

Holistic Impact: The Role of Individual Christians as Salt and Light in Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract

We live amidst poverty and putrefaction of all kinds, especially with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. From Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13–16, the foundational identity of Christians is to be salt and light of the world. However, living this identity remained a challenge to many. Through comparative analysis of various Christian approaches to poverty alleviation, this paper presents practical steps for individual Christians to adequately live out their mandate in a dark world characterized by abject poverty, discrimination, and injustices. The paper argues that while it is crucial for the church as a corporate body to put measures to alleviate poverty, individual Christians also have a critical role. Further, the paper samples the various responses of Christians vis-à-vis their mandate towards the depressed, the marginalized, and the poor—"the least of these"—and the dangers we run in limiting the text to cooperate with Christian bodies. Finally, the paper proposes practical steps individual Christians can take to lessen suffering and alleviate poverty.

Keywords: Poor, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Suffering, Salt and Light, Christian, Holistic Ministry

Introduction

Despite significant technological advancements, many anomalies, including poverty, still plague most of the globe. At the core, the world suffers from two serious problems—physical and spiritual hunger and maladies. The primary calling of Christians is to address these



concerns by offering the “*bread of loaf along with the Bread of Life.*”¹ Jesus carried out a holistic ministry by seeking and saving the lost (Lk 19:10), teaching, preaching, and healing the sick (Matt 4:23). He “...*went about doing good*” (Acts 10:38). The approach of merging evangelism and social action provides a model for Christians and the church, as they seek to meet the needs of humanity.²

Stott and Wyatt conceptualize Christians’ societal influence as ‘reform’ rather than ‘redemption.’³ However true, reform and redemption are crucial needs to be addressed concurrently. On the one hand, reform will adequately describe the church’s activity towards society if it limits itself to offering the “bread of loaf” alone, meeting physical needs. On the other hand, authentic reformation will lead to spiritual redemption if, alongside social service and action, the church carefully presents the “bread of life,” the Gospel, as the ultimate solution to human needs. Hence, the holistic ministry should aim at redeeming the whole person, not just the soul.

Wright has argued that God’s idea of redemption is holistic, as viewed in the Exodus narrative, and not limited to eradicating sin. He rightly opines: “Exodus-shaped redemption demands exodus-shaped mission. Moreover, that means that our commitment to the mission must demonstrate the same broad totality of concern for the human need that God demonstrated in what he did for Israel.”⁴ In other words, our redemptive response to God’s redemptive work must be holistic in nature and character, following the same divine exodus pattern. Christians must address people’s bondage to sin and social and economic injustice and similar communal and world concerns like climate change, human rights, ethnic diversity, war, and peace. In addition, the Christian witness should be broad enough to cover all human needs in all sectors of life because the Gospel is that broad. Newbigin rightly stated that “the primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ must be given, and can only be given, in the ordinary secular work of lay men and women in business, in politics, in professional work, as farmer, factory workers and so on.”⁵

¹ O’Callaghan uses the term “bread of loaf” to refer to material things to meet physical needs, while the “bread of life,” refers the gospel that alone can meet the spiritual needs of people. Rob O’Callaghan, “What Do We Mean by ‘Holistic Ministry,’” Word Made Flesh, May 6, 2009, <https://wordmadeflesh.org/holistic/>.

² Also, in church history, evangelism, and social action have been collectively carried out, “evangelism and social concern have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the Church ... Christian people have often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling any need to define what they were doing or why,” See John R. W. Stott and John Wyatt, *Issues Facing Christians Today: 4th Edition*, ed. Roy McClaughry, Fourth edition (Zondervan, 2011), 20.

³ Stott and Wyatt, 62.

⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006), 275.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Asian Churches,” in *A Decisive Hour for the Christian World Mission*, ed. Norman Goodall et al. (London: SCM Press, 1960), 28.



Coming back to Wright, if believers are to emulate God as his beloved children (Eph 5:1), their ministry should be holistic and comprehensive enough to include political, economic, and social freedom. For those who think an exodus-shaped approach is incongruent with the New Testament ministry perspective, Wright holds that the cross of Jesus answers all human needs because all human problems or evils are an offshoot of sin. In other words, as sin (through the Fall of man) is the root cause of all human predicaments, the cross of Christ provides the root solution to that problem and all its ramifications. He adds, “sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the cross of Christ is good news for every area of life on earth that has been touched by sin, which means every area of life. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess.”⁶ Hence, acting as salt and light in a context of untold suffering and poverty espouses such a thought.

The World Poverty Situation

World Vision⁷ and World Bank report that about 9.2% of the world’s 689 million people live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$1.90 daily. Children and youth account for 2/3 of the world’s poor, and women represent a majority in most regions. In addition, “further two billion people can also be regarded as poor, although they are not facing starvation (meaning half of the world’s seven billion people can be regarded as poor).”⁸ The same World Vision report indicates that in the United States, 10.5% of the population (34 million people) live in poverty as of 2019, where the poverty line is at \$35.28 per day.

Extreme poverty rates nearly doubled in the Middle East and North Africa between 2015 and 2018, from 3.8% to 7.2%, primarily because of crises in Syria and Yemen. The war-affected population struggles to put food on the table, find clean water, and feel safe.⁹ Every nation grapples with the issue of poverty, though at different levels.

Excruciating poverty is increasingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. About 40% of the region’s people live on less than \$1.90 daily. Globally, approximately 1.3 million people in 107 developing countries live in multidimensional poverty, accounting for 22% of the world’s population. However, about 84.3% of this category lives in sub-Saharan Africa

⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 315.

⁷ For more statistics on world poverty, see the World Vision report by Andrea Peer, “Global Poverty: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help,” World Vision, August 23, 2021, <https://www.worldvision.org/sponsorship-news-stories/global-poverty-facts>.

⁸ Scheffler, “Poverty Eradication and the Bible in Context,” 9.

⁹ “Crisis in Syria,” Oxfam International, May 25, 2022, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/emergencies/crisis-syria>.



and South Asia.¹⁰ Oxfam Report states, “Today, a fifth of the African population (278m) is undernourished, and 55 million of its children under the age of five are stunted due to severe malnutrition.”¹¹

During the 2001 floods in Mozambique, rescue operators shockingly reported that most people lost nothing because they possessed nothing. Perhaps, they only owned their lives. And that is what they carried along.¹² All these events, coupled with the advent of the covid-19 pandemic, have brought the global poverty rate to an acme height. The situation is so dire that O’Connor says, “To think of Africa is to think of poverty.”¹³

The cleavage between the haves and the have-nots in the world is too broad and needs bridging. Ayedze remarks that everyone has a share of the blame for the situation: “The truth is that colonialism, postcolonialism, and the international financial institutions, as well as African leaders and intellectuals, share various degrees of responsibilities for this gloomy situation in Africa.”¹⁴ Sheffer warns against oversimplifying the problem,

Attempting to relativize this situation by underlining the industriousness of the developed nations against the “laziness” of the poor nations grossly oversimplifies the problem. It also ignores the fact that, in the process of producing wealth, the poor and poor countries have often been exploited (the colonial legacy). Moreover, poverty works like a cancer that penetrates the whole of society: being born into such a society means that the innocent children who are born into this society will have little chance of escaping the poverty trap.¹⁵

From the above thought, relativizing the situation means overlooking other parameters that explain poverty in the world.

The Great Commission as a Holistic Commission

The holistic approach in the Bible offers a solution to the current problem in the world. Historically, the Great Commission (in Matthew 28:19–20) has provided motivation for world missions. The dual-dimensional task of making disciples includes baptizing them as the initial step and teaching them to observe *all* that Jesus commanded. This visibly makes

¹⁰ Mookgo S. Kgatle, “A Practical Theological Approach to the Challenge of Poverty in Post-1994 South Africa: Apostolic Faith Mission as a Case Study,” *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1–9.

¹¹ For more, see Oxfam press release by Victor Oluouch, “Over 20 Million More People Hungry in Africa’s ‘Year of Nutrition,’” Oxfam International, February 17, 2023, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/over-20-million-more-people-hungry-africas-year-nutrition>.

¹² Eben Scheffler, “Poverty Eradication and the Bible in Context: A Serious Challenge,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39 (August 2013): 9.

¹³ O’Connor A., *Poverty in Africa: A Geographical Approach* (London: Belhaven Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁴ Kossi A. Ayedze, “Poverty Among African People and the Ambiguous Role of Christian Thought,” in *Religion and Poverty: Pan African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Duke University Press, 2009), 194.

¹⁵ Scheffler, “Poverty Eradication and the Bible in Context,” 9.



this epic charge comprehensive enough. The adjective πάντα (all) implies a curriculum that covers the whole teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, including adhering to all Old Testament teachings as reinterpreted in the light of Christ and as inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ It is because the epistles are additional commands of Jesus given to the church through the agency of the Spirit (2 Pet 1:19–21; 1 Cor 14:37). The teachings of Jesus were holistic and covered the whole man and all aspects of life.

Further, the holistic ministry can be traced to the very heart of God as we read the creation story. That is contrary to many who begin God's missionary venture with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 or even the promise of the Savior in Genesis 3:15. A closer look shows that God's (holistic) missionary activity begins discretely in his heart and concretely at creation. The Bible presents God as a missionary God who has the well-being of the whole man at the center of his heart. He created good earth with every component of human life intact (Gen 1:1; 31). By that creative prerogative, he owns everything and everyone in it, to which the psalmist declares, *"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein"* (Ps 24:1). The fact that everything and everyone in the world belongs to the Lord has profound implications for holistic ministry. Probably an illustration would do here. My beloved country Cameroon has dense rainforests and fertile grass fields. When traveling to the Southwest Region, for instance, you will not help but notice the large hectares of palm, rubber, and banana plantations on either side of the road. Imagine that I owned a large rubber plantation and a factory that transformed the rubber into things like buckets, bowls, and chairs. I will have all kinds of workers: farmers who till the soil in the plantation, harvesters who tap the rubber from the trees, drivers who transport the raw materials to the factory, and the finished products from the factory to the markets. I will have machine operators and many other workers, direct or indirect, doing value-addition on the raw materials. By implication, God has many employees in this world doing various things. They are not all preachers or theologians. However, they are all God's workers, and whatever they do on God's earth is vital to him for holistic impact.

The creation of humanity in the image of God was followed by the cultural mandate to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen 1:28–29), and his placement in the Garden of Eden was followed by the charge *"to work it and keep it"* (Gen 2:15), all of which are

¹⁶ The content of "all" is still shrouded in conjecture. Some writers view this curriculum as comprising what Jesus taught his disciples in the gospel of Matthew alone. Others stretch it to include the four Gospels, and yet others the whole teachings of the NT. Some in exegetical oversight pass by this crucial detail. In this work, "all" (Greek: πάντα) is taken to mean all that flowed out of the life and teachings of Jesus, as revealed not only in the gospels but in the NT as a whole and all OT Teachings as reinterpreted in the light of Christ. See David S Gifford, "The In Situ Meaning of 'to Observe All' in Matthew 28:20," *Liberty University Digital Commons*, n.d., 110; Don Fanning, "The Great Commission," *Eruditio Ardescens* 1, no. 2 (2014): 17.



holistic. Hence, humanity was created in the image of God to be God's coregent "to carry out his responsibilities as the chief representative of God on earth."¹⁷ He was to maintain peace, wisdom, and order in the garden as a spiritual service to the Lord.¹⁸ In addition, God deciphered that the overflowing abundance of Eden warranted a manager, a steward. Hence, humankind was given two specific duties: gardening, a kind of physical work, and preservation, a sort of intellectual, cultural, or scientific work. It is worth noting the similarity between the new mandate to believers in Matthew 28:19-20, the cultural mandate to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth in Genesis 1:28-29, and the charge given to man in the garden of Eden "to work it and keep it" in Genesis 2:15. They are all holistic. Consequently, following God's pattern of sustaining the earth and redeeming man, Jesus intended a holistic ministry when he gave his disciples the Great Commission. Hence, holistic ministry anchors itself in the great commission and the creation story.

Considering that "missions can go forward only if based on an adequate biblical and theological foundation,"¹⁹ there is a need for a holistic theology and praxis of missions, one that makes sense of the whole of God's redemptive purpose and the whole of life. Kirk concurs, "The transformation promised in the coming kingdom relates to the whole of life, internal and external, personal and social."²⁰ The same was expressed in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom (Matt 4:17; Mk 1:15; Lk 4:43). According to Wright, a holistic ministry "explore[s] the divine mission and all that lies behind it and flows from it in relation to God himself, God's people, and God's world insofar as it is revealed to us in God's word."²¹ That is how Stott sees the Christian's mission—"everything the church is sent into the world to do... the church's double vocation of service to be 'the salt of the earth and 'the light of the world.'"²² Thus holistic ministry is the only way to fully obey the Great Commission and the only thing that will bring about holistic impact and relevance in the community.

Christian holism in ministry is to respond to our surroundings as an integral part of our redemptive mission in partnership with God. It is to see our involvement in suffering reduction, poverty alleviation, promotion of peace and stability, and standing against gender-based violence, or even care for creation and deem them valuable and part of our Christian responsibility as the direct preaching of the Gospel. It is to witness to the world around us in

¹⁷ Kenneth Gangel and Stephen J. Bramer, *Holman Old Testament Commentary - Genesis*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, Tenn: Holman Reference, 2003), 45.

¹⁸ Allen Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to The Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Publishing, 2009), 124.

¹⁹ David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 345–46.

²⁰ J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 37.

²¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 23.

²² John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 33.



all areas of human needs and in every scripturally acceptable way. Indeed, Newbigin is correct that “God’s saving power known and experienced in the life of a redeemed community has to issue in all kinds of witness and service to the world.”²³

The Role of Christians as Salt and Light (Matt 5:13–16)

The issue of poverty alleviation has been most often approached from the perspective of the corporate body of the church. The prevailing thought is that poverty alleviation is far beyond the endeavors of an *individual* Christian and that it must, of necessity, be approached and grappled with from a united and cooperative front for this societal malady to reduce significantly. A balanced approach is thus desirable.

Matthew 5:13–16 does not explicitly address suffering and poverty alleviation but the concept of the Christian’s nature and identity as salt and light of the world, which is nonetheless beneficial in this context as it holds a graphic picture of what Christians should be doing in a pain-stricken and darkness-engulfed world. When Jesus said: “*You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven,*” he was primarily talking to his disciples, who are committed to following him, and whom he would later commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). The implication should be obvious; *individual* Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was directed to the disciples, although he might have included the crowd in his address. Blomberg, for instance, remarks, “Identifying the disciples as Jesus’ audience is crucial for recognizing the ethics of the sermon as applying to those already committed to Jesus... But great crowds also form an important part of Jesus’ audience.”²⁴ Jesus focuses on the disciples because of how instrumental they will later spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The focus was on the disciples who would later lead the church. The corporate approach to responding to the world’s challenges (through parachurch organizations and NGOs) is crucial, but the individual role should not be overshadowed. Fowler clarifies this identity, “It is not that we possess some saltiness or enlightenment, nor that we must strive to become salt or light, but because of Christ’s indwelling presence, we

²³ Lesslie Newbigin, “Our Task Today” in Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*, 3.2.2011 edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 213.

²⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, (Nashville, Tenn: Holman Reference, 1992), 94–95; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, First Edition, First Printing (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1999), 97.



are salt and light expressions. Visible expression of such is a logical and spiritual necessity. We must behave like who we have become.”²⁵

Salt preserves, sweetens, and flavors. Thus, the mission of the Christian is to bring out this identity as salt would on a piece of meat or in a pot of soup, preserving, sweetening, and flavoring it, as that is what salt is and does. Believers in Christ are to be of benefit to the world through their purity and preservation (Exo 30:35; 2 Kings 19–23), wisdom (Col 4:5), and peacemaking (Matt 5:9; Mark 9:50).²⁶ They could positively impact the world through their lives and witness because of who they are in God.²⁷

Similarly, apart from being salt, Christians are also light. In the Bible, light symbolizes enlightenment (knowledge), truth, purity, and God’s presence, unlike all its counterparts. The OT spoke of the Messiah as the “*light for the nations*” (Isa 42:6, 49:6; cf. Matt 4:16). Jesus spoke of himself as being the “*light of the world*” (Jn 8:12; 9:5; 12:35; 1Jn 1:7). Now he says to his disciples “*You are the light of the world.*” It does not mean they are lights in and of themselves. Instead, Jesus’ disciples are light in a derived sense. When Christ indwells every believer (Eph 5:8–9; Phil 2:15; Col 1:27), they reflect this inner light externally (cf. 2 Cor 2:14) as the moon reflects the sun’s light. In a dark world, the disciples of Jesus are supposed to give hope, direction, and illumination. They are to testify to God’s truth, purity, and power wherever they are.

The Christian’s influence on their surrounding is blessed, and it brings those they are in contact with face-to-face with the good God of heaven (Matt 5:16). Jamieson *et al.* capture their distinctiveness somewhat in an exciting way. They:

Let it be observed, too, that while the two figures of salt and sunlight both express the same function of Christians—their blessed influence on their fellow men—they each set this forth under a different aspect. Salt operates internally in the mass with which it comes in contact; the sunlight operates externally, radiating all that it reaches. Hence Christians are warily styled ‘the salt of the earth’—with reference to the masses of mankind with whom they are expected to mix; but ‘the light of the world’—with reference to the vast and variegated surface which feels its fructifying and gladdening radiance.²⁸

Though distinct, their effects are complementary. Salt, on the one hand, exerts a negative function by preventing decay, while light, on the other hand, positively illuminates the

²⁵ James Fowler, *A Commentary on the Four Gospels* (Fallbrook, California: C.I.Y. Publishing, 2006), 104.

²⁶ Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 97; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 111.

²⁷ Don Garlington, “‘The Salt of The Earth’ In Covenantal Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011): 715–48.

²⁸ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible.*, 2nd Printing edition (Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 899.



darkness. However taken, both imageries can be applied to Christian involvement in society. They strongly militate against all forms of separation and withdrawal. While they do not guarantee a sudden Christianization of society, they nonetheless emphasize the calling on society to heed God's standards.²⁹ Stott brings the idea home when he highlights the holistic involvement of salt and light in society. He writes:

Putting the two metaphors together, it seems legitimate to discern in them the proper relation between evangelism and social action in the total mission of Christ in the world—a relation which perplexes many believers today. We are called to be both salt and light to the secular community... God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad.³⁰

Christians are never called to be salt and light for the church but for the world. It is the world that is languishing in darkness. Sadly, many Christians limit their ministry to the church when, in essence, they should be the solution to the world. In both metaphors, the individual Christian's positive impact on the community is what Jesus aimed at in Mathew 5:13–16.

The Danger of Applying Mathew 5:13–16 to the Church as Corporate

The church is an agent of change, which is why it is at the center of the fight against poverty and other social ills plaguing our communities. However, this corporate view should not be allowed to overshadow individual responsibility. Below are dangers when the salt and light metaphor is exclusively applied to the church as a corporate body, thereby minimizing individual believers' role.

First, it promotes ignorance of the individual Christian's responsibility towards society. It makes Christians remain ignorant of their personal and divine responsibility towards the poor and needy. Christians are called to join God at work so that his "*will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matt 6:10). That ignorance breathes passivity, abdication, and neglect of the suffering poor.

Second, it minimizes personal efforts. The primary danger in applying this passage only to the church is perhaps the minimization, neglect, and even abdication of personal effort by individual Christians. Many will think of their unique contribution as a very menial worthless drop of water in the whole bucket of societal reformation. Others will hide under

²⁹ Green, *The Message of Matthew*, 87.

³⁰ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Leicester Leicestershire; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A: IVP Academic, 1985), 43.



cover of the cooperative action of the church to minimize, stifle or even abjure personal endeavors to poverty alleviation and the betterment of society.

Third, it delays action in addressing the needs of the poor and suffering. When any issue is approached democratically from a cooperative point of view, unanimous agreement is usually a hard trophy to win. It usually takes unduly long for concrete action to happen as the process often involves committees, consultations, deliberations, and bureaucracy. And while church and parachurch institutions spend undue time debating, many are languishing, writhing in pain, and dying of poverty.

T.V. Philip, in his article “*Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13–16)*,” opines: “The Christian’s task is to be the salt of society, preserving, reconciling, adding taste, giving meaning where there is no meaning, giving hope where there is no hope. We are called to be the light for the world. Jesus Christ is the real light which enlightens everyone.”³¹ Christians are to duplicate and radiate the goodness, gentleness, and love of Christ wherever we are. The first-century Christians understood and modeled the value of personal ministry and brotherly responsibility for the good of the community when each sold their belongings to meet the needs of brethren in their midst (Acts 2:42–4; 4:32–37; 9:36–43).

Four Attitudes of Christians towards Poverty Alleviation

The possibility for salt to lose its taste and for light to be hidden under the bushel is one thing Jesus warned his disciples against.³² Jesus indirectly instructs that salt’s sweetness should be preserved, and the power of light should not be stifled, for “*if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?... Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket.*” In other words, “a disciple who does not live this lifestyle of the Kingdom is worth about as much tasteless salt or invisible light—nothing.”³³

Just like a city on a hill is visible to all, Jesus targets a witness powerful enough to affect the whole city. Also, besides good deeds, Jesus seems to be targeting good character, or their attitude and commitment towards their calling. Keener observes,

³¹ T.V. Philip, “Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13-16) – Religion Online,” accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/salt-and-light-matthew-513-16/>.

³² There has been debate as to how possible salt can lose its saltiness (“become tasteless”) since it is of a chemical element (sodium chloride) that does not break down. Nevertheless, the meaning of what Jesus is saying is strongly connected to its cultural background. Carson explains that “most salt in the ancient world (was) derived from salt marshes or the like, rather than by evaporation of salt water, and therefore contained many impurities. The actual salt, being more soluble than the impurities, could be leached out, leaving a residue so dilute it was of little worth.” This then was tasteless or useless. For more discussion, see D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 138.

³³ Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 210.



Jesus refers to more than good needs; he refers to a good character... A disciple who rejects the values exemplified in the beatitudes is like tasteless salt: worthless (5:13) ... A disciple whose life reveals none of the Father's works is like invisible light for vision: useless (5:14–16)... Jesus demands a wholehearted commitment to himself and his teachings.³⁴

Hence, Christians can only act effectively as salt and light if they retain their virtue. Jesus' analogy indirectly presented possible Christian attitudes toward their commitment to him and their ministry of redressing the ailments of the world around them.

Christians have exhibited different attitudes toward the reality of suffering and poverty. John Stott points out four possible attitudes Christians can adopt or have adopted towards the world. First, he talks of "escape," that is, the absconding of Christian responsibility towards the suffering poor in the community. Second, he underlines "engagement," where the Christian actively addresses the malaise. Stott's third attitude, "accommodation," refers to a situation where the Christian becomes indistinguishable from the world and consequently unable to develop a distinctive attitude toward it.³⁵

In his book *Christian Approaches to Poverty*, David T. Williams outlines 7 Christian attitudes or perspectives to poverty: wealth to be ignored (contentment), given (charity), denied (self-limitation), claimed (prosperity teaching), restructured (liberation theology), shared (Christian community), and created (reconstructionism).³⁶ Below are four summarized attitudes.

First is the attitude of denial, which refuses to acknowledge the reality of the languishing poor in the community or the Christian's responsibility of poverty alleviation as part of her mission towards a fallen and broken world. This attitude also absconds responsibility towards the suffering poor for a posture of convenience. In the words of Bonhoeffer, "Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him."³⁷

Second is the attitude of disregard, which admits the reality of suffering and poverty in the community and the Christian's mission towards poverty alleviation as a biblical mandate but ignores them all. It is an attitude of avoidance. It takes a position of complacency, passivity, carelessness, or even compromise. Carson writes,

³⁴ Keener, 211–14.

³⁵ John R. W. Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 14.

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of this, consult David Williams, *Christian Approaches to Poverty* (iUniverse, 2001), 79–348.

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1st edition (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 106.



If salt (v.13) exercises the negative function of delaying decay and warns disciples of the danger of compromise and conformity to the world, then light (vv.14-16) speaks positively of illuminating a sin-darkened world and warns against a withdrawal from the world that does not lead others to glorify the Father in heaven.³⁸

Third is the attitude of dejection that looks at the overwhelming reality of the poor and despondent in society and the enormity of the Christian's role vis-à-vis poverty alleviation and finds it impossible, giving in to dejection and helplessness. Such an attitude fails to recognize salt and light's power and usefulness. Speaking more directly, Stott remarks,

This call to assume our Christian responsibility, because of what God has made us and where he has put us, is particularly relevant to young people who feel frustrated in the modern world. The problems of the human community are so great, and they feel so small, so feeble, so ineffective... They feel themselves victims of a situation they are powerless to change. What can they do?³⁹

His answer comes immediately—a motivating call to be cognizant that it is from the ashes of despair that God raises kingdom influencers,

It is in the soil of this frustration that revolutionaries are being bred, dedicated to the violent overthrow of the system. It is from the very same soil that revolutionaries of Jesus can arise, equally dedicated activists—even more so—but committed rather to spread his revolution of love, joy, and peace.⁴⁰

Fourth is the attitude of doggedness which admits the painful reality of poverty, the Christian's mission towards the poor, considers the challenges surrounding them all and puts hands on deck to bring a unique contribution to a painful narrative, just like Tabitha (Acts 9:36–43). Barclay expresses Christian doggedness in good deeds as being characterized by courage and compassion,

It is the Christian's duty to take the stand which the weaker brother will support, to give the lead which those with less courage will follow. The world needs its guiding lights; there are people waiting and longing for a leader to take the stand and to do the thing which they do not dare to take and to do by themselves.⁴¹

Jesus never had in mind followers who would play safe, avoid friction, and escape the plight of the suffering poor. Salt and light, by nature, are made for adverse conditions and constitute God's response to this broken world. Denial, disregard, and dejection are various ways of

³⁸ Carson, "Matthew," 140.

³⁹ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 42.

⁴⁰ Stott, 42.

⁴¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Revised edition, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: West Minister Press, 1975), 124.



losing one's saltiness and hiding one's light under a bushel. They are wrong attitudes that minimize the opportunities of joining God to reach out to the fallen world around us,

Christians are not otherworldly. We are not to spend our time thinking of how to escape from the world. Nor are we to be preoccupied with churchly matters. The church is not the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is about this world and about our life and witness in the world. It is about politics, about economics, and about culture. It is about our environment, about the destruction of nuclear weapons. It is about peace. How are we to fulfill our responsibility in the society in which we live? Jesus said: You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.⁴²

This last attitude is what Stott calls engagement, which involves “turning our faces towards the world in compassion, getting our hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, and feeling deep within us the stirring of the love of God which cannot be contained.”⁴³ This is what living faith is, faith backed by good works (Jam 2:14–26) towards reducing suffering. In his article, *The Gospel and the Poor*, Tim Keller shows that “commitment to the primacy of the gospel ties into our obligation to do good to all, especially those of the household of faith.”⁴⁴ Ministry to the poor is a crucial sign that we believe in the Gospel, are mindful of others, and are in tune with God toward the redemption of the world.

Approaches to Suffering and Poverty

Scholars have suggested several approaches to the problem of suffering and poverty, as surveyed below.

1) Christological Approach

Verster's “Christological approach”⁴⁵ to poverty (in Africa) ascertains the implication of God's relationship and involvement in the human condition. He thinks poverty can only be adequately addressed by a ‘high’ Christology, that incorporates the humanity and divinity of Christ in relation to the poor. On the one hand, “the divinity of Christ is to be proclaimed because this is the way in which Christ changes the human condition.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, his humanity is essential because “in Christ God is present. In Christ, he is the one for others.

⁴² Philip, “Salt and Light (Matthew 5).”

⁴³ Stott and Wyatt, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 20.

⁴⁴ Tim Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” *Themelios*, 2008, 6, <https://repository.globethics.net/handle/20.500.12424/156951>.

⁴⁵ Pieter Verster, “A Christological Approach to Poverty in Africa: Following Christ amidst the Needy,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 01–08.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.



Christ for others humbles himself to give a life of fullness to the poorest and the most ill.”⁴⁷ This, to Vester, is what offers hope in this life and for the future world.

Embracing a high Christology for the church would imply “following the wounded Christ to see the wounded people.”⁴⁸ That is, acknowledging the divinity and salvific work of Christ as the fundamental basis by which he identifies with and reaches out to the poor.

2) Theological Pragmatism

Considering that the economic policies employed in the past have not satisfactorily addressed the issue, Kgatle et al.⁴⁹ advance theological pragmatism or a practical theology as a laudable approach to poverty alleviation in Africa.⁵⁰ According to him, the church should not limit itself to preaching society’s ills but should be unequivocally involved in the solution. He posits that the local assembly, the closest infrastructure to the context, can play a significant role through local initiatives that bring relief to the most deprived in the community. Hence, the Apostolic Faith Mission (and the church in general) can become entrepreneurial in character via sowing (creating jobs rather than seeking them), sharing (becoming a breadbasket for the hurting), storing (acting as a food watchman in preserving food for the needy), and selling (engaging in the food business to generate revenue for the needy) to fight poverty and its various ramifications. This practical involvement will bring moral edification to society and government and spell out the social relevance of the church. Concretely, no one better fits this role than individual Christians who have the needy as immediate neighbors in the community. They are the Tabithas, the people “*full of good works and acts of charity*” the less privileged in every neighborhood are seeking (Acts 9:36–43).

3. Diaconal Ecclesia

Klaasen investigates the gap in the church as a liturgical movement and service-oriented body in times of crisis through the lens of the whole making. To him, the distinctive features of a diaconal ecclesia will respond promptly in challenging times.⁵¹ From the early church some leaders or deacons (διάκονος) were selected to meet the social needs of the people. He

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹ Frederick Kakwata, “The Progressive Pentecostal Conception of Development within an African Context of Poverty,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3, no. 1 (2017): 159–83; Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert, and Katie Casselberry, *Helping Without Hurting in Church Benevolence: A Practical Guide to Walking with Low-Income People* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015).

⁵⁰ Though addressing the specific situation of South Africa within the Apostolic Faith Mission, the concept he postulates is nonetheless applied to Africa (and possibly, a broader generalization can also be made to this). Mookgo S. Kgatle, “A Practical Theological Approach to the Challenge of Poverty in Post-1994 South Africa: Apostolic Faith Mission as a Case Study,” *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1–9.

⁵¹ John Klaasen, “Diakonia and Diaconal Church,” *Missionalia* 48, no. 1 (August 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7832/48-1-363>.



holds that a diaconal church not only organizes worship services but also assumes a caritative vocation where both laity and ordained share in providing pastoral care to the needy and marginalized. He writes: “Diaconal church is both about authentic worship of God revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by worshippers and of the scattering of the faithful for service in the world.”⁵² Hence, the way Klaasen presents it, diaconal ecclesiology is more functional than substantive.

In line then with the early church, which attended to issues of poverty, marginalization, exclusions, domination, and oppression, the church with a diaconal character as liturgy unites people of shared beliefs and brings them to the worship of God and, as service, shares in the ongoing mission of Jesus reflected in the valuable service of providing for the physical needs of the community at all costs.

4. Empathic Remembering

In her work, *God Knows There's Need*, Holman introduces the concept of “empathic remembering” as a Christian response to poverty via a historical perspective. This phraseology means “the capacity to participate in the visceral emotions or thinking of another.”⁵³ According to her, empathy is quite different from sympathy in that while the former feels *in*, sympathy feels *for* the other person. In this light, unlike sympathy, which is a slightly distant way of feeling alongside the other person, empathy feels *in* with the other person, as if, though distinct, they were part of one’s very self. To Holman, this approach of sensing/feeling the poor aligns with “loving your neighbor as yourself,” as commanded in the “Golden Rule.”

By merging “remembering” with the concept of empathy then, Holman aims to reconstruct the past, which always shapes the present. Empathetic remembering then, she explains: “is the act of membering again, or “re-membering” the needy voices and bodies of the past, internally refiguring through an imaginative but carefully empathic reconstruction, and in the process giving them new consideration and engagement in the present.”⁵⁴ Hence, before we take any laudable action towards the poor (remember), we must first put ourselves in their place (empathize) and feel their pain/need just as they do. The two, that is, empathy and remembering, will result in a kind of incarnational giving that could be multifaceted. In this way, one will “embody sacred ‘kingdom,’ ultimate ‘cosmos,’ or *eschaton* to bring body

⁵² Klaasen, “Diakonia and Diaconal Church,” 2020, 125.

⁵³ Susan R. Holman, *God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

⁵⁴ Holman, 7, 72–90.



and its brokenness into direct relation with that divine urban finale, usually called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁵

Holman’s approach is a sincere attempt to bridge the gap between historical stories and modern action through three conceptual paradigms: seeing the poor, sharing the world, and embodying a sacred kingdom. She contends for an approach towards poverty that is first effective before being productive and representative of God’s kingdom, in line with God’s eschatological agenda of ending all suffering with the establishment of the new creation.

5. National Reforms

In *The Poverty of Nations*, Grudem and Asmus approach the situation of world poverty at the national level and from a combined perspective of Christian theology and economics. Since poverty is a complex issue, they think it can only be solved at the national level. Hence, they provide a complex solution of 78 factors⁵⁶ for poverty eradication that involves federal laws, economic policies, and cultural values.

John Stott, in *Issues Facing Christians Today*, argues that the strength of our Christian social involvement is predicated upon our grasp of five great fundamentals: a fuller doctrine of God, a proper understanding of anthropology, Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology is what generates a healthy worldview and constitute the bedrock of the evangelism and social ministry. Considering that Christians are in the world but not of the world and are charged to be conscientious citizens (1 Pet 2:11–17). Stott explains: “We cannot be totally ‘world-affirming’ (as if nothing in it were evil), nor totally ‘world-denying’ (as if nothing in it were good); we need to be a bit of both, and we particularly need to be ‘world-challenging,’ recognizing its potentiality as God’s world and seeking to conform its life increasingly to his lordship.”⁵⁷ As such, the effectiveness of the Christian depends on their combination of “holiness” and “worldliness.”

Being Salt and Light: Four Practical Steps

Scheffler writes: “Perhaps the greatest obstacle in the endeavor to eradicate poverty is the myth that it is impossible to end it. There is an urgent need to dispel this myth.”⁵⁸ He purports that if resources are evenly distributed and judiciously used, extreme poverty will be

⁵⁵ Holman, 21, 154–71.

⁵⁶ For Asmus and Grudem’s composite list of factors that will enable a nation to overcome poverty, see Barry Asmus and Wayne Grudem, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*, Illustrated edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 369–74.

⁵⁷ Stott and Wyatt, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 62.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 10. See also Scheffler, “Poverty Eradication and the Bible in Context”; Eben H. Scheffler, “Pleading Poverty (or Identifying with the Poor for Selfish Reasons): On the Ideology of Psalm 109,” *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 1 (2011): 192–207; Temba T. Rugwiji, “Scheffler’s Autopsy of Poverty in the Biblical Text: Critiquing Land Expropriation as an Elitist Project,” *HTS Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2019): 1–9.



drastically reduced. The problem, however, is the will to do it. To this, various scriptural motivations exist. The book of Proverbs instructs, “*Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed*” (Prov 19:17), that “*whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor*” (Prov 22:9), and “*whoever gives to the poor will not want*” (Prov 28:27). These verses, among others spur the will towards ministry to the poor while indicating that any service in this direction fulfills a divine purpose and shall not go without divine recognition.

If individual Christians take the mandate of poverty alleviation seriously, the practical steps below will go a long way to make a huge difference. Waiting for the government (church or parachurch organizations, as earlier mentioned) to act is tantamount to handing over the needy and “the least of these” to the jaws of death, for Scheffler rightly said, “the children who will die of hunger have no stake in government... nor are they responsible for government systems.”⁵⁹ In other words, the Christians in the neighborhood are the last visible hope the poor in that locality have because they embody God’s compassion and character to the world around them (Deut 15:7–10, Matt 5:7; 10:42; 25:34–40; Jn 13:35; Heb 6:10).

How should a Christian function as salt and light to reduce suffering and alleviate poverty? Here, we propose four practical approaches that individual Christians could consider.⁶⁰

1) Pray for Poverty to be Alleviated

Throughout church history, Christians have always resorted to passionate entreaties to God in prayer during periods of crisis. No one will dispute that poverty constitutes a crisis in modern society. It then goes without mentioning that the first thing individual Christians can do towards poverty alleviation is to turn to the Lord in earnest supplication.

After dedicating the temple, Yahweh appeared to Solomon and assured him of the very thing he prayed for—to forgive his people and heal their land should they repent and pray in ensuing poverty due to divine chastisement (2 Chron 6:26–27; 7:13–14). In the days of Israelite Babylonian captivity, Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to tell the people: “*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*” (Jer 29:7).

Jesus expressed passionate concern for the poor and the weak. He saw God as the ultimate Giver and taught that the Father could be approached in prayer for all the needs of

⁵⁹ Eben Scheffler, “Of Poverty Prevention in the Pentateuch as a Continuing Contemporary Challenge,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 2 (January 2013): 12.

⁶⁰ John R. W. Stott, “Four Ways Christians Can Influence the World: How We Can Be Salt and Light,” ChristianityToday.com, October 20, 2011., <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/john-stott-four-ways-christians-can-influence-world.html>.



life. “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11) was how Jesus taught his disciples to pray. When faced with thousands of hungry mouths to feed, Jesus himself prayed to the Father (Matt 14:19; Mk 6:41; Lk 9:16; Jn 6:11). The result was a miraculous provision that lavishly fed over 5,000 men.

Suffering and poverty neither bring peace nor reflect the dignity of human life. Cognizant of that, the apostles emphasized ministry to the poor (Gal 2:10). On several occasions, they prayed and recommended prayer for the physical needs of people (Acts 3:7–10; 4:31; 5:12–16; 14:8–11; Phil 4:6–7; Jn 1:2, Jn 5:13–15). Encouraging Christians in a hostile Roman context to pray for governing authorities, Paul has it that “*First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people... that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way*” (1 Tim. 2:1–2). “All men” certainly includes the poor and suffering among them. In Paul’s view, prayer helps to bring peace. It restores human dignity and promotes godliness.

Hence, if suffering and poverty persistently rise, Christians should first take it upon themselves to individually pray for a reversal of things. They should pray for those affected: the suffering poor, the less privileged, and society. They should pray for governments to prioritize the poor and the weak in their deliberations and action plans..

2) *Speak the Truth Pertaining to Poverty*

As mentioned earlier, light in the Bible symbolizes truth, illumination, enlightenment (knowledge), and purity. Eberhard says, “The secret of salt and radiating light lies in their unadulterated truthfulness and clarity.”⁶¹ Contrary to the falsehood that camouflages reality, the nature of light reveals the nakedness and truthfulness of things. Hence, while light reveals their state, salt acts in them to better their condition against all propaganda; the aberrant truth in all their statistical and experiential facts about the situation of suffering and poverty must be revealed to be addressed objectively. No one can do this better than Christians.

Paul called the church “*a pillar and buttress of the truth*” (1 Tim 3:15). Just as he did even under challenging circumstances (Rom 9:1; Gal 4:16; Phil 1:8; 2 Cor. 4:2; 7:14; 11:31; 1 Thess. 5:27), Paul severally encouraged Christians to “*speak the truth in love*” (Eph 4:15) and to “*speak the truth, each one to his neighbor*” (Eph. 4:25, cf. Col 3:9–10). Paul says: “*For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth*” (2 Cor 13:8). Thus, Christians should be people of the truth.

⁶¹ Arnold Eberhard, *Salt and Light: Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 4th edition (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2014), 44.



Paul acknowledged that the brethren in Jerusalem were going through severe suffering and needed assistance (Rom 15:25–27; 1 Cor 16:1; Acts 24:17; Acts 11:30; 2 Cor 8:4). Similarly, believers need to speak the truth to the powers that be and to whoever cares and would listen to the realities on the ground about the issues of poverty and the necessity to succor the needy and less privileged.

Akin to the issue of speaking the truth is advocating for the weak, vulnerable, voiceless, and suffering poor. In the Scriptures, advocacy is inspired by God's love and justice in favor of the marginalized and constitutes an essential part of our witness. Proverbs 31:9 says, "*Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*" Thus, advocacy is a command (cf. Isa 1:17; 58:6, Amos 5:24). It provides an effective avenue to care for the poor (cf. Prov 29:7) and grants the opportunity for justice to prevail for the needy (Job 5:15–16).

Jesus spoke in favor of the poor whenever the opportunity presented itself, demonstrating his compassionate heart and desire for their well-being. He told the rich young ruler to sell his belongings and give the proceeds to the poor (Matt 19:21).⁶² When Jesus sent out his disciples; he asked them to meet human needs as a sign of the incursion of the Kingdom of God (Matt 10:7–8; Lk 9:2; 10:9). The Kingdom which Jesus exemplified in his teachings and actions vanquishes darkness, meets human needs and restores stability in society.

Since evil thrives in silence and darkness, boldly speaking up in times accruing inequality, injustice, poverty, and suffering is central to our identity as salt and light. More like the salt that loses its saltiness, or the light stifled under the bushel, it is true that "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."⁶³ Not only our lives but, most unfortunately, those of the weak, marginalized, and languishing poor. Again, Eberhard writes,

Not a single area of life should remain unaffected by this salt and this light. There is no responsibility in public life, including economics and politics, from which the city on the

⁶² Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell his belongings and give the proceeds to the poor (Matt 19:21; Mk 10:1-31; Lk 18:18-30). Though he never made this obligation to everyone (as it is done in some circles today), it was obvious that this man's riches were a hindrance to his discipleship process, for he went back sad. His riches were not what he was ready to sacrifice. Though the text is about the cost of discipleship, Jesus' heart for the poor is obvious. The cause for the poor is worth sacrificing for.

⁶³ Though there is no record of him making this statement in any of his speeches, Martin Luther is often credited to have made this statement. It seems to be a modification of a quote drawn from his sermon delivered on the 8th of March 1965, the day after "Blood Sunday." He said, "A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true." Whatever the case, the point of advocacy is clear. In the context of our discussion, it is evident that speaking up for the suffering poor is part of our acting as salt and light. Frederick W. Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*, 1st edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 133.



hill may remain aloof. Nowhere should the poison of decay be allowed to set in without being counteracted by salt. No wickedness must be allowed to lurk in the dark. The light must scare away the horrors of night... It serves the whole of life without letting itself be enslaved. It fights against all suffering and injustice without succumbing to the suffering and becoming unjust itself. It has to remain salt and light, for the seed of the future age lies hidden in it.⁶⁴

As it was in the days of Paul, countless people are suffering in poverty in our neighborhoods (and even in our churches) and in dire need of help. The reality of suffering and poverty, the necessity of personal responsibility, the scriptural response to poverty, and the effects of an attitude of denial, disregard, and dejection towards this societal disorder, among others, are the truths to be sounded to whom it may concern beginning with the church. Christians must condemn the neglect and exploitation of the weak and the poor. This may take the form of social action or the like. Indeed, as it has always been, it will move many to constructive action when the truth is spoken convincingly, boldly, and in love.

3) *Giving to the Poor and Needy*

Besides prayer and advocacy for the poor, individual Christians can also give their resources to the poor and needy around them. Kindness or benevolence has transformed more people than passion, eloquence, or learning.⁶⁵ Besides, it is difficult to listen on an empty stomach. Apostle John says, “*Let us not [only] love in word or talk but [also] in deed and in truth*” (1 Jn 3:18). If we must address suffering and poverty, then kindness expressed through giving is not optional. And this kindness, Scheffler remarks, begins with an “attitude of empathy for the poor... and by internalizing the positive perspectives of the Pentateuch, even on a subconscious level.”⁶⁶ We need to be aware that God blesses us so that we can bless others and that sharing one’s goods with the poor is a Christian imperative.⁶⁷ Hence, the excess we have on our dining tables or in our wallets is the answer to someone’s prayer in need.

Oliver et al., in their article “Can Christians Really Make a Difference?”⁶⁸ argue that though not all changes initiated by Christianity through church history were positive, Christianity has nonetheless “changed the world for the better through the development of education, charity organizations, art, music, law, and medical care, among others.” Moreover, they hold that Christians act as agents of change when they live an exemplary lifestyle of

⁶⁴ Eberhard, *Salt and Light*, 43–44.

⁶⁵ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us?*, 1st edition (Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2009), 29.

⁶⁶ Scheffler, “Of Poverty Prevention in the Pentateuch as a Continuing Contemporary Challenge,” 10.

⁶⁷ Paul Mumo Kisau, “The Sharing of Goods with the Poor Is a Christian Imperative,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 2000.

⁶⁸ Erna Oliver et al., “Can Christians Really Make a Difference? A Response to the Call for Change to Make the World a Better Place,” *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1–11.



giving, especially to the people around them, for “charity,” it is generally said, “begins at home.”

In the Old Testament, special concessions were made for the poor, among which were: allowance to graze the fields on the Sabbath year (Ex 23:10-11), remitting of debts to the poor on Jubilee (Lev 2:25–26), and harvesters left portions behind in the harvest fields for them (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:19–22). In addition, they were allowed to present modest guilt offering to the priest that reflected their means (Lev 14:21), and money loaned to the poor was to be interest-free and items sold to them, not for profit (Deut 24:10–13; 25:35–39). Giving to the poor was an essential mark of godliness, and disregarding the poor was an infringement on God’s express command, a dishonor of God’s person, and disdain of one’s flesh and blood (Deut 15:7–11; Prov 17:5; Prov 15:4; 19:17; 21:13; 22:2, 16; 22:22–23; 28:17; 29:4; Isa 58:6–11).

Jesus, in multiple instances, demonstrated love and compassion to the poor through exemplary care and hospitality (Matt 15:32; Mk 8:3). In recording the feeding of the thousands (Matt 24:13–21; Mk 6:30–44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1–15), the evangelists aimed beyond evoking wonder at the miracle to demonstrating Jesus’ heart and practical love for the needy. In one instance, while the disciples pleaded for Jesus to send the crowd away to fend for themselves, Jesus responded, *“They need not go away; you give them something to eat”* (Matt 14:16). From Jesus’ attitude, something is wrong with our Christianity if we see people in need and avoid them or send them away to fend for themselves.

The apostle John wrote, *“By this, we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”* (1 Jn 3:16–17). The sacrifice John is talking about is giving to meet material needs, just like Jesus gave his life to meet our redemption needs. Two conditions make this possible, seeing a need and having what it takes to meet it. However, poverty is such a glaring need to pass by. When a Christian lacks what it takes to meet a need, he can show others where to find bread. Whatever the cases, Christians should be open to God to use them in whatever way to meet needs. Concerning this, Stanley writes:

God uses the needs of others as opportunities for us to exhibit His love alive in us. And many times, those opportunities are revealed through special promptings that are above and beyond your regular, scheduled giving... If you see your brother in need, it doesn’t



matter if you already gave somewhere else. You should be open to the idea of God using you to meet your brother's unexpected need.⁶⁹

Christians are sent to the world to save lost souls and feed the hungry. In the famous illustration of the separation of the goats from the sheep, Jesus taught that the destitute, the hungry, the homeless, and the prisoners are a type of him such that whatever we do to them, we have in some mystical way done it to him (Matt 25:35–46). Striking enough, caring for the less privileged will be one criterion by which people will be justified or condemned at the end of time. Jesus even prescribed how to give to the poor and needy, insisting that it had to be discreet and with deep humility and that if done contrariwise, though praised by onlookers, God would reject it. (Matt 6:2–4). Consequently, Paul exhorts the Ephesian brethren to *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children”* (Eph 5:1) and tells those in Philippi to have the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5–11).

In the early church, Christians had all things in common. They sold personal properties to meet the needs of their fellow brethren (Acts 2:44). Paul mobilizes collection for the poverty-stricken brethren in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15; cf. Gal 2:10; Rom 15:25–31). To this project, the Macedonian Christians were commended for having given even beyond their ability because they first gave themselves to the Lord and saw the exercise as a participation in God's work in alleviating poverty (2 Cor 8:1–15). In line with Paul, other apostles like James instruct and commend giving to the poor and need as a mark of godliness and true religion (Jas 1:27). This is what he meant when he reiterated that *“faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”* (Jas 2:17). Paul instructs that as we grow in other spiritual graces, we must make sure *“to excel also in this gracious act of giving”* (2 Cor 8:7, NLT).

No gift is ever insignificant when given willingly, joyfully, and in obedience to God's voice. Voorhies said, “Simple efforts by ordinary people bring about marvelous changes in their own societies... People understand that this assistance [they receive from Christians] comes because God loves them and has demonstrated his care for the community through other believers.”⁷⁰ Giving to the poor and needy is so significant for Christians because it mirrors the boundless and scopeless love and generosity of God, the ultimate Giver, who gave up his only Son to be an atoning sacrifice for poor sinners (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:9). It will make a massive difference if individual Christians exemplify true generosity towards the poor in their neighborhoods, job sites, and wherever they may be.

⁶⁹ Andy Stanley, *Fields of Gold: A Place Beyond Your Deepest Fears, a Prize Beyond Your Wildest Imagination* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 97.

⁷⁰ Samuel J. Voorhies, “Transformational Development: God at Work Changing People and Their Communities,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, Fourth Edition (Pasadena, California: William Carey Publishing, 2009), 603–4.



4) *Service toward the Poor and Society*

In “*The Hole in our Gospel*,” Stearns postulates that God has gifted Christians to serve humanity in diverse ways that could change the world. He is convinced that “God has created each of us with a unique contribution to make to our world and our times.”⁷¹ But, unfortunately, many never make an impact or assert their significance for indecorous reckoning of the paraphernalia they dispose of God. In a motivational fashion, he explains:

What has God given you? Moses had a stick, David had a slingshot, and Paul had a pen. Mother Teresa possessed a love for the poor; Billy Graham a gift for preaching; and Joni Erickson Tada, a disability. What did they have in common? A willingness to let God use whatever they had, even when it didn’t seem very useful. If you will assess what you have to offer in terms of your time, your treasure, and your talents, you will have a better understanding of how you might uniquely serve.⁷²

Jesus exemplified service to the poor in striking and tangible ways. He is portrayed as humble and a friend of the poor in the NT. Though his mission consisted in establishing a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men, he never neglected or overlooked the reality of poverty and the poor in his days. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, touched the lepers, and preached the good news.

Every Christian is unique and owes a unique contribution to eradicating poverty. Acknowledging this truth will liberate the Christians from lethargy and empower them to act as free agents to benefit the poor in their specific context.⁷³ Tim Keller says that “a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith. By deeds of service, God can judge true love of himself from lip service (cf. Isa 1:10–17).”⁷⁴ Thus, faith and action are inseparable and constitute an essential aspect of poverty alleviation.

Conclusion

To reduce suffering and alleviate poverty, we don’t only need orthodoxy; we also need orthopraxy. Not only theology but also theopraxis. Not only spirituality but also physical welfare. We must serve the world the “bread of life” and the “bread of loaf.” Attending to one is not enough, as it falls short of the Lord’s expectation of us as salt and light. We must address the two with the methodology and empathy of Jesus. The world has become a melting pot, and the church cannot claim to be growing rich amid untold poverty. It is time

⁷¹ Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, 269.

⁷² Stearns, 277.

⁷³ Scheffler, “Of Poverty Prevention in the Pentateuch as a Continuing Contemporary Challenge,” 10.

⁷⁴ Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” 7.



we inserted individual Christian responsibility toward poverty alleviation in the theology and the church's administrative and ministerial engines.

This work has examined the critical role of individual Christians as salt and light towards suffering reduction and poverty alleviation. It has established that holistic ministry aligns with God's ministry calling and expectation for the church and every individual Christian. Furthermore, the attitudes towards the Christian mandate towards the less privileged and the dangers of applying Matthew 5:13–16 uniquely to the church or parachurch organizations have been interrogated. In sum, this work has demonstrated that Christians, primarily individuals, are salt and light and can impact their surroundings holistically by intentionally engaging in poverty alleviation via the suggested practical steps.

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