Good News to the Poor:

The Social Action Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada Background Paper on the Bible, Poverty and Government in Contemporary Canada

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An EFC Position Paper has been officially endorsed by the Organization. An EFC Background Paper is a serious document, created by a Task Force or Commission to encourage dialogue within our community.

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,
or thirsty and give you something to drink?
When did we see you a stranger and invite you in,
or needing clothes and clothe you?
When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?
(Matthew 25:37-39)

Introduction

Jesus inaugurated his ministry with a sermon announcing good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and the coming of the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:16-30). His startling claim that "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" led some of his home town listeners to try kill him! What does Jesus' claim lead Christians to do as we enter the third millennium? How does Jesus' death on the cross influence our hearing of this passage? Will we proclaim good news to the poor in our time and place?

This paper is a biblical primer on poverty, written to help contemporary Christians understand the importance of the Bible's message about poor neighbours. A vast body of literature has been written on the Bible, poverty, the church, and government. This paper will not duplicate this important work. Nor is this paper a public policy paper that presents direct advice to government. Such policy options need to be developed in response to poverty issues in specific times and places. Rather, this paper addresses some obstacles that many Christians experience in responding positively to the poor. It does so by setting out a biblically-based framework for understanding and acting on poverty in today's society. This paper helps Christians see that the needs of poor people at home and abroad are connected to the very heart of the Gospel.

In specific, this paper aims to encourage dialogue in our community regarding contemporary poverty issues, to inform the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's action in the public realm, to encourage local churches to serve the poor in our communities, to inspire Christians in all social roles--work, recreation, volunteering, investing, family, etc.--to serve and empower the poor, and finally to encourage the state to do justice for the poor and eliminate the causes of poverty. This paper seeks to achieve these aims by examining: (1) who are the poor? (2) the nature of poverty, wealth and idolatry, (3) the relationship of poverty to grace, (4) the spiritual roots of present-day poverty, (5) the ways contemporary differentiated society can engage poverty, and (6) the state's distinct role in fighting poverty.

Who are the Poor?

What makes a person or family poor in Canada, or for that matter, in any country? How can we recognize poverty when we earnestly seek to discern which of our neighbours are in need?

In Canadian society, poverty is commonly associated with scarcity of income and material resources. Statistics reveal some important material dimensions of poverty. In 1989, 14.1% of Canadians lived in poverty while in 1995, 17.8% of Canadians lived in poverty. Fully 21% of Canadian children lived in poverty in 1995 (Stats. Can. Income Dist. by Size, 1995). Well meaning political words have not helped. Parliament unanimously resolved in 1989 to make significant strides towards the elimination of poverty among Canadian children. In spite of that resolution, today there are half a million more poor children in Canada than there were in 1989. The United Nations Development Program says in its 1998 report that Canada ranks 10th out of 17 leading industrial countries in dealing with poverty (*Edmonton Journal,* Sept. 1998).

Many people share in poverty and crippling personal and national debts world-wide. In an era when globalization is heralded as the means to achieve progress and prosperity for all, dire poverty plagues many around the world. The UN Development Program has discovered that 1.3 billion people lived on less than $1 U.S. per day in 1997. Annually, twelve million children under the age of 5 die because of hunger and preventable diseases (UNICEF). And the spectre of poverty continues to grow in under-developed nations: in 1960 the poorest 20% of the world accounted for 2.3% of the world's economic activity, while the richest 20% accounted for 70.2%. In 1993 this condition worsened to 1.4% for the poorest and 85% for the richest.

Statistics, however, are often hotly disputed. Christians frequently allow themselves to become entangled in debates about the validity of one or another set of statistics and fail to acknowledge that the flesh and blood people behind the numbers are "image-bearers of God." A good place to start making sense of this statistical debate is to ask what is meant by poverty? Organizations such as Statistics Canada, the National Council on Welfare, and the Canadian Council on Social Development have developed a number of statistical poverty lines. The Statistics Canada poverty line, for example, indicates that a family is likely to experience poverty when it spends 58.5% or more of its gross household income on food, shelter, and clothing. Although there may be good arguments to adjust the cutoff lines up or down, this definition of poverty is useful for giving us an indication of the number of people who are likely to experience the hardships of poverty. This definition is weak, however, in that it tends to reduce poverty to lack of finances. The United Nations Human Development Index uses a somewhat broader way of detecting poverty. It measures the percentage of the population "not expected to live to age 60, unable to read and write adequately to function in a modern society and unable to maintain sufficient disposable income to avoid hardship and social exclusion brought on by long-term unemployment" (*Edmonton Journal*, Sept. 1998). Statistical means of defining poverty share the danger that the poor can be detected in a mechanistic way--simply apply the formula and the poor automatically will be identified.

Christians can improve on the statistical method of getting at the complex but hard hitting reality of poverty through the biblically based concept of calling. Christians sometimes limit their idea of calling to church- and evangelism-related ministries. Within God's creation, however, people are called to image and respond to God in a wide range of activities, e.g. people are called to nurture children, to work creatively, to care for neighbours, to play, and to steward the earth. In the broad setting of creation, these callings can be seen as opportunities to be faithful or unfaithful to God.

This broader understanding of calling leads to a more complex definition of poverty. **Poverty exists when persons, associations or institutions lack the resources and space they need to fulfil their God-given responsibilities and callings.** For example, a person or family might lack money but they may also lack skills, healthy habits, or enabling opportunity structures. One or another institution--like a school, hospital or farm--may lack the resources it needs to properly fulfil its functions in society. Furthermore, entire communities may become poor, for example, certain inner-city neighbourhoods, native reserves, or rural districts. Poverty weakens and undermines our capacity to `open up' and tend creation as God originally intended us to do in His great benediction of Genesis 1:27-31. Understood in this way, poverty can never be a secondary concern for Christians since it strikes close to the heart of what it means for humans to image God.

This definition of poverty offers a variety of advantages. First, the main strength of this broader definition is that it helps show that poverty is as multi-dimensional as the human beings God created. People can be weakened in their ability to fulfil their callings for more reasons than simply the lack of material resources. People can become poor in social, economic, psychological, and spiritual ways. They can be family-poor, job-poor, friends-poor, food-poor, cash-poor, culture-poor, land-poor, etc. While poverty does not undermine our dependence on grace in Christ Jesus, it weakens our capacity to fully respond to the multi-dimensional callings in our daily lives.

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Vignette

Shawna is a stark example of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. Shawna is 28 and the mother of three boys aged 5,7 and 10. After 10 years of marriage she has fled her home because of horrific abuse by her husband. Shawna married young, did not finish high school and has not worked in ten years. Her livelihood and world was completely controlled by her abusive husband. Now she is faced with the prospect of raising her sons on her own. Sixty-two percent of single parent families headed by women live in poverty in Canada--Shawna and her boys have just slipped into that group. Shawna is faced with the unfamiliar challenge of feeding and clothing three growing boys on a meagre welfare income. Shawna's entire life is consumed by trying to eke out an existence. Shawna's financial poverty is clearly an extension of the depravity and isolation that she experienced in her abusive marriage. The very act of escaping the relational poverty of family violence has thrown Shawna and her children into financial poverty. She and the boys have

been deprived of open and trusting relationships with friends and family, and must now struggle to find meaningful emotional support. The lasting scars of abuse are with them each day but they lack the resources for counselling. Therefore they must rely on free community services that have long waiting lists. The long and frustrating road towards healing makes it difficult for Shawna and the boys to thrive and to enjoy life. Furthermore, Shawna's prospects for a better financial situation are hindered by her emotional wounds and lack of skills to find a decent job. She also feels the need to be near to her boys in this trying time of transition. So with little hope for significant change in their situation it is clear that Shawna and her boys are experiencing poverty on many levels. God, who desires the best for his children, most certainly did not call this family to image Him by living in a cycle of despair and poverty.
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A second advantage of this definition of poverty--as a lack of resources or space needed to fulfil a person's, association's or institution's God-given responsibilities and callings--is that it gives us a starting point for distinguishing "needs" from "wants." In contemporary economics, it is assumed that no one can make a valid distinction between needs and wants because they are both based on individual value choices and thus beyond moral criticism or external limitation. But if we understand that "needs" are directly related to the resources and space required to fulfil one's God-given callings, we acknowledge that there are standards external to the individual person that help us discern "enough." Importantly, as persons, institutions, and communities discern "need," we will also find that it is a two-edged sword, it not only helps us discover who is poor and needy, but also helps us know who in the community has abundance and can contribute more toward the common good. The resulting understanding gives Christians a basis for the stewardship of all of the gifts and resources with which we have been entrusted. Only when a society has a sense of enough--our real needs are being met--can it also develop a sense of "abundance" and thus appropriate thankfulness to God!

Third, the proposed definition of poverty also reminds us that we must discern who is poor in a context. People did not need the same types of resources and space to live their lives in 1000 AD as they do in 2000 AD, nor do people living in the inner city of Edmonton need the same resources and space as people living in a small farm in China. Time and place significantly influence how we define poverty and how people experience various forms of poverty.

Fourth, this definition acknowledges that the specific callings and/or responsibilities of people and institutions in society shape the type and amount of resources and space they need. As we publicly and politically address poverty, we need to be able to discern the nature of different callings and institutions in order to develop a sense of what they might require in order to fulfil their responsibilities.

Fifth, this definition of poverty recognizes that the determination of callings, poverty, enough, need, wants, etc. will **always** involve human judgement--in response to God's word and creation--and can never be reduced to a particular Bible text, a mechanistic political or social formula, or a simple financial or statistical cutoff point for poverty. Poverty is a human, social, and relational reality; it concerns real people in a variety of offices and callings as they make real choices.

Adopting this multidimensional definition of poverty can also lead to new distortions, that is, we can be tempted to underestimate the importance of finances to the poor. People who exist in absolute poverty in our society may be able to survive physically, but is mere survival sufficient to fully respond to God in contemporary Canada? A family without any cash flow in present-day Canada simply cannot obtain the day-to-day necessities needed to fully respond to God's callings, e.g. they need cash for rent, groceries, bus fare, telephone, and clothes. For many people, falling back on a self-sufficient farm life is a faded dream and cash flow has become critical for fulfilling their callings in an urban society.

Poverty, Wealth and Idolatry

The problem of poverty is often attributed to irresponsible personal behaviour. This makes some sense in light of a multidimensional definition of poverty. A host of personal or family sins can initially trigger or exacerbate one's poverty. An important dimension of addressing poverty must be the community's urging that we take responsibly for our moral, consumption, family, and other faulty choices. Some forms of poverty will have to be addressed in part on an interpersonal level, that is, by sitting down together with the people affected to discuss what has gone wrong and what needs to be done to set it right.

As important as personal responsibility may be in dealing with certain cases of poverty, however, there are a number of larger societal choices that we have made that also cause poverty. These choices notably fall within the power of many Canadian Christians to influence and change. Poverty is directly linked to "wealth" in so far as the poor often lack access to wealth as a means of fulfilling their callings. But, this is not to vilify wealth. The Bible portrays wealth and material things originally and ultimately as parts of God's good creation (Ge 1&2, Col 1:15-23). Material wealth and prosperity are often pictured in the Bible as gifts of God when they are used in the context of covenantal obedience to him (Dt. 8:18, Ecc

5:19, Jos 1:8, Ps 17:14). Material things are an integral part of the coming of shalom which the Bible declares God is eagerly bringing into the cosmos. The prophet Isaiah, for example, paints an eschatological picture in which "the wealth of nations" is brought into Jerusalem as a gift to God and his people (Is 60:11). This is echoed in Revelation 21:26 where the "glory and honour of the nations" are brought into the new Jerusalem.

The sharp paradox between our wealthy society and simultaneous poverty, ought to signal to Christians the need to discern the "spirit of our times." Wealth, like any other created thing, can become twisted and oppressive in the hands of sinful human beings. Wealth is easily twisted by personal and social sins of greed, gluttony, and pride. Something spiritual goes wrong with wealth. The Bible uses the word idolatry to describe the major way that creaturely things can be twisted. It teaches that idolatry is the sinful human tendency to trust in a part of creation for provision and salvation rather than in the life-giving Creator. When we ask "creatures" to give us more than the Creator intends them to give, idolatry is generated. Thus, human creatures are directly responsible for generating idols in God's world (Ps 115:4-7, 135:15-17, Is. 40:18-26, Jer 10, Ro 1:25).

A strange reversal happens when we create idols. Instead of idols serving us as we intend, the creaturely things we transform into idols start to threaten us as "powers, authorities, and dominions." This does not mean that these creatures become intrinsically evil. The apostle Paul reminds us that these "thrones or powers or rulers or authorities" were "created by him and for him" (Col 1:15-17). In fact, a central element of the Gospel message is that Christ disarms "the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col 1:15).

Something as simple as the gift of daily bread can become an idol when we expect it to take care of our needs rather than waiting on God and his life-giving word, i.e. people "do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4, Lk 4:4, Dt 8:3). When a person, institution, or even an entire society desires wealth so strongly that they start trusting in the wealth-creation mechanisms of society--such as our jobs, businesses, or the market--to guarantee it, this misplaced trust transforms these things into idols.[1] The Bible refers to the idolatry of wealth as Mammon (Lk 16:13-15). The Bible further teaches that trust in material wealth and the market--in place of God--comes to nothing since idols are blind, deaf and dumb and can do nothing (Is 57:13; Ps 39:6-11, Hab 2:18-19). Ultimately, idolatry results in the opposite of what we expect, for we are converted into impotent and powerless people (Pm 115:8, 135:18, Gal 4: 8-9). And when idols make us powerless and ineffective, we not only hurt ourselves and our families, but as a society we can also seriously undermine our neighbours' wellbeing. This can be seen in the irony that our society acts like it is powerless to do anything about poverty while in fact we are one of richest societies ever in history!

Our personal and societal claims to be powerless to solve poverty illustrates another common characteristic of idolatry, that is, it leads its adherents to produce "deceptive words" (Jer 7:3-8) or in modern terminology, ideologies. The character of contemporary ideologies is that they serve to justify personal or societal behaviours that twist God's norms and abuse other creatures. Ideologies serve to allow us to call "evil good and good evil" (Is 5:20). The Kingdom of God--often called the `upside down Kingdom'--is really the turning right-side-up of life in the creation order which our modern-day "deceptive words" have falsely depicted as up side down.

Christians sometimes think that they are exempt from idols. But closer inspection suggests that often we end up compartmentalizing our lives in such a way that pious service of God in private life coexists with some form of idol-worship in public. Jesus' criticizes the religious leaders of his own day for a one-sided piety and twisted legalistic faith that ignored justice:

> Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (Mt 23:23-24).

Jesus also explicitly warns us that "you cannot serve God and Mammon" (Lk 16:13-15). The idolatrous love of money is pictured as a stumbling block to following Jesus (Lk 14:33; 16:19-31). The record of the churches on domestic and international poverty give cause to reflect whether, and to what degree, idols and "deceptive words" may have influenced our lives.

Poverty and Grace

Christians often contrast "spiritual poverty" and "material poverty" and say that material poverty is secondary. This dualistic conception is not supported by the Bible. Scripture frequently refers to poverty and the poor, so often that someone suggested that if you cut these passages out of your Bible it would hang in tatters. In fact, the Bible portrays poverty and the poor--the widow, orphan, and stranger--within the larger drama of creation, the fall into sin, redemption through Jesus Christ, and the return of Christ. Within this redemptive story, possessions are pictured as part and parcel of fulfilling our God-given callings. Without "enough," the poor lack

the means to fully enjoy and live out their God-given humanity. They lack the resources, possessions, relationships and legal standing in the community needed to fully exercise their humanity through the exercise of their various callings and responsibilities in life. The Bible often pictures God standing over against sin and injustice and on the side of redemption and justice. God reveals himself as the liberator and restorer of sinful humanity, on the side of the poor, widow, and the orphan and against those who injure and oppress (e.g. Is 1:10-20, 3:13, 10:1-3, Pr 21:3, Mt 25).

Jesus' statement that "the poor you have with you always" (Mt 26:11) can be of great help in understanding the biblical message concerning the poor. This passage has been used by some Christians to suggest Jesus condones doing little or nothing for the poor. But this unbiblical emphasis misses the deeper thrust of the Gospel. Jesus borrows this phrase from the Old Testament passage which ends "therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers [and sisters] and towards the poor and needy in the land" (Dt 15:11). Why? Because, the passage continues, "God will richly bless you in the land." This is God's grace! God had liberated Israel out of Egypt not because they deserved it but by grace (Dt 7:7). Once they were delivered into the Promised Land, the land of plenty, God gives Israel the opportunity to chose curses or blessings. He summons Israel to see their prosperity as the basis to care for others so that "there should be no poor" among them (Dt 15:4). God initiates redemption and provision, and the people are asked to respond to His generosity by caring for the poor. Notably, this passage reveals a different sense of property than the modern, classical liberal idea of `private property.' Possessions in this passage are seen as `stewardship property,' as gifts of God to be opened up by serving our own, and our neighbour's, legitimate needs (Dt. 15:7-11). Even in regards to property, Christians are not "containers" but "pipelines" flowing and even overflowing with God's grace (2 Co 1:3-5).

Our understanding of Jesus' peculiar use of the phrase "the poor you have with you always" is deepened in the context of the Old Testament sabbatical laws. A sabbath year was to be observed every seventh year in which land was given rest--and whether one deserved it or not--debts were cancelled and servants set free (Lev 25, Dt 15). At the mathematical climax of the sabbath years (seven-times-seven years, or forty-nine years) came an additional Year of Jubilee. At the centre of the Year of Jubilee was the Day of Atonement when God pronounced the people cleansed of their sins. As a consequence of this pronouncement, the people were to "proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev. 25:8-12). Thus, at the very heart of God's early ordinances for Israel's social and economic order was the reality of unmerited forgiveness of sins or debts. So when we go back to Jesus' words "the poor you have with you always," we note that it ends with the phrase "but you will not always have me" (Mt 26:11). Jesus says this on his last journey to Jerusalem that ends with the cross. On the cross, Jesus fulfils the Day of Atonement once and for all. In the ultimate sense, Jesus' death and resurrection is the definitive Jubilee for all creation, it is the conclusive "good news to the poor," "freedom for the prisoner," "release for the oppressed," it is in fact "the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk 4:18-19, see Lk 7:21 and Mt 25:31).

In the Old Testament era, Israel was to function as a unique people pointing all the nations to the redemption that God was bringing into the world. The very structure of the economic, social, and political order that God set up for the Israelites in the sabbatical laws, points to the need for Jesus Christ. In Christ, we see God's love for the whole cosmos and his singular love for each person (Jn 3:16-17). Jesus is the solution for sin that lies at the heart of all human problems, including poverty in all of its dimensions. Grace in Jesus Christ works out from regenerated hearts into redeemed patterns of living, working, caring and sharing.

The biblical message of grace does not allow us to oppose soul against body, spiritual against material, and evangelism against justice. Redemption is integral to the whole of human existence. Thus, it should come as no surprise to New Testament believers that God's intention for human society as stated in Deut 15:4 is that "there should be no poor among you, for...he will richly bless you..." In fact, this message is echoed powerfully in the early practices of the New Testament church (Ac 2:42-47 and 4:32-35). The integrality of redemption is further evident in passages such as when John the baptizer sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the Promised One. Jesus replies "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, whose who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Mt 11:4-6). Shortly before Jesus entered Jerusalem for the final time, he told the parable in which he recognizes his true followers as those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, invited strangers in, clothed the naked, and visited the prisoner (Mt 25). Those who are restored to fellowship with God show this in every dimension of their lives.

The message of grace also does not allow us to oppose charity against justice. It is true that God called Israel to charity, that is, to be "open-handed" to the poor (Dt 15:8). But acts of charity were also to be structured into the very institutions and relationships of the new society in the Promised Land. These were to be societal structures of justice, that is, structures that routinely enabled the poor to achieve a full life within the community, for example, cancellation of debts (Dt 15:1), lending freely (Dt 15:8), returning land that was lost by the original owner (Lev.

25) and so on. These just societal structures allow the poor, the widow, and the dispossessed to be restored to full human and social participation.

Finally, the Bible does not allow us to treat justice for the poor as an optional frill over and above worship and evangelism. In fact, God emphatically warns us that worship and religion are empty if they are not accompanied by actions that come from a heart of gratitude and structures of justice and mercy (Is 1:10-20 & 58:3-12, Mt 23:23, Am 5:21-24, Hos 6:6, Mic 6:6-8, James 1:27, 2:17).

Spiritual Roots of Present-Day Poverty

The paradox we experience over the presence of scarcity in the midst of the continual and rapid growth of wealth in our country ought to alert us to something that has gone deeply wrong. Our society has achieved unprecedented **abundance** and incredible economic growth yet a sense of **scarcity** regularly surfaces in Canadian life in the forms of poverty, the pressure on funding for caring human services, and personal, corporate, and national debts. Canada's GDP grew constantly while our national debt simultaneously sky-rocketed. These paradoxical tensions between our wealthy society and personal and public scarcity beckon us to actively discern the "spirit of our times" (1 Jn 4:1) as it shapes our society and institutions.

In order for Christians to discern the "spirit of our times" and begin developing a common mind on poverty, it will be necessary to reflect on the historical visions and motives that have strongly shaped our society. Western culture is profoundly shaped by the struggle between the secular Enlightenment ideologies of classical liberalism and reform liberalism/democratic socialism and their presumptions of either meritocracy or welfare state assistance. This section briefly examines the idolatries and ideologies that have most directly shaped Canadian society.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, some `classical liberals' began to picture life as essentially consisting of autonomous (i.e. a law unto itself) individuals whose major concern was to secure material happiness in this life. Happiness in the next life was deemed a matter purely of personal and private concern. These early `classical liberals' were responding to real problems, however, such as, absolutist political power, state control of the church, and traditional social hierarchies. They originally argued that wealth should not be divided on the basis of principles flowing from state mercantilism or noble birth but strictly on one's merit. Their growing obsession with material prosperity in this life, however, led them to increasingly trust the market and individual pursuit of rational self-interest as means to deliver them to this goal. They began to preach meritocracy, that is, those with merit would win the "race for wealth" while those without merit would loose. This picture of life as a "race for wealth" produced a distorted ideology or "deceptive words" (Jer 7:3-8).

The notion of meritocracy has often been adopted uncritically by Christians who portray material prosperity as the result of one's merit, work and effort. The Bible does call everyone to work diligently and not to sit by idly while others to do the caring and productive work for the community (1 Th 5:12-14, 2 Th 3:6-10). But this call to share in the work of the community was distorted into a new form of material works-righteousness. If someone was poor, this was seen as a personal failure and a moral deficiency. The poor simply failed to rationally pursue their self-interest and thus were undeserving of aid or state support.

During the late 19th and the 20th centuries, `reform liberals' and `social democrats' reacted to the classical liberal emphasis on individual merit. While they agreed with classical liberals on the goal of material prosperity, they argued that market flaws needed to be corrected through state action in order to make the race for wealth fair. The goal of material prosperity could only be achieved by trusting in a market that was corrected by the welfare state. Reform liberals were far less willing to blame the poor directly for their plight and sought "equality of opportunity" in the race for wealth. This led to the development of a number of important government assistance programs for the poor. However, `reform liberal' solutions still tend to reduce poverty to a lack of finances and thus tend to limit involvement with the poor to state-delivered financial programs. The importance of interpersonal "care" that goes beyond dollars is often neglected. Furthermore, justice came to be seen too narrowly as entitlements, that is, the right to increase your relative material position within society by getting a bigger slice of the economic pie. In this way, life continued to be seen as a race for wealth. Entitlement to income, not service of God and neighbour, continues to be the vision shaping our society.

The materialism, meritocracy, and statism of contemporary ideologies are not neutral approaches to poverty and wealth which Christians can quietly adapt into their worldviews. In many ways, they are the antithesis of the biblical vision of free unmerited grace which we discussed above. Not only salvation from sin (Ro 3), but our life, food, breath, and shelter are gifts of God which he lavishes on both the sinner and saved (Mt 5:45, Job 25:3, Ps 145:9). Merit does not condition God's grace, or we would all immediately perish.

This is not to suggest that employees do not merit a just wage. Rather, the status of being human under God's creational and providential care means we should care for

and share with all needy people. As the apostle John writes "if anyone has material possessions and sees his brother [or sister] in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear Children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 Jn 3:16-17). Grace is founded on God's love and invites humanity to respond with lives based on love (Ro 13:8). This means that we not only have the negative task of fighting sin but also the positive task of "doing good to all people" (Gal 6:7-10).

Ultimately, grace breaks the idolatrous powers of wealth and the market, places them back within the bounds of the Kingdom of God, and makes them servants of God's justice and shalom. Once we accept "enough" as central characteristics of a non-idolatrous life, we can again recognize the "abundance" that God lavishly provides beyond our needs. When we accept limits on, and norms for, our possessions then we can thankfully acknowledge through word and deed that God provides for all people.

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Vignette

Jesus calls his followers, as part of his body, to continue his ministry of grace and reconciliation. It is clear then, that Christians are called to love their neighbours by fighting poverty in their communities. Mission Services, of Hamilton Ontario, is a shinning example of a Christian approach to seeking justice for the poor in tangible ways. An evangelically based organization, Mission Services was founded in 1956 to respond to Christ's call to help those who suffer. Its services are centred in Hamilton's north end and are, therefore, accessible to the people of one of Canada's most needy communities. This multi-divisional agency strives after the basic and practical goals of relief and empowerment for the less fortunate in the community.

The flagship men's residence provides emergency shelter for transient and homeless men, and facilitates a highly successful addictions counselling program. Men are given the opportunity of extended shelter in conjunction with committed participation in addiction counselling. Many men have been empowered to escape the trap of life on the street by this program. In 1997 147 men went through the program.

Mission Services' Inasmuch House for Women in Crisis also strives to provide relief and empowerment to some of the most vulnerable people in society--they face a deep poverty in relationships and are constantly threatened economically by virtue of losing the support of a husband. This facility provides a safe and secure haven for women and children to weather the crisis of leaving a violent home. Simultaneously the staff provide education and proactive supports to enable women and their children to lead a peaceful and safe family life devoid of the scourge of violence and isolation.
The Help Services division of Mission Services provides a food bank service to Hamilton's north end community. In 1997 it distributed emergency food assistance to 1730 families including 3382 children. This division prioritizes the development of relationships with its clients in order to minimize the isolation of poverty and to facilitate proactive intervention through health, nutrition and lifestyle education.

Lastly, the Marty Carl Centre for skills training provides employment counselling and training for people who experience barriers to employment. 106 people were empowered by the services of the Marty Carl Centre in 1997.

Mission Service's provides relief and empowerment to people who suffer the most profound effects of poverty in what is often reputed to be one of Canada's neediest neighbourhoods. The specific work of the Missions divisions is a clear and practical response to the many dimensions of the poverty problem. This is all done out of a firm desire, on the part of the agency and its supporters, to continue Christ's ministry of justice for the poor.
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Poverty and Differentiated Society

Poverty should not be reduced simply to idolatry and spiritual failure on the part of society. Nor should the causes or solutions for poverty be interpreted narrowly as individual responsibility. Deep spiritual problems manifest themselves in highly complex societal structures. Poverty is deeply rooted in structures and practices that reflect a combination of sinful and healthy motives. It is tempting to look for quick and simple solutions, for example, by asking people to pick up their personal responsibilities, or by asking one particular institution--e.g. the state, church, or business--to solve poverty. But poverty cannot be addressed by passing the buck to the state, or simply requiring churches to do more for the poor, or demanding businesses create more jobs, or forcing individual persons to care for their neighbours.

In addition to understanding the spiritual beliefs that drive society, therefore, we also need to understand the structures of our modern society. Today's society is a complex intertwinement of a variety of persons, institutions and relationships, often with their own unique differentiated responsibilities and rights. If we are going to ask what a particular Christian person should do about poverty, we need to understand how he or she is situated within our societal structures? **Who**--which people in which offices and institutions--should do **what** about particular instances of poverty?

The starting point for a Christian understanding of societal structures is the biblical message that God is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all things. All creaturely life, including human society and culture, is a **response** to the Lord of creation and history. This stands in stark contrast to many secular social and political theories that assume human society is invented and built by autonomous persons. These theories assume individual persons gather together to shape and create society as they will. Modern social institutions and relationships, therefore, are seen as the result of free creative choices rather than historical human responses to God's creational will for life. Adopting a biblical starting point leads us to reject notions of society that see it as an artificial construction that is totally malleable and remakeable.

We need to develop biblical wisdom in order to understand contemporary society. This requires that we continually reflect on the God-given nature of contemporary social institutions and offices in the light of scripture (Ps 119:105). Just as King Solomon, in his time and society, was able to discern the character of a faithful mother and so return the living child to its true mother (1 Ki 3:16-28), so in our society we must discern the character of various institutions and offices so we can give them their due.

As we analyze contemporary society, we immediately note that human responsibilities and rights are historically differentiating and unfolding, becoming located in a variety of distinct societal offices and institutions. For example, the entire society does not take direct responsibility for nurturing a child, parents do. All Canadians do not directly make choices about investment, rather bank managers, investors and others take the lead in these choices. Editors and news reporters take primary control of reporting, principals and teachers are responsible for teaching, farmers for farming, and pastors for preaching. The crucial point is that the character of our offices--including the nature of the institutions and associations within which one lives and works--shape, limit and condition our responsibilities and rights within society. The Bible implies this unfolding of society within creation when it pictures history moving from a "garden" to a "city" (Ge 1, Rev 21 & 22, Heb 11:16).

A helpful way of picturing society is to see it as a variety of differentiated institutions, associations, and persons that are closely interwoven and interrelated. These institutions and persons are not arranged vertically but horizontally--each one fulfilling its calling directly in relationship to God. No institution is responsible to God for the central calling and function of another institution, although the state and even the church have historically tried to claim that role. Business people are responsible to discern the will of God for their business practices and should not expect, nor allow, the state or church to dictate to them how they should act. The church and state do not have the overall competency to make these specialized types of choices. This is not to suggest that social, economic, and political institutions and associations ought to operate in isolation from one another. Rather, institutions and associations are responsible for mutually encouraging and admonishing one another to carry out faithfully their respective God-given callings.

An important correlate of the differentiation of social tasks is the reintegration of these entities. How should families, hospitals, arts and drama groups, businesses, banks, internet companies, universities, schools, neighbourhood associations, media, brokerage firms, and other institutions relate together within one society? A good deal of social integration occurs directly through mutual discussion and accommodation between the various social players. The state, as we discuss later, has a special public role to play in legally enabling the just integration of society.[2]

This unfolding of institutional responsibilities, as well as the re-integration of society, occurs either in obedience or disobedience to God. This yields societal practices and structures that reflect various degrees of health and brokenness. We only need to look around us to see that "the whole creation"--including the social and economic dimensions of human creatures--is "groaning as in the pains of childbirth." We know that "the creation itself will be liberated from bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rs 8:22).

Viewing the responsibilities, both for causing and solving poverty, through the lens of a differentiated social structure has several benefits. First, it helps us understand that poverty is integrally linked to the proper functioning of the many components of society. Different people in a range of different offices need different kinds of resources. Second, each differentiated institution and office has its own unique and important contribution to make in fighting poverty. No matter which offices we function within, there are things we can do in these roles to address poverty. For example, journalists can report on the causes, extent and solutions for poverty, business people can address employment issues, and schools can help address poverty and learning. Whatever the unique task may be of each institution, however, they should all make sure that they wisely sustain life, enables the reversal of the cycle of poverty, and help prevent further poverty.

The church can also play an important role in fighting poverty. The church can be considered broadly as the "people of God" as they function in their every day lives and more narrowly as a specialized church "institution."

The church understood as "the people of God" functions in the full range of tasks and callings that make up modern differentiated society--e.g. Christians form families to nurture children, participate in schools to form minds of students, create businesses to produce useful goods and services, and so forth. As followers of Christ, we are invited to carry out these tasks and callings in love of God and neighbour and to actively oppose sinful ways of doing them. The church as the people of God can work within each of our everyday offices and callings in society to prevent and heal poverty.[3]

The church, understood as a specialized and distinctive "institution" within the larger society, is the place where believers worship, preach, and engage in certain forms of direct service. The church understood in this sense can play a decisive and direct role in dealing with poverty. Many institutional churches could begin working on poverty by confessing frequent failure to bring "good news to the poor." Churches have often failed to enfold the stories of the poor and marginalized into the great encompassing story of God's redemptive love for the world. Beside the obvious importance of beginning to recognize the breadth of the Gospel, however, this would also allow the poor to be fully included in the local church. Inclusion is itself an important aspect of overcoming poverty. This would also give churches the opportunity to benefit from the contributions and gifts of the poor themselves.

The church as institution could specifically do the following: (a) be prophetically bold in proclaiming God's call to do justice and fight oppression in our country and abroad (even when this involves people in our own pews), (b) help Christians recognize that everyone is needy and so as recipients of God's abundance we are called to be givers, (c) pursue thoughtful and empowering initiatives to benefit the poor in the church neighbourhood, (d) in appropriate ways, encourage and promote community actions and public policies that help bring meaningful relief to the poor, and (e) become more knowledgeable about the effects of international poverty on people--including on brothers and sisters in Christ abroad--and actively participate in international relief, development, and justice organizations.

The State's Role in Fighting Poverty

Canadian churches have publicly addressed the government's role in addressing poverty in society, although sometimes in conflicting ways. Some churches push government to do more while others ask it to do less. The definitions of the task of government used by the various churches are never neutral, that is, they intrinsically reflect a religious or ideological vision of life. Since all institutions in society should mutually encourage and admonish one another to properly fulfil their respective callings, churches need to speak out--not only to Christians exercising their various offices in society--but also to society-at-large and the state. This final section is a contribution to the ongoing reflection Christians need to do on the character of the modern state's task in the light of Scripture.[4] A clearer understanding of the distinctive character and calling of the state will allow Christians to speak more effectively to the state's role in dealing with poverty.

In the letter to the church in Rome, the heartland of the great Roman Empire, Paul calls the governing authorities "God's servants" (Ro 13:1-7)! He describes government's task negatively as punishing evil and positively as being "God's servant to do you good." Paul clearly does not mean that government is called to usher in the Kingdom of God or that it has the overarching task of enforcing true religion in society. Government is not called to do everything in society. But neither is the state cut off from God's rule as some Christians might conclude from the passage "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mk 12:13-17). In this passage, Jesus exposes the "hypocrisy" of Pharisees who want to trap Jesus by playing God off against a deified Caesar. Jesus condones paying taxes to Caesar precisely because even the mighty Emperor can only function as government under the sovereign rule of God. The task which is Caesar's comes from and belongs to God!

Within the highly differentiated structure of contemporary Canadian society, therefore, the state has a distinct and limited responsibility before God. In the Old Testament, this task is frequently described as doing justice (e.g. Ps 72, 82). But what does justice entail in our modern differentiated society? Clearly the state does not have the competency to enact justice in every societal situation, e.g. justice in family relations, in business pay scales, or classroom conflicts. Since government plays a restricted role in achieving the full reality of biblical justice, it is important to delimit the modern state's task to doing `public justice'.

But what does a state actually "do," what functions does it perform, when seeking to do public justice in society? As social responsibilities historically differentiate into specific institutions and offices they also need to be re-integrated into harmonious societal unity. Much of this is accomplished through mutual accommodation and negotiation between various persons, institutions and associations. A central function of government, however, is to set out a public legal order that can serve to justly integrate all social institutions together into one society according to public justice, that is, in a way that respects, enables and enhances their specific callings. Sometimes the state sets conditions which shape the future integration of society and sometimes the state follows up existing integration in order to correct distortions and oppression.

Both are valid elements of government's public legal integration of society.

The state's task, however, includes more than simply making laws and regulations. Governments that legally integrate society may have to step in to prevent the oppression of one institution by another, intervene to justly reconstitute a distorted societal relationship, act to fulfil a particular function or service that is absent or failing, or arbitrate in order to restore a person or institution to its proper place when another institution unjustly absorbs its calling.

It is tempting to adopt a definition of the state's role that is static, or outlines a rigid set of do's and don'ts for the state, out of fear for the state's power and control. Christians have often been tempted to adopt the philosophical liberal trap of drawing an impermeable wall of separation between the state and other social institutions. This approach, however, leaves us trapped in a mechanistic understanding of society and human responsibility. The callings of societal institutions are unique and limited but they are also dynamic callings from God. Government, along with all social actors, is admonished to "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Am 5:21-24). This metaphor suggests a dynamic and insistent effort to walk justly with God and our neighbour in the daily circumstances of our society.

In relationship to the poor, government ought to ensure that a satisfactory supply of housing, food, clothing and income is accessible to the needy; it should empower the initiative and exercise of responsibility by poor persons, institutions, and neighbourhoods; and government should promote initiatives that help business, unions, and other groups create employment for the poor. While poverty programs should appeal to and activate the God-given responsibilities of people and institutions, these initiatives should in the deepest sense be motivated by **grace**--the unmerited economic and social "new start" for all (Dt 15, Lev. 25, Mt. 25). For Christians, public justice for the poor is also firmly rooted in the cross of Jesus.

Finally, the state has the right to tax citizens in order to fulfil its calling (Ro 13:5-7). The adequacy or fairness of various taxes needs to be judged in the context of the task of government and the demands of justice in our society at particular times and in specific places.

Conclusion

Jesus' startling message that the Year of the Lord's Favour includes good news for the poor is a wonderful, third-millennium challenge for today's church. Some Christians may respond to this message with hopelessness and surrender because of the immense scope and gravity of poverty in Canada and around the world. We need to remember, however, that Jesus also said "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In Jesus Christ the ultimate victory over sin and evil has already been won. God has already gone ahead and initiated his Kingdom of righteousness and justice. It does not ultimately depend on our work and efforts. The Holy Spirit is beckoning and empowering us to be faithful and to gratefully respond to God's work in our everyday callings. In this way, we are becoming "letters from Christ... written not with ink but the Spirit of the living God" (2 Co 3:3). And as open letters, our neighbours will be able to read in us the concrete reality of good news for the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and the coming of the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:16-30).

Endnotes

[1] See Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time*, Dowers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1984.

[2] For articles dealing with a variety of societal actors and poverty, see Stanley Carlson Thies and James W. Skillen, Eds., *Welfare in America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis*, Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1996.

[3] A helpful model for understanding differentiated responsibilities and poverty is "Charter of Social Rights and Responsibilities" developed by Citizens for Public Justice.

[4] For a helpful discussion of Christian social and political responsibility see Brian C. Stiller, *From the Tower of Babel to Parliament Hill: How to be Christian in Canada Today*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1997.