted this view but suggested modifying 'injustice' to 'evil' since involvement may be a necessary evil but guilt in a biblical sense is not present and sin is something a Christian cannot accept.

21. R. J. Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig, 1970) 371.



that the historical causes of hunger are fourfold: 'the prevention of cultivation or the wilful destruction of crops; defective agriculture caused by communistic control of land; governmental interference by regulation or taxation; and currency restrictions, including debasing the coin'.<sup>22</sup> Rushdoony believes that a 'free economy' like the USA rightly 'penalises the less capable, the less provident and the lazy' and rewards 'men of ability, industry and foresight'. The world's wealth today is actually 'the capital of Christian civilisation and is ours to enjoy'.<sup>23</sup> The Bible indicates that people's economic blessings are positively correlated with their 'adherence to biblical righteousness'.<sup>24</sup> Thus poverty is a spiritual problem and its cure is conversion of the individual. Meanwhile, however, it is our duty to do individual, voluntary works of mercy to deserving, poor people.

On this view poverty is basically caused by non-economic factors, meaning not the greed of the West but the religions of the East. The Brandt Report is wrong to assume that all cultures are to be treated equally and to seek the removal of economic inequalities. western, Christian culture is better and has been proved to succeed by the 'Weber-Tawney thesis'.

On this latter point, which is fairly often popularised,<sup>25</sup> it is important to be aware of what R. H. Tawney actually wrote, notably his criticism of the late-Puritan surrender to individualism ('minding your own business') and the failure to realise that the formation of character is social and spiritual. For Tawney 'compromise is as impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the

22. Rushdoony, *Politics* 223.

23. *Ibid.* 238, 240.

24. T. Rose, 'Economics from a Christian Perspective', *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 2 (1975) 15, 16.

25. As, for example, by Sir Frederick Catherwood in *The Christian in Industrial Society*, third edition, Leicester, IVP, 1980. See the Appendix and note both the disclaimer as to the absolute validity of the 'thesis' and also the revisions compared to the first (1964) edition. See also S. Webley, *What shall it profit?* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1981) 66-69.

practical religion of capitalist societies, as it was between the Church and the State idolatry of the Roman empire'.<sup>26</sup> Success measured in GNP terms is a dangerous index for divine blessing - there may be a connection between late-Puritan hyper-Calvinism's private enterprise and contemporary OPEC-related Islam, but I am not sure that it is a good one!

*C. A Problem to be Managed*

A third view of the poor lies somewhere in between the previous two. Poverty is seen as an evil and perhaps for this reason cannot always be explained. It can, however, be minimised by organisation, including restraint on economic growth by the rich.

In many respects this is the standpoint of the Brandt Report. In the words of its chairman:

Focussing on questions of historical guilt will not provide answers to the crucial problem of self-responsibility on which alone mutual respect can build. . . We also want to make it manifest that mankind is faced with very critical issues. They are not hopeless, if decision-makers of the world lend their weight to the solutions. Situations are seldom hopeless if they are not accepted as such. And hope itself is the most important element in overcoming obstacles which might otherwise seem to be insurmountable.<sup>27</sup>

Richard Mouw, in his *Politics and the Biblical Drama*, adopts this mediating approach, urging the need to minister to both rich and poor. After all, Zacchaeus was a rich and powerful man. His gifts to the poor and repayments 'probably left him reasonably well off'. Similarly, Christ's words to the rich, young ruler

26. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1938) 253. See also R. H. Preston, *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism* (London: SCM, 1979) which on Tawney's thesis is for me at least far more convincing than those works mentioned in the previous note:
27. W. Brandt in the Introduction to the Brandt Report, *North-South* 25.

should not be erected into a theology of wealth. At the same time concern for the poor is the basic test of the obedience of the Church.<sup>28</sup> Mouw quotes Calvin in his support and this general view can be seen in some of the actions of other early reformers also - Luther, Carlstadt and Zwingli - though it is significant that it seems to have petered out in the next generation.<sup>29</sup>

Scriptural support for this view has been drawn from Jesus' ministry of doing good and healing all and from such commands as 'not one of your people will be poor if you obey the Lord your God and carefully observe everything that I command you' (see Dt. 15:4-5). The theological basis has been seen in the Reformation understanding of grace as God's downward gift in Jesus Christ, freeing the believer to serve those in need in as practical and organised a way as possible.

#### D. *A Blessing to All*

A fourth view of poverty completes this survey and may appear to disturb the 'left, centre and right' schema suggested above. This standpoint emphasises that, especially in its biblical usage, the term 'poor' has both a religious and an economic connotation and it asserts that the religious meaning provides the deeper understanding of poverty as fundamentally good. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' is taken to show that there is a dignity in poverty, particularly where the materially poor can discover the inner truth and where the materially rich can cultivate true poverty of spirit.

A generation ago this was the dominant view in evangelical writing, as evidenced in commentaries on the Gospels and in devotional material. It is still widely adopted in practice but is less often openly advocated, partly because of 'the current theological climate', as one of its recent and tentative exponents expresses it.<sup>30</sup>

28. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976, 70-80.

29. See C. Lindberg's comments in 'Through a Glass Darkly: a History of the Church's Vision of the Poor and Poverty', *The Ecumenical Review* 33 (1981) 37-53.

30. D. C. Jones, 'Who Are the Poor?', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 2 (1978) 214-226, esp. 219.

Bible Dictionaries tend to adopt this approach; for example, the article on 'Poverty' in the recent Inter-Varsity Press *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.<sup>31</sup> This states: 'The poor are often shown to be happier than the rich, because it is easier for them to have an attitude of dependence upon God. . . It is they who are the first to be blessed. . . if their poverty is the acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy'. They must be helped, 'though charity was to be secondary to worship (Jn. 12:1-8)'.<sup>32</sup> A short paper in a recent issue of the Journal of the Theological Research and Communication Institute, an Indian evangelical study fellowship, argues that Lazarus went to Abraham's bosom so there is blessing in being poor but also that 'in Hebrew and Christian traditions the relief of poverty has always been considered a virtue'.<sup>33</sup>

In fact the prevalent approach in the history of the church has been that the rich by relieving poverty do a good thing both to the recipients and to themselves, hence poverty is good for everybody - though this view is rarely put so plainly nowadays.

The Reformers by and large rejected this view of 'noble poverty' which made begging respectable. The poor had often been detected abusing their holy status and becoming the 'sturdy beggars' which all Poor Laws have tried to root out - the undeserving poor who lack moral fibre, the scroungers in a welfare state. However, the 'spiritual' view persisted, with its concept of the believer as a pilgrim rising towards God by using the world's poor as a help to acts of charity and thus transferring treasure to heaven. The reader is invited to attribute this quotation:

If we believe heaven is our country, it is better to transmit our possessions there than to keep them here where upon our sudden migration they would be lost to us. But how shall we transmit them?

31. Leicester, IVP, 1980, vol. 3, 1254-1255, which is in fact transferred, unrevised, from the 1962 *New Bible Dictionary* article by the late R. Nixon.
32. *Ibid.* 1255.
33. E. E. James, 'Who are the poor?', *TRACI Journal* 19 (1981) 4-9.

Surely, by providing for the needs of the poor; whatever is paid out to them, the Lord reckons as given to himself. . . He, as a faithful custodian, will one day repay it with plentiful interest.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, Mouw quotes a similar passage from one of the writer's sermons to prove that reformed theology stresses concern for the poor.<sup>35</sup> It could at least as well be argued that the mercantilist language and the ambiguous view of the usefulness of the poor in helping us explain how within a couple of generations a commercial version of the mediaeval view had reasserted itself over the preventative view of the earliest reformers.<sup>36</sup>

In any case, this spiritual view of poverty needs as careful an examination in the light of the biblical material as do the other three attitudes, before we decide where the truth of the matter lies.

#### IV THE APPEAL TO THE BIBLE

Evangelicals advocating these varied views all naturally seek biblical justification. It is instructive, for example, to contrast the use made of parables by Sider and Rushdoony. The 'Good Samaritan' is an obvious choice for social ethics, as even our Prime Minister has on occasion recognised. Sider's modern paraphrase starts his section on 'Structural Change':

A group of devout Christians once lived in a small village at the foot of a mountain. A winding, slippery road with hairpin curves. . . There were frequent fatal accidents. Deeply saddened by the injured people. . . (the Christians) pooled their resources and purchased an ambulance.—

34. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.18.6 (translation of F. L. Battles in LCC 20 827).

35. *Politics* 74, referring to one of Calvin's sermons on Dt. 15:11-15.

36. See Lindberg, 'Through a Glass Darkly', for a fuller discussion of this point.

Week after week Church volunteers gave faithfully. . . they saved many lives. . . Then one day a visitor came to the town. Puzzled, he asked why they did not close the road over the mountain and build a tunnel instead. . . the ambulance volunteers quickly pointed out that. . . the narrow, mountain road had been there for a long time. Besides, the mayor. . . owned a large restaurant and service station half-way up the mountain. The visitor was shocked that the Mayor's economic interests mattered more. . . he was an elder in the oldest church in town. Perhaps they should even elect a different Mayor. . . Now the Christians were shocked. . . the Church dare not become involved in politics. . . the visitor left. . . Is it more spiritual, he wondered, to operate the ambulances which pick up the bloody victims of destructive social structures than to try to change the structures themselves?<sup>37</sup>

Now compare Rushdoony in the course of justifying the distinction between compassion or works of mercy and true charity which he considers should be restricted to relationships between true believers:

In works of mercy, the relationship is different. The Good Samaritan, like all Samaritans, had no use for Jews as such but he had compassion on a Jew's need. . . He made provision for a Jew's care and passed on. He was under no obligation to change his religious concepts or have further relations with the Jew. Thus, the work of mercy is a humane act, requiring no further involvement. . .

A couple of chapters later Rushdoony's terminology has shifted but the distinction is kept:

The good neighbour, the Samaritan. . . offers charity, assistance to help the man on his feet again and then passes on. . . The Good Samaritan shares no property but reveals rather a sense of compassion. . . Samaritans and Jews had religious and racial differences and hated one another. The Samaritan did not change his opinion of Jews. He

37. The full version is in *Rich Christians* 177-178.

showed respect for the person and needs of the Jew and then passed on. . . The Samaritan did not subsidize the Jew, he merely rescued him and then went his way.<sup>38</sup>

A comparison of attitudes to the Old Testament laws on the land, and on the seventh (or sabbath) and fiftieth (or jubilee) years is more intriguing. Sider regards these as 'mechanisms and structures to prevent great economic inequality among his people. . . Every fifty years God said, all land was to return to the original owners - without compensation! . . . a law which would equalize land ownership every fifty years. . . Yahweh's ownership of everything is the presupposition. . . Before and after the year of Jubilee land could be bought or sold. But the buyer actually purchased a specific number of harvests, not the land itself. . . There is no hint here of some sacred law of supply and demand. . . It is to be the poor person's right to receive back his inheritance'. 'The sabbatical release of debts was an institutionalised mechanism preventing an ever growing gap between rich and poor.' Tithing and gleaning 'extend the concern' of the seventh and fiftieth years. 'The poor widow, Ruth, was able to survive. . . because God's law decreed that farmers should leave some of the harvest for the poor. . . The memory of their own poverty and oppression in Egypt was to prompt them. . . "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt"'.<sup>39</sup>

Rushdoony sees matters rather differently. Gleaning is 'the fundamental form of charity in biblical law'.<sup>40</sup> The landowner 'had the responsibility of determining who was worthy in his eyes for the privilege of gleaning'. Hence, 'Boaz selected Ruth as a particularly deserving person' (*Politics* 66). Gleaning was 'charity in which the recipient had to work', thus gaining self-respect.<sup>41</sup>

38. *Politics* 68, 93-94.

39. *Rich Christians* 78-83.

40. *Politics* 65.

41. See also Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) 247-249, 252, where he concedes that Deuteronomy describes a form of gleaning where the 'deservingness' is not required.

According to Rushdoony, 'pity on God's part is never promiscuous but always selective and, according to Scripture, is to be selective on man's part also' (p. 65). The fact that destruction of the Amalekites is enjoined in the same section of Exodus which requires care of widows, orphans and the like is held to prove this. There is to be no identification with the ungodly; at the most separate coexistence.<sup>42</sup>

For Rushdoony the purpose of biblical laws on property is 'the preservation of man from the attempts of the state to become god over man, and to assert the total dominion of God over society' (p. 172). Christian social ethics is really meant to defend the rights of those with property. The fact that the biblical law prevented the permanent sale of land is not only to prevent the concentration of land but also to make the rural population 'an area of conservatism'. The land itself was not taxed because 'the power to tax is the power to confiscate' (p. 166). On the other hand debt and interest are legitimate and 'it is not the money-lender who creates the debtor-slave but the debtor-slave who creates the money-lender' who cannot be blamed if he lends 'honestly and legitimately' (pp. 204-206). Some people choose slavery, hence the pierced-ear provision in Exodus 21. In any case, the sabbath and jubilee years did not apply to 'unbelieving foreigners', unlike the ten commandments, so charity to the undeserving means robbing the 'godly and provident' and leads 'directly into welfare economics and socialism' (p. 248). The special years show that 'the believer cannot mortgage his future' (p. 249) and are types of the work of Christ - 'man ceases from working because he knows that it is God's work of grace that saves him' (p. 250).

One is left wondering whether Rushdoony and Sider live in the same world, let alone the same nation with the same Bible. Both cannot be right. Is either, or is it one of the other approaches?

42. *Politics* 83-84. On this reasoning the command to kill witches (or sorceresses, NIV), which is in ever closer proximity to the prohibition of oppressing aliens (Ex. 22:18, 22), might be held to encourage the elimination of horoscope writers; not to mention the need to 'nuke' twentieth-century Amalekites like the Russians: See Rushdoony, *Institutes* 312-323, if this seems far-fetched.



## V A BIBLICAL EVALUATION

How do we avoid the arbitrary application of Scripture to the problem of poverty? I believe we have to be prepared to hear something new from the text in response to the questions we are forced to ask because of actual involvement in making Jesus Christ real in our contemporary world. I think this is an approach which is analogous to Peter Stuhlmacher's 'hermeneutics of consent'<sup>43</sup> and which tries to take seriously Hans-Georg Gadamer's insistence that we must be 'from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness'.<sup>44</sup>

In what follows this approach is taken in relation to Yahweh's concern for the poor seen in the 'Book of the Covenant' (Exodus 20:22-23:19), and to Christ's distinctive deeds and words in this same concern.

A. *Old Testament*

Traditional evangelical apologetics and the biblical theology movement have tended to claim that any concern for the poor and downtrodden was peculiar to the Old Testament in the ancient world. In fact, there is sufficient evidence to show that Yahweh was similar to the other gods of the ancient Near East in showing, through words and historical acts, a covenant relationship involving power, justice and mercy.<sup>45</sup> The difference was Yahweh's distinctive concern for the poor and oppressed shown by their deliverance from the injustice of slavery in Egypt, their settlement as a free people in Canaan, with laws given by the Lord himself, not by a king. It was distinctive to declare

43. *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1979) 83-87.
44. *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975) 238.
45. This section draws on the work of H. E. von Waldow, 'Social Responsibility and Social Structure in Early Israel', *CBQ* 32 (1970) 182-204; N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), esp. 182-194 and 667-695; and H. J. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (London: SPCK, 1981).

the monarchy a second-best arrangement, but even more so, a covenant in which God was bound to a body of people, not to a region or to a city, but to an intertribal society where kinship was less important than the fact of the Lord's initiative in making them into one people. Unlike other nations, neither the priestly leaders nor the army were specially favoured, but the poor and oppressed were. This was not some 'cult of poverty' preserving them as a favoured group. Instead the poor, the aliens, the widows and orphans, the barren and the diseased formed what has been termed a 'functional grouping', with a fluctuating membership, not unlike what used to be the case with the majority of the unemployed in Britain, when 'frictional unemployment' was the main type, meaning men and women who were between jobs, rather than the stagnant pool we have recently achieved.

Thus the poor formed a sub-group of the larger society. They were the ones at risk and their existence threatened the solidarity of the Israelite community. Therefore, Yahweh gave them the rights and privileges which would remove their suffering and protect them from injustice. They were not meant to be kept in that condition, as though it was a noble state, instead they were helped to recover full membership of the community.

Yahweh's covenant partner was the whole community of Israel. As Eberhard von Waldow, a Roman Catholic scholar, has put it:

Israel herself was a stranger and a slave without property but Yahweh set her free, gave her property and ruled that she must not afflict the ones in her midst who were in the same position from which Israel was liberated . . . The basic saving event of Yahweh constituted the special character of Israel as the people of God: the liberation from Egypt constituted Israel's characteristic particularity; her attitude to the destitute is the way to maintain it.<sup>46</sup>

The sabbatical year of the Covenant Code is central to this understanding. The produce of the land, including that from orchards and plantations, was meant to belong to the poor in that year (Ex. 23:10-11).

46. Von Waldow, 'Social Responsibility' 201-202.

Compared, for example, to the many property laws in Hammurabi's Code, the Book of the Covenant has a standpoint on land which keeps the normal users of the land very much aware of both Yahweh and those in need, with the demands of righteousness in both directions.

There is a real sense in which the seventh year, and even more the jubilee year, can be understood as a social-ethical expression of the Exodus, just as the Passover was its ritual remembrance. Charitable deeds to individual poor people is less important than a continual, programmed reformation of the social system. The author of a fairly recent dictionary article on 'the poor' was right to summarise the Old Testament legal view thus:

In the long run poverty could be created almost only by unrighteousness, that is, the failure of the community and disobedience to God.<sup>47</sup>

In formulating a biblical view of poverty, it would seem relatively unimportant to settle whether the jubilee year was actually implemented or was an idealised expression, or to decide whether accounts of the conquest of Canaan are historicised to describe what should have happened rather than being straight records. In any case, the emphasis is that the land belonged to the Lord and was meant to be divided up equally amongst families according to need, with individuals being prohibited from selling off what belonged to the family group. This is a picture of a society of free peasants on small land-holdings of similar size - destroyed in practice by the establishment of a monarchy. One might be reminded of the comment by radical Christian groups during the seventeenth century that the land of Canaan was shared out amongst the people at the conquest but that William the Conqueror divided England amongst his friends. Certainly the prophetic critique against concentration of land in the hands of the few - 'Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land' (Is. 5:8, NIV) - was

47. L. Coenen in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1976) vol. 2, 820.

based on some such understanding. Whatever the connection with 'wisdom thought' and forms of general revelation, there seems to be a strong link with the belief that Yahweh entrusted his land to people, even as he set them free.

It may be that social activists prefer to quote the prophets while more moderate people are drawn to the wisdom literature and those who despair of a better world stress apocalyptic passages, but even a cursory examination of the Old Testament seems to rule out any restriction of demands for righteousness to relations within Israel or any simple equation of righteousness with rewards here and now.

### B. *New Testament*

In turning to the Gospels, the writer is very much aware that ethical enthusiasts, like systematising theologians, not least among evangelicals, tend both to minimise the discontinuities between the Old and New Testaments and also to ignore the half millennium that lies between the two. Yet it has increasingly been argued by scholars like John Riches<sup>48</sup> and Sebastian Kappen<sup>49</sup> that Jesus not only reached back into the Old Testament for his language and ideas but also used terms and concepts from those turbulent, so-called Inter-testamental, centuries towards the close of which he was born. Rather than coining a series of new terms for God, man and the world, it looks as though Jesus took the images of his contemporary crisis-ridden culture, which emerged from that background. He kept the 'core-meanings' of those concepts but, by his actions more than anything, then in his parables and in his formal teaching, followed by the apostolic reflection on it all, Jesus contradicted the value-system of his day. One of the clearest ways of seeing this is to note the way in which Jesus reversed contemporary valuations. The wise were in fact foolish, and vice-versa; the strong were weak; the healthy, sick; the righteous, sinners; the first, last; the pure, impure; and the rich, poor, while the poor were rich. He completely altered men's and women's experience and concept of God and their neighbours.

48. *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1980).

49. *Jesus and Freedom* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1977).

Central to this was the significance Jesus saw in the poor. How were they to relate to his revelation and explanation of God's coming rule and himself as the king? His association with men and women on the periphery of society was partly a prophetic rediscovery of distorted truth and partly a new expression of God's nature and purpose. For example, Jesus rejected current ideas of purity yet deliberately cleansed the Temple, that first-century equivalent of St Paul's Cathedral, the Church Synod, the Bank of England and the Stock Exchange combined into one, corrupted institution. External contacts with 'sinners' and 'idolators' were less of a problem: real corruption lay at the heart of the nation and especially in the hearts of its leaders. Poverty was a live issue in first-century

Palestine, notably in Galilee. People were burdened by heavy taxation and rent as well as by the topography and climate. Rome, the colonial power, extracted food-crops in addition to money, while the puppet ruler, Herod, grabbed as much land as he could. Debt was a major problem and it is not surprising that many debt records were deliberately destroyed during the Jewish Revolt. A large proportion of the population, mainly the poorest people, were at the same time excluded from taking part in synagogue or temple life, as well as being the worst affected by indebtedness.

It is important and surprisingly necessary to stress that the revolutionary turbulence from the days of the Maccabees onwards was far from being an exclusively religious protest, any more than similar unrest at the time elsewhere in the world. (To a large extent this would also appear to be the case with Israel's exodus and conquest of Canaan. European scholarship has spiritualised these and when various exponents of 'liberation theology' seek to redress the balance - which appears to be a major concern of scholars like Gutierrez and Miranda - orthodoxy and biblical theology are offended).

Jesus came into such a revolutionary situation as a poor man who declared that God would set free the poor. He used the emotive and highly political term, 'the kingdom', with associations such as 'swaraj' (self-rule) had in pre-independent India or freedom has for black people in South Africa today, rather than the somewhat

nostalgic, and sentimental royalist reference which 'kingdom' bears in Britain today, and certainly not the highly technical significance it has come to have in theological circles because of the enormous 'kingdom' literature. Taking this word, with all its nationalist and even militaristic undertones and its ritual and religious images, Jesus reasserted the basic Jewish meaning of 'kingdom'; that God is establishing his rule over men and women, and gave it a transformed context.

By shared meals, healings, exorcisms and sheer love in action Jesus established a new priority for the outcast, the diseased and maimed, the possessed and the oppressed. His parables developed the concept, followed by explicit teaching on forgiveness, joy and service. The poor and rejected were drawn out of the corners of Judaism's society and gathered together around Jesus, completely the reverse dynamic to the divisive, separatist and elitist tendencies of the scribes and Pharisees and the other dominant religious or political groupings. It is not going too far to say that Jesus rejected the culture of the ruling classes!

Space does not permit detailed comparison between the Qumranites' view of themselves as *anawim* and *ebhyonim* (the humble and the poor) (see e.g. IQM 14:7), that is, the poor in spirit, living apart from the ungodly and being purified by a God who would destroy all their enemies, all seen in ritual and non-economic terms, and Jesus depicting a father who loves his enemies and seeks out the lost and the fallen. Jesus called for a spiritual humility which could understand why he had a special love for the poor. This suggests that the demand implied in the Matthean beatitude ('Blessed are the poor in spirit', Mt. 5:3) and the promise to the oppressed in Luke ('Blessed are you poor', Lk. 6:20) are complementary and should not be played off against each other. They point not so much to a private virtue as to a social commitment to solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

## VI SOCIAL - ETHICAL CONCLUSIONS

It has been said that Jesus grasped Palestinian society from the underside. If the preceding discussion has managed to show the connection between his action and the intention of basic Israelite law, it would strongly suggest that the quality or righteousness of any society is measured by the kind of relationship that exists with the poor and oppressed close at hand and across the world. The unemployed, the ethnic minority groups (often one and the same), the homeless or badly-housed and the lonely have a special significance. They need to discover that they can be the active members of God's people, signs of the coming kingdom. We need to see them in faith as such, not as passive objects of a compassion which almost inevitably degenerates into self-righteous 'pseudo-charity', especially when its relation to the demands of God's justice is neglected or, worse still, denied. The German Reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann has put it thus: 'The rich will only be helped when they recognise their own poverty and enter the fellowship of the poor, especially the poor whom they have made poor by violence.'<sup>50</sup>

So far as evangelical views of the poor are concerned, a comparison between the four approaches outlined at the start and the following examination of the two critical areas of the biblical material suggest, to the writer at least, that poverty is an evil for which the rich are to blame more than anybody else, a failure in community which its leaders often fail to take seriously. While it is right to stress the normative place of the biblical record and the authority of Christ which it can communicate, there is a danger of superficial, use of isolated texts to justify the existing state of affairs. Speaking personally from experience in the 'Third' World and in Britain, the writer is inclined to say that a relatively prosperous, privileged and well-educated evangelical Christian leadership in the West is too often out of touch with the very real scandal of poverty and a host of related issues both in the West and in the 'Third' World.

50. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977) 79.

Finally, through this essay into the difficult area of social ethics, it is hoped that the need for more 'theology in action', that is, for the difficult task of relating current socio-economic problems to the statement of Christian truth, has been underlined. Scholarship is tempted to be safely engaged in obscure areas at a time when the Church is tempted to a similar compromise with prosperity and security. Following Christ calls for something more risky.



Evangelical Social Reformers ended slavery in America. And they combined Social Work with Evangelism, providing food, clothes, shelter, literacy, education, medical care, day nurseries, kindergartens, soup kitchens, employment bureaus, dispensaries, and athletics combined with sharing the Gospel. The abolition of slavery was at the top of the list, followed by the Temperance Movement. Evangelicals also founded and supported rescue missions for the poor, orphanages, Bible schools, medical missions, citadels of evangelism to the young, and preaching outposts in the inner cities. Churches proved to be the main vehicles through which Christians could combine social work, community service, and evangelism. 16 For a chastened view of the dangers and pitfalls of Christian involvement and confidence in politics from the perspective of figures who were actively involved in the Moral Majority, see Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999). On the constant attempts of evangelicals to legitimize social involvement for their constituents, see Gerald Stephen Mathisen, "Evangelical Social Concern: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Legitimization" (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1982). 48 E. Earle Ellis, "Segregation and the Kingdom of God," *Christianity Today* (18 March 1957) 6-9. 54 Lewis B. Smedes, "The Evangelicals and the Social Question," *Reformed Journal* (February 1966) 8-10.