

Poverty Relief Resources  
for the churches of the  
Canadian Baptists of Western Canada

# The Church's Call to Compassion and Justice in the face of Poverty: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections

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The call to care for the poor and to work for social-economic justice runs through the entire biblical narrative. This is a clarion call for us. As churches, we can't ignore it and be considered faithful to the call of God. Consider this strong thread woven throughout scripture.

1. **The Torah.** The book of Deuteronomy provides a whole cadre of instructions for the Hebrew people around the care of the poor. These include instructions:
  - a. to welcome orphans, widows and foreigners into the annual community festivals and celebrations (14:28-29; 16:11-14; 26:12-13)
  - b. for farmers to leave produce in the field for those who were hungry to pick and eat (23:24-25; 24:19-22);
  - c. for employers to give day labourers their pay at the end of each day (24:14-15);
  - d. for the courts to give socially fair access and due process in legal matters of justice (24:17-18);
  - e. for masters to treat slaves well and set them free after six years with adequate provision for supporting themselves in the community (15:12-18);
  - f. for debtors to forgive debts every seven years (15:1-11).

All these instructions were geared towards restoring power and opportunity for the downtrodden.

## 2. Kings and Prophets

In the historical books of the Old Testament, the kings were judged on their faithfulness in upholding and implementing the covenant that God has made with the nation. This included the call to maintain justice for the poor and to care for the needy (eg. Psalm 72). Solomon is the quintessential example of a king who starts out well in this vocation but then loses his way. He asks for wisdom to judge rightly and to bring justice to the land, only to become married (literally and figuratively) to oppression and money.

The prophets summoned the people and especially the leaders back to their covenantal

responsibilities for upholding justice and compassion for the poor. Amos is a case in point. After identifying the ways that the surrounding nations have oppressed Israel, Amos turns the spotlight on how Israel has oppressed the poor and needy in their own nation. “This is what the LORD says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed” (Amos 3:6-7a). Amos wasn't hard on them only for their injustice with the poor, he also indicted them for the complacency and apathy. “Woe to the complacent in Zion....You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, *but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph*” (Amos 6:1-7).

(I once heard a modern-day prophet speak to a room of over 400 people, including over 50 federally elected MP's, where he both encouraged and challenged them to take up their true leadership role of caring for the poor and ensuring justice for them. He reminded them that this is what they would be finally judged for one day, far over and above whatever judgement's the Canadian public might make of them).

### 3. Jesus

In Luke 4, when Jesus is in Nazareth, his hometown, he gave a speech that launched his public life. In Luke's gospel, this speech from Isaiah 61 also served as a manifesto of sorts for Jesus:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (ie. the year of Jubilee).”*

Then, dramatically, he rolls up the scroll from the prophet Isaiah which he has been reading from and delivers the punch line: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Nice sermon! I wonder how that sermon would be received today if a church made this its manifesto.

Throughout the rest of Luke's gospel, we not only hear more stories affirming God's resolve to lift up the poor and free the oppressed, we also witness Jesus enacting this mission in person. Jesus enacts this vision in the community meals he hosts with the wrong guest list (“eating with the poor and sinners”), a practice he challenges his followers to embrace themselves in the parable of the great banquet (Luke 15:14-24). He enacts this vision in healing lepers, offering both a social and physical restoration. Jesus enacts this vision in his confrontation of the temple system that adds debt upon debt to the already disadvantaged. And he enacts this vision in his repeated calls to divest oneself of wealth for the sake of others. (“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that

will never fail” – Luke 12:33).

In essence, Jesus lives out his manifesto: Jesus enacts God’s mission work among his people. Jesus preaches good news to the poor. Jesus frees those in captivity. Jesus releases the oppressed. This is the type of world that he came to inaugurate through his life, death and resurrection. This is what the kingdom of God looks like, the kingdom we are to pray for on earth as it is in heaven, the kingdom we are to seek first above all else.

#### **4. Paul**

Paul shares this same concern for the poor and downtrodden along with James, Peter and John. (“All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along -- Galatians 2:10). He regularly collects money for the poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem on his journeys around the Roman Empire (cf. Romans 15:26). Paul upholds the downward mobility of Jesus as a model that he has embraced and urges all followers to follow this same pattern (Philippians 2:1-10; 3:17; also 2 Corinthians 8).

#### **Summary:**

The biblical witness is compelling. Throughout its history, the Church has sought to live into this vision of addressing poverty by caring for orphans, widows and strangers; by offering free meals; by building housing; by developing hospitals and schools; by confronting unjust systems that deny the poor justice.

#### **Not Just Acts of Charity: The Call to Justice**

One of the challenges in addressing poverty today is that it seems easier to give our money to charities and keep our distance from the poor. There are three problems with this approach:

1. Charity on its own can actually entrench injustice. If we give money to the poor but don't address the systemic issues that result in poverty, we can make it even harder for the poor to break out of this oppressive system.
2. Secondly, charity alone can actually give us the misguided impression that we have “dealt with poverty.” Yet as this short Biblical review makes evident, a biblical vision for addressing poverty includes much more. It includes both personal involvement with those who are poor (referred to as works of mercy in many traditions of the Church) as well as a commitment to socio-economic justice.

Echoing John Wesley on the second point, Shane Claiborne has two good quotes on these points from his book *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Zondervan,

2006):

*I'm just not convinced that Jesus is going to say, "When I was hungry, you gave a check to the United Way and they fed me" (p 158)*

*"I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor...I truly believe that when the rich meet the poor, riches will have no meaning. And when the rich meet the poor, we will see poverty come to an end." (p 113)*

One of the great gifts to our community in Vancouver has been people who have the tools to offer us a detailed, systemic analysis of our economy and social injustices in order to help us lament what is broken and to begin to imagine different alternatives for our economy and our social configurations in society. I think we need more people in churches doing this sort of analysis for us.

3. Thirdly, but related to the second point, the vision in the Bible is that the socially vulnerable and economically weak might not only be cared for financially but empowered to shape their own future as fully valued, meaningfully participating members of the community. Once-removed forms of "hands-off" charity alone without justice do not move us in this direction.

On the other hand, charity can be a starting point for moving towards a more biblical response to poverty. In our church, we have found that works of mercy have started us on such a trajectory. Through getting involved personally and corporately in works of mercy, we have become friends together as rich and poor. As those with more power or money have become advocates for those with less, those with more have become exposed to the systemic injustices that the poor so often face. For example, by providing refugee housing, we have become so much more aware of the roadblocks, opposition, stereotyping, harassment and lack of justice that so many refugee claimants now face in our country (eg. Bill C-40). By having friends and housemates who are affected in these ways, you can't help but get more involved and take action.

## **Hope**

The vision of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven opens up new possibilities for the Church's response to poverty. That vision leads us to develop communities that become symbols and signs of God's shalom where the poor are included, valued and given opportunity to contribute their gifts along with everyone else. That vision gives us courage to stand up to the economic and social injustices within our system, knowing that the power of Christ is greater than any other forces. That vision gives us imagination for different ways of living that allow us to share our resources together – whether houses, cars, money, or neighbourhoods.

We have a great opportunity to address poverty in a holistic transforming way across Western Canada. Are we making the most of that opportunity? What steps might your community take to move towards the kingdom of God's compassion and justice in your city?

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*Tim Dickau's theological reflection on poverty was written in response to a request from the CBWC's Justice and Mercy Committee. Although his paper reflects his personal theological reflections and is not official CBWC policy, the CBWC is grateful for this reflection and affirms its content as a resource to promote theological reflection and discussion.*

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# Study Questions

## For

### The Church's Call to Compassion and Justice

### in the face of Poverty

With almost 3,000 verses of the Bible dealing with poverty (10% of the whole Bible), poverty is clearly an issue close to God's heart. Which Bible verses on poverty speak to you most clearly?

What are the similarities or differences between the terms 'charity' and 'justice'. How might the two work hand in hand?

How do you understand God's kingdom and whether it is present now or in our future eternal life? How might your vision of God's kingdom affect our response to poverty? And what are the implications for yourself or your church?

Who are the orphans and strangers in your midst?

Are there connections you can make between being poor in spirit and physical poverty?

What did Jesus mean when he said that the 'poor are always with you'? How does that impact whether or not we attempt to alleviate poverty?

How can we actually become a direct community to people who are on the margins of society where we live– to interact with them face to face?

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## Fact Sheet: Poverty

882,188 Canadians used food banks in March 2012. *Food Banks Canada.*

3,912,239 were prepared by soup kitchens, shelter, school breakfast initiatives and other programs in Canada in March 2012. *Food Banks Canada.*

Use of food banks grew 2.4 % from 2011 to 2012. *Food Banks Canada.*

Food bank use is 31% higher in 2012 than in 2007, before the start of the recession. *Food Banks Canada*

Poverty Costs Canada between \$72 and \$84 billion. (*Ontario Association of Food Banks and BC Cost of Poverty reports*).

3.1 million households pay more than 30% of their income on housing making them housing insecure. *Food Banks Canada.*

150,000 – 300,000 are visibly homeless. *Wellesley Institute, Precarious Housing Report, 2010.*

450,000 – 900,000 of Canadians are ‘hidden’ homeless. *Wellesley Institute, Precarious Housing Report, 2010.*

Poverty costs the Canada’s health care system **\$7.6 billion** per year *Ontario Association of Food Banks*

33% of low-income children had at least one parent who worked full time throughout the year in 2008, and still lived in poverty *Statistics Canada, 2008*

Children and youth represent 38% of those helped by food banks, although they are 21% of the population. *Canada Food Banks*

Households on social assistance make up less than 10% of the population but represent 52% of those receiving food from food banks.

Approximately 3.5 million Canadians were living in poverty in 2004 - more than 11% of the population. *Canadian Council on Social Development.*

- The proportion of Canadian families living in poverty declined slightly, from 8.5% in 2003 to 7.8% in 2004. In all, 684,000 economic families were living below the poverty line in 2004. *Canadian Council on Social Development.*
- Rates of poverty in 2004 were lowest among elderly families (2.1%) and highest among female lone-parent families (35.6%). *Canadian Council on Social Development.*
- 865,000 Canadian children under the age of 18 lived in poverty in 2004 – one of every eight children. *Canadian Council on Social Development.*

| Statistics Canada's After-tax LICOs, 2005 ( 1992 base) |                |                             |                  |                    |                      |
|--|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
|  | Community Size |                             |                  |                    |                      |
| Family Size  | Rural Areas    | Population less than 30,000 | 30,000 to 99,999 | 100,000 to 499,999 | Population 500,000 + |
| 1 person   | \$11,264       | \$12,890                    | \$14,380         | \$14,562           | \$17,219             |
| 2 persons  | \$13,709       | \$15,690                    | \$17,502         | \$17,723           | \$20,956             |
| 3 persons  | \$17,071       | \$19,535                    | \$21,794         | \$22,069           | \$26,095             |
| 4 persons  | \$21,296       | \$24,373                    | \$27,190         | \$27,532           | \$32,556             |
| 5 persons  | \$24,251       | \$27,754                    | \$30,962         | \$31,351           | \$37,071             |
| 6 persons  | \$26,895       | \$30,780                    | \$34,338         | \$34,769           | \$41,113             |
| 7 or more persons                                      | \$29,539       | \$33,806                    | \$37,713         | \$38,187           | \$45,155             |

Source: Statistics Canada, Low Income Cut-offs for 2005 and Low Income Measures for 2004, Cat. 75F0002MIE.

From Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_minimum\\_wages\\_in\\_Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_minimum_wages_in_Canada)

#### Hourly Minimum Wages (2012):

- Alberta \$9.75

- British Columbia: \$10.25
- Saskatchewan: \$10.00
- Manitoba: \$10.25
- Yukon: \$10.30
- Northwest Territories: \$10.00

**Suggested Hourly Living Wage Ranges (2012): Source: A Living Wage for Families**

- \$19.14 in Metro Vancouver
- \$18.07 in Victoria
- \$14.50 in Calgary

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty\\_in\\_Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_Canada) lists ways to measure poverty.

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## Reading Resources on Poverty

### Websites

[www.homeless.org.au](http://www.homeless.org.au) Homeless Directory. Compilation of resources on homelessness.

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca) Information from homelessness networks across Canada.

[www.theseed.ca/](http://www.theseed.ca/) Mustard Seed, providing shelter and services in Calgary and Edmonton

[www.makepovertyhistory.ca](http://www.makepovertyhistory.ca) Make Poverty History

[www.cwp-csp.ca](http://www.cwp-csp.ca) Canada Without Poverty

<http://www.foodbanksCanada.ca/> Food Banks Canada

<http://livingwageforfamilies.ca/> Living Wage for Families

### Books

Born, Paul. *Creating Vibrant Communities: How Individuals and Organizations from Diverse Sectors of Society Are Coming Together to Reduce Poverty in Canada*. BPS Books, 2010.

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*. Eerdmans, 2008.

Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Zondervan, 2006.

Fisher, Robert, Maginnis, Stewart, Barrow, Edmond, Jeanrenaud, Sally. *Linking Conservation and Poverty Reduction: Landscapes, People and Power*. Routledge, 2008.

Food Banks Canada. *Hunger Count 2012*. [www.foodbanksCanada.ca/getmedia/3b946e67-fbe2-490e-90dc-4a313dfb97e5/HungerCount2012.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf](http://www.foodbanksCanada.ca/getmedia/3b946e67-fbe2-490e-90dc-4a313dfb97e5/HungerCount2012.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf)

Goudzwaard, Bob, Vander Vennen, Mark, Van Heemst, David. *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises*. Baker Academic, 2007.

Holman, Susan R. *God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Ingram, Chip. *Spiritual Simplicity: Doing Less, Loving More*. Howard Books, 2013.

Lupton, Robert. *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*. Harperone, 2011.

Myers, Bryant L. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Orbis Books, 2011.

Raghubar, D. Sharma. *Poverty in Canada*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Russell, Jesse and Cohn, Ronald. *Poverty in Canada*. Book on Demand, 2012.

Sachs, Jeffrey. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. Penguin, 2006.

Sider, Ronald. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. (revised edition). Thomas Nelson, 2005.

Simon, Arthur. *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture*. Baker Books, 2003.

*Low Income in Canada: A Multi-Line and Multi-Index Perspective*. by Brian Murphy, Xuelin Zhang and Claude Dionne of Statistics Canada, 2012.

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2012001-eng.pdf>

Stearns, Richard. *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us? The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World*. Thomas Nelson, 2010.

Williams, David T. *Christian Approaches to Poverty*. Authors Choice Press, 2001.

Van Til, Kent. *Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market*. Eerdmans, 2007.

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