

A Biblical View of Poverty

[Written in 2006]

Part 1

How does poverty and arise?

How does God view the situation?

Are you troubled by poverty – troubled and perplexed?

It is a huge problem, titanic and menacing, defying and scorning solutions it seems.

1. Who are the poor? – The bitter curse of poverty!

		Common Definitions			Annual Income
Rich	{	The mega rich	0.05%		>1 million
		The affluent/wealthy	9% of world population		100,000 +
		The well-off	35%	“ “	10,000 +
		The coping	10%	“ “	1,000 +

Poor	{	The needy	28%	“ “	100 +
		The absolute poor	18%	“ “	10 +
		The mega poor	2%	“ “	

There is a vast disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. Therefore:

- The poor are those who earn **less** than \$1000 a year.
- The absolute poor – i.e. on the verge of starvation – earn less than \$100 a year.
- The mega poor – those who are barely existing, hanging on by a thread, earning and owning nothing – earn less than \$10 a year
- The dead: there are over 35 million poverty-induced deaths a year.

The Materially Poor

Statistics – 1995: 5.5 billion – now 6.5 billion

Then: 1.8 billion undernourished

950 million hungry (inadequate food to work adequately)

550 million severely malnourished

400 million starving

Infant mortality due to malnourishment: 68 per 1000 live births

20 million starvation-related deaths

25,000 killed every day by dirty water

100 million with no shelter whatsoever

60 million abandoned each year – children/babies due to poverty-related death of parents

100 million street children

1.5 billion with no access to medical care

Exploited child labour: 50 million

Poverty in terms of Human Rights

65% live in states that violate their human rights in some way
54% of people live disenfranchised
29% of people are illiterate
9 million more illiterate people a year
2.5 billion women denied full rights and equality
1 billion victims of corruption
>1 billion with no access to school
4 million + political prisoners
32 million slaves
200 million children abused in childhood
1 million more refugees/internally displaced people each year due to desertification (increasing due to global warming)
1 billion at risk due to desertification
25,000 deaths per day due to air pollution

Disability

Ignorance is a major cause of disease. Malaria, typhoid, cholera etc. can be prevented if only people understand their causes. Disease gains strong footholds in societies because of vitamin or protein deficiency and malnutrition and so ignorance contributes to grinding poverty because, for the poor, there are so few educational opportunities. With over one billion children without access to schools, they don't have even the rudiments of learning.

42 million are blind
18 million blind due to river blindness – 85 million at risk
130 million deaf
10 million dumb
5 million deaths a year due to malaria
3 million deaths a year due to TB
1.6 billion physically handicapped people
2.8 million children die per year due to vaccine-preventable diseases
4 billion people are not immunized
0.5 million AIDS-related deaths a year

The leading causes of death

1. Parasitic diseases: 17 million
2. Circulatory disease: 14 million
3. Cardiovascular disease: 5 million
4. Cancer: 4.5 million

There are:

- 26 million epileptics.
- 225,000 Down's Syndrome births a year
- 130 million severely mentally retarded

Do we realise the terrible attrition poverty causes to a nation – ill health, malnutrition, loss of energy and initiative. This leads to low productivity and poverty.

2. Where are the poor?

- 80% of the absolutely poor live in the 10/40 window.
- The poor are spiritually lost and most of the spiritually lost are poor.
- The majority of unreached people live in the poorest countries of the world.
- Dr. Luke emphasizes that the Gospel of the Kingdom is Good News for the poor (Lk. 4:18; 6:20; 7:22).
- The majority of the world's population, who are destitute, suffering and oppressed, have never heard the Gospel.
- The Law, the Prophets, the Wisdom books of the Old Testament **and** the ministry of Jesus, all stress God's concern for the poor and consequently our **duty** to defend and care for them.
- 99% of the least evangelized, poorest people live in the 10/40 window. Yet only 6% of Christian workers (mostly locals) work specifically among this 99%.

3. Why are they poor?

A vast superstructure of organised human activity, motivated by two factors – greed and selfishness, largely causes this mega complex of global human need. I am going to use the term “Structures of Evil”.

The mega problems causing poverty:

- ✓ exploitation
- ✓ national debt
- ✓ embezzlement by the rich
- ✓ pollution
- ✓ nepotism
- ✓ manipulation
- ✓ desertification and other environmental problems

Some major evils causing poverty:

- ✓ warfare
- ✓ fraud
- ✓ corruption
- ✓ crime
- ✓ drug trafficking
- ✓ terrorism
- ✓ death squads
- ✓ genocide
- ✓ pornography and the sex industry

These cost about \$14 billion a day including profits from criminal enterprises.

Agencies causing poverty – with a failure to confront/tackle the causes

- ✓ cartels and syndicates
- ✓ dictatorship/totalitarianism
- ✓ gangs/organised crime
- ✓ religions
- ✓ multinationals (sometimes)

- ✓ strong militarisation
- ✓ governments

These problems are so vast that we have a tendency to give up in despair. The progress is so small. Aid given is so often wasted. There are frequent setbacks – frequent disasters. We grow bewildered! So many mistakes are being made creating dependency that we tend to become ostrich-like and hide our heads.

The Result of Poverty – the Poverty Trap

[see diagram p. 6]

The cause of poverty is lack of opportunity to fulfil our potential as human beings, so that those caught in a vicious cycle of natural disasters, bad harvests, malnutrition, enfeebled bodies stunted development and ineffective agricultural methods have no hope of breaking free and discovering the meaning of life for which God made them.

The poverty trap is only made greater when a fatalistic worldview is held. So the primary requirement is a **radical** change in outlook and it is **only** the Christian Gospel that can provide the incentive for this.

But existing poverty must not only be relieved; its causes must be eradicated if a new generation is to grow up strong, healthy and free.

In 1936, Winston Churchill attacked the Baldwin government in the House of Commons for its failure to deal with the threat of Nazism:

“So they go on in a strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent.....”

Is this reminiscent of the attitude of us Christians?

In January 1940, Churchill said in the House of Commons:

“Come then, let us to the task, to the battle, to the toil – each to our part, each to our station succour the wounded, uplift the downcast. There is not a week, nor a day, nor an hour to lose!”

We need to say the same.

Later in May 1940, again in the House of Commons, Churchill said:

“I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word, ‘Victory’. Victory at all costs; Victory in spite of all terror; Victory, however long and hard the road may be. For without Victory, there is no survival!”

What are some of the reactions of Christians to poverty?

> Separation

Separation and minimising contact with the world, afraid that we may be polluted by the world, we retreat into our ‘holy bubble’. Recognising we ought to evangelise, we are like people in an air raid shelter. We know there is a small boy just outside – lost. We worry about the boy outside, so we stick a notice at the entrance – ‘All are welcome to come in’.

Holiness is an issue, but we are denying the power of God to keep us from evil as we go out and grab the boy!

➤ **The Second Coming of Christ**

I have heard it argued that Jesus said, in Matthew 24, there would be wars and rumours of wars, famine etc. before He returned – signs of His coming. So work for social reform to alleviate poverty will only delay the Second Coming. So it should not be entered into and at His return, there will only be a small remnant. So world evangelism will be unsuccessful. As a result, we do nothing!

➤ **The rise of Pessimistic Pre-millennialism**

This is similar to the above view and has the same results.

But, there **has** been a change in the last 50 years:

- Carl Henry wrote about *“the uneasy conscience of the evangelical world”* in the light of worldwide poverty and injustice.
- Great change was demonstrated in Article 5 of the Lausanne Covenant where evangelicals expressed penitence both for our neglect and for regarding evangelism and social action as mutually exclusive. It goes on to state that, *“Socio-political involvement (is) ... part of our Christian duty”* and that, *“We should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist”*.

Lausanne II in Manila in 1989 issued the Manila Manifesto and made 21 different statements including:

No. 8: ***‘We affirm that we must demonstrate God's love visibly by caring for those who are deprived of justice, dignity, food and shelter.’***

No. 9: ***‘We affirm that the proclamation of God's Kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression – both personal and structural. We will not shrink from this prophetic witness.’***

So praise God! We are changing!

Summary

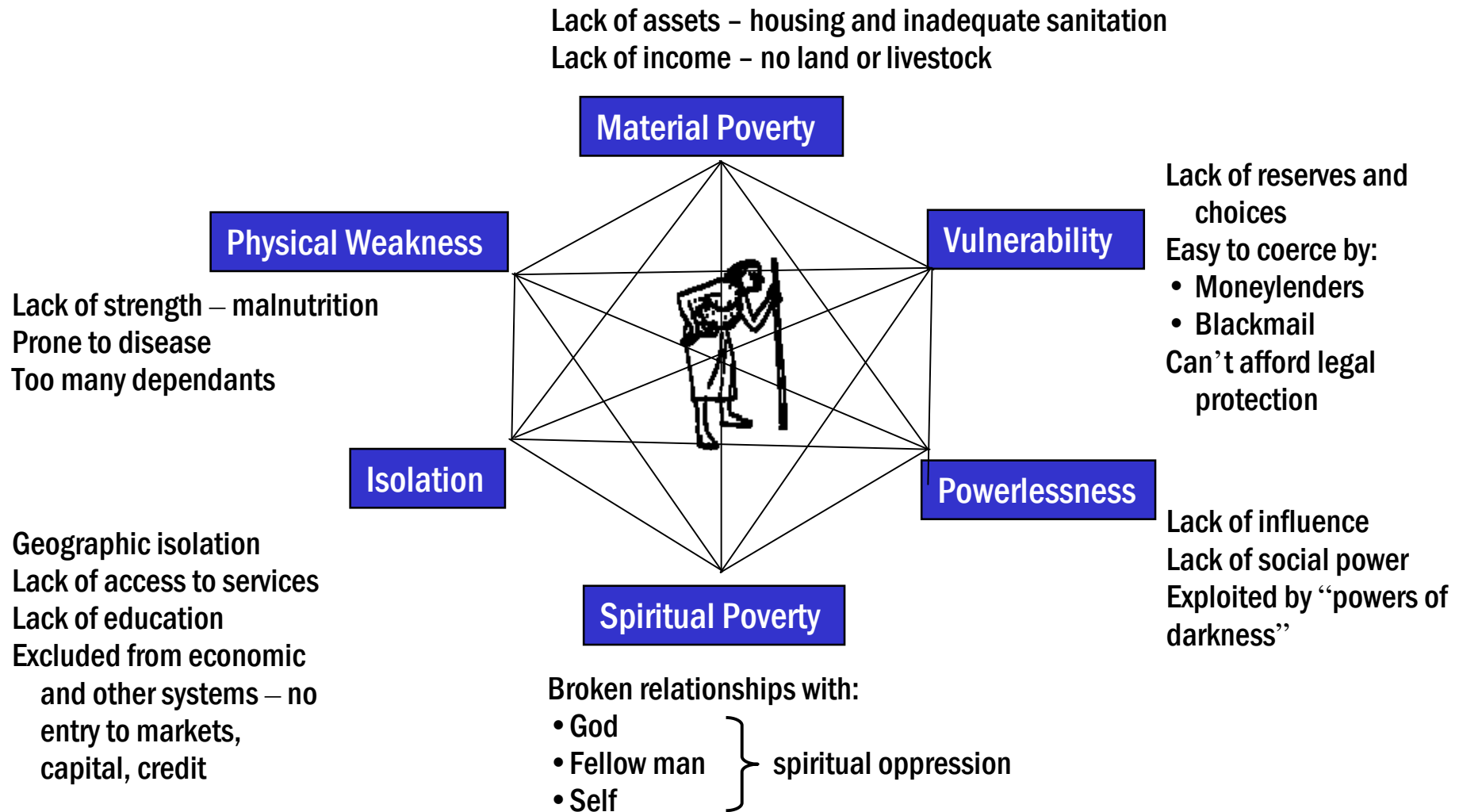
So, poverty is not just a lack of money. It is a form of slavery, dreary, hopeless, a crushing bondage.

Be very clear: **THIS IS NOT GOD'S WILL FOR ANY!**

Very, very briefly God wants ‘milk and honey’ for everyone.

Many of the diseases in the world are caused by the pervasive poverty. They are mostly the result of malnutrition due to ignorance. Hunger, debilitating disease and enfeebled bodies deny “life” to people, let alone the “abundant life” that God came to give us.

The Poverty Trap



Part 2

God's heart for the Poor

A Dutch protestant martyr (died 1539) said this:

"The true believer's faith cannot be dormant. It clothes the naked, feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful. It shelters the destitute. It serves those who harm it. It builds up that which is wounded. It has become all things to all men."

How does God view the poor?

"I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted and justice for the poor."
(Ps. 104:12)

The witness of the Bible is immense. God cares!

"... If you feed the hungry from your own plenty and satisfy the needs of the wretched, then your light will arise like dawn out of darkness and your dusk be like noonday ..." (Is. 58:10)

"I command you to be open-handed with your countrymen, both poor and distressed."
(Deut. 15:11)

"Happy is the man who has a concern for the helpless! The Lord will save him in time of trouble." (Ps. 41:1)

"He who despises a hungry man does wrong, but he who is generous to the poor is happy."
(Prov. 14:21)

"The righteous man is concerned for the cause of the helpless, but the wicked understand no such concern." (Prov. 29:7)

"... the man with two shirts must share with him who has none. And anyone who has food must do the same." (Lk. 3:11)

"When you give a party, ask the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; and so find happiness. For they have no means of repaying you; but you will be repaid on the day good men rise from the dead." (Lk. 4:13-14)

"... if anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple of Mine, I tell you this, that man will assuredly not go unrewarded." (Mt. 10:41)

"I showed you that it is our duty to help the weak ... by hard work and that we should keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who Himself said, 'Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving'." (Acts 20:35)

"Agabas ... was inspired to predict a severe and worldwide famine ... so the disciples (in Antioch) agreed to make a contribution, each according to his means, for the relief of their fellow Christians in Judea. This they did and they sent it off to the elders in charge of Barnabas and Saul." (Acts 11:28-30)

"... they (the Macedonian churches), begged us to be allowed to share in this generous service to their fellow Christians and their giving surpassed our expectations, for they gave their very selves." (2 Cor. 8:4-5)

"God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor. 9:7)

“All they (the Jerusalem leaders) asked was that we should keep in mind the poor, which was the very thing I made it my business to do.” (Gal. 2:10)

“Therefore as opportunity offers, let us work for the good of all, especially members of the household of faith.” (Gal. 6:10)

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give them a drink” (Rom. 12:20)

“Suppose a brother or a sister is in rags, with not enough food for the day and one of you says, ‘Good luck to you keep yourself warm and have plenty to eat’, but does nothing to supply their bodily needs, what good is that? So with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing.” (James 2:15-17)

“... if a man has enough to live on and yet when he sees his brother in need, shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the divine love dwells in him? My children, love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine and show itself in action. This is how we may know that we belong to the realm of truth.” (1 Jn. 3:17-19)

“They shall never again feel hunger or thirst ... because the Lamb who sits at the heart of the throne ... will guide them to the springs of the water of life.” (Rev. 7:16-17)

And so it goes through the Law, the Wisdom literature the Prophets, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles and The Book of Revelation. We shouldn't be surprised at the persistency of the theme of a concern to do something about poverty, for it reflects the heart of God and the heart of the Gospel – God giving His Son for us needy people!

Five key questions

1. What concern for the poor did God show when He acted in history to reveal Himself? (seeing God as a model for us)
2. In what sense does God identify with the poor?
3. How significant is the fact that God usually chooses to work through the poor and oppressed?
4. What does it mean when it says that God will destroy the rich and exalt the poor?
5. Does God command His people to be especially concerned for the poor?

1. How did God act?

- ***Exodus 3:7-8: “I have seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry, because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them....”***

God cares when people are enslaved and oppressed by others – see Ex. 6:5-7.

God reminds His people in the first commandment, ***“I am the Lord your God who brought you ... out of the house of bondage.”*** (Ex. 20:2)

In Leviticus 19 you have various laws:

(v. 9) not harvesting fields to the edge and always leaving gleanings

(v. 10) not stripping a vineyard bare of grapes, nor picking up fallen grapes

Why? ***“You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner.”***

(v. 13) You must pay the daily wages to a hired servant in the evening **before** he goes home.

Then there is more about treating the disabled, having justice in the courts etc.

Why these laws? **God cares!**

- **Ezekiel 16:49:** It was economic exploitation that so outraged God that He sent His people into exile. Sodom was destroyed for similar sins: ***“This was the guilt of your sister Sodom; she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy”.***
- **Amos 2:7:** The rich had an affluent lifestyle **because** they, ***“trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth...”***. (see also Amos 6:1-7) Amos calls the rich women “cows” for they ***“oppress the poor ... crush the needy.”*** (4:1) Amos speaks out about the fact that there is no justice for the poor in the courts. (5:10-15) Amos declares that because of their treatment of the poor, the Northern Kingdom would be destroyed. And they were! The Southern Kingdom of Judah were warned that they would follow if they continued in the same patterns – Jer. 5:26-29 and 7:5-7. But they didn't listen.

- **The model of the Lord Jesus**

In Psalm 146:7-9 the Lord does these things:

- ✓ He executes justice for the oppressed.
- ✓ He gives food to the hungry.
- ✓ He sets the prisoners free.
- ✓ He opens the eyes of the blind.
- ✓ He lifts up those who are bowed down.
- ✓ He watches over the sojourners.
- ✓ He upholds the widows and the fatherless.

When Jesus proclaimed his ‘manifesto’ in the synagogue at Nazareth, He began, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to proclaim Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed”.***

Jesus, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, said this because this is His nature. This is what God does!

2. God identifies with the poor.

God not only cares about the poor, but He identifies with the poor.

2 Cor. 8:9, ***“Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor....”*** He was born in an insignificant village. The first visitors were shepherds – very widely despised by ordinary people. They were known as thieves. At His presentation in the temple His parents could only offer two pigeons – the sacrifice of the poor. (Lk. 2:24). Jesus was, for a while, a refugee and later an immigrant to Galilee, living in a despised town. He trained as a manual labourer. As a rabbi He received no regular income. He had no home. At His death He had absolutely nothing. He was stripped of His garments. He sent His disciples into a life of poverty. (Lk. 9:3)

He **still** identifies Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. His words in Matthew 25:35-40 speak to us with great power!

3. God delights to choose the poor and honour them.

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world” (1 Cor. 1:26-29)

James speaks very clearly: **“Show no partiality”** for the rich. He says if you do, you have “evil thoughts”. Then he goes on to say, **“God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith ...”**. (James 2:1-7)

4. God is not class-conscious.

But God hates **injustice** and punishes it and part of that concern is neglect of the poor.

5. God’s concerns must be our concerns.

In over 40 different places in the Bible we are told to care for widows, orphans, strangers/sojourners and the poor – see Is. 1:10-17 and 1 Jn. 3:17-18.

We need to affirm to ourselves and collectively to each other that we will obey and take these things very seriously! We need to hold each other accountable!

Jesus modelled six roles for us:

- **He lived with the poor:** Throughout his life He **identified** with “sinners” – (the view that poverty was a punishment of God for sin). Therefore **identify** with the poor.
- As a **‘prophet’**: Jesus condemned the religious/political authorities for not caring for justice and heaping difficulties on people – see Lk. 11:46.
- **Jesus as an activist:** having spoken out for justice, He has new wineskins to offer – the way of discipleship, a new community of the Spirit that is active to all – healing, comforting, teaching, helping etc.
- **Jesus as a compassionate Human/God:** Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (Lk. 13:31). He acted compassionately in the face of five conditions:
 - * Hunger – feeding of the 5000
 - * Sickness and disease
 - * Death/bereavement – raising the widow of Nain’s son
 - * Alienation – healing lepers
 - * Leaderless, harassed, oppressed people (people with no shepherds)
- **Jesus the silent sufferer:** Jesus chooses to let the religious and political powers condemn Him. They keep their status. Jesus dies as an atoning sacrifice. (Is. 53:7-8)
- **Jesus the intercessor:** praying for the poor and the oppressor.

We should collectively consider all of these roles – all are valid – the prophetic role is often ignored. We need to develop ‘comfort’ for those who are sinned against. In history we have found it easier to call the sinner to repentance.

Usually those who suffer are too weak to oppose the oppressors openly. Contrary to Western political theory, there may be times when God asks us to accept suffering and be silent before oppression, identifying with the poor, meeting their needs – including that of being affirmed in dignity and love.

6. What about our concern?

In the past:

- John Calvin in Geneva, designed a sewage disposal system with underground pipes and drains for the city. He was also into starting businesses to create employment. He established the weaving industry in Geneva.

- In A.D. 125, an Athenian philosopher, Aristides, wrote about Athenian Christians of his day:

“They love one another; the widows’ needs are not ignored and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has, gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting. If they find poverty in their midst and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities”

Hunger springs from poverty and is maintained by poverty. Poverty is a bitter, hopeless way of life. It is a denial of all that God is – a denial of His character and His care for us.

Are you troubled by this? Jesus was. His heart was moved with compassion.

I am troubled! I have grappled with the problem and with my conscience. I have learned not to worry about what I can’t do and **to get on with what I can do!**

a) Solutions on a **political level** (international level)

- ✓ ‘Trade not aid’ – reduction in tariffs
- ✓ Investment of capital into poor nations
- ✓ Development aid
- ✓ Research into what are the structures that are used to maintain the status quo of poverty

b) Solutions on a **spiritual level**

The poor are not statistics – not disembodied souls – not a concept! God loves them. They respond to the Gospel. **Prayer** and **evangelism** are very important.

“Sustainable development requires sustainable Christian communities.”

c) Solutions on a **practical level**

Aid and development should help accelerate **positive, sustainable change**. Communities are constantly changing:

- Populations are increasing (urban areas)
- Soil fertility is decreasing
- Shocks – natural disasters, conflict, economic changes
- Prices and employment opportunities

Often in the community positive change is not fast enough. Usually this is because the **capacity** to change is too low – lack of education, know-how, leadership etc.

Sustainability is the capacity to maintain something. It could be:

- a credit scheme
- a clean water supply
- a health facility
- a grain mill
- a new variety of wheat/rice etc.

Sustainability gives the capacity to cope with future changes.

Questions for small group discussions

1. What should our response be to poverty and oppression – its causes, the victims of poverty and oppression and those who have a vested interest in the status quo?
2. What might hold us back, distract us or prevent us from becoming really involved?
3. Jesus gave us six roles for us to live out in the face of poverty. How do our churches/teams measure up to these roles?
4. How do we fulfil our renewed commitment?