

BIBLICAL ECONOMY, WEALTH AND POVERTY: A CHALLENGE TO THE GREAT LAKES REGION OF EAST AFRICA

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The Great Lakes Region includes Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. It is part of East Africa, which also includes the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia) as well as the Indian Ocean islands of Comoros and Seychelles. These three regional distinctions are based on different types of vegetation, availability of water and topography. This paper is designed not only for church leaders in the Great Lakes Region, but also for researchers in African

Church History, Contemporary Christian Ethics in an African Context, and Christian Education, as well as students at all levels majoring in Theology, Religion and/or Peace, Democracy and Governance programs.

Introduction

We must be serious and concrete about the significance of biblical economics and social justice, because God's dealing with humanity is concrete. Such concreteness in biblical and theological ethics maintains that Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Liberator of the world, empowers his followers to be religious liberators, making them able to effect joyous victories over contemporary economic and social upheavals. In fact, there is a cry for biblical spirituality in the Great Lakes Region, where corruption has become a pervasive social evil and is cutting across the whole region. Corruption is equal to power plus money minus responsibility and accountability.

Biblical economics and justice are to be understood as a reaction against the global domination of money, and the spread of financial values into every area of modern life. Although the global market promises life and abundance for all, it is becoming clearer every year that prosperity is available only to those inside the global market camp. For those outside, whether in the developing countries, or in the rich world, the market is creating sharp contrasts between rich and poor. It is within this context that biblical teaching on poverty and wealth is a relevant topic in the religious arena; hence the justification for this paper.

Nearly two-thirds of the population in the Great Lakes Region falls below the poverty line. This is one of the greatest challenges to religious leaders and faithful Christians who worship in various churches. These churches are united in sacramental struggles to follow our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the bread-breaker and bread-sharer. In fact, that is his trademark. He is always commissioning his followers to be bread-breakers and peace-seekers (Mt. 5:9).

Within this sea of disturbing poverty, a few people openly control the wealth of the area and hardly ever extend justice to the economically-disabled at the grassroots level who are living in extreme poverty. To be more precise, instead of giving assistance to the poor, the rich comfort themselves with the myopic view that the materially

poor are poor because they are lazy, unfortunate or both. Any help they give is meager and only improves the economic situation of the poor at a snail's pace. The gap between the two economic structures—the poor and the rich—widens every day.

Many, maybe even most, of the rich have acquired their riches through covetousness and greed. They know that such wealth gives them power to marginalize, deprive, abuse and subjugate the poor to subhuman conditions as though they were second-class citizens. The situation is discouragingly complex. This is the context in which there is a call for Christian education to address the prevailing challenges. Poverty is affecting men and women, young and old, educated and non-educated at all levels, and eventually it creates a vicious cycle. The fact is that people are living in precarious conditions.

Two of the most perplexing and notorious questions—which cannot be easily silenced—are these: (1) What is the position of our churches on the issues that confront the poorest of the poor? (2) Why do the poor find it so difficult to get justice? These questions and many more are important in the Great Lakes Region today. However, King Solomon's position is clear:

Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor person is deserted even by his or her friends (Prov. 19:4).

We are ashamed of this quotation, but its truth is still apparent today. In the Great Lakes Region, there are proverbs and sayings that describe the fortunes of the rich and the misfortunes of the poor. One example will suffice. A *Kiganda* proverb (in Uganda) stresses that God showers his blessings “like rain” upon the rich. *Omukisa mpewo, nobwogalawo guyinira*—even though doors are closed, still more blessings enter to bless the rich.

It is important to note at this point that whether the interest is in the personal and spiritual development of children and adults, or in the relationships between state and church or in methods of teaching or the question of syllabus construction, Christian teachers, administrators and faithful Christians are now studying the Bible in order to understand their current national economy. What is clear, to use Bediako's phraseology, is that “Africa [the Great Lakes Region included] has become the heartland of the Christian faith in our

times.”¹ In Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, the Bible is continuously a unifying force.² Taking it seriously means reading and obeying its teaching (Deut. 6:4-9) in order to seek answers to the troubling questions people face on their Christian journey. Most encouragingly, it is something they lean on and it is something they listen to. However, faithful Christians in the region need to be encouraged to grow towards what Isaac Zokoue calls Christian maturity.³ The gospel has to be seen as offering resources for life’s most deeply-felt experiences. When faced with death or famine or other calamities in life, Christians should not resort to traditional rituals and beliefs. Rather, the Bible is a good companion and a friend to embrace. Worshipers sometimes kiss it; however, there is nothing magical in it. On the contrary, its driving force is love, justice, goodness and hope.

The present discussion tries to help analyze the above issues. It is intended as a challenge to faithful Christians to continue important biblical and theological study, and to translate their findings into their respective ministerial roles, so that their theoretical reflection becomes action-oriented in their biblical and theological practices. Theory without practice is sterile and practice without theory can be misdirected.

I intend to address the subject beginning with a definition of some terms; then I will survey some biblical and theological thinking to express solidarity with the helpless grassroots people in the churches, before looking at economic life, wealth and poverty, with the intent to enable the poor to have “the will to rise” and fight for their rights in the twenty-first century. Naturally, African experience in the Great Lakes Region will colour the central reflection of this paper.

Definitions

In this new century, a clear definition of the word “Christian” is crucial to those who claim to be Christians, as they wrestle with rampant poverty, regional conflicts, drug addiction, barbaric wars and disease

1. Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 3-7.

2. J.N.K. Mugambi, “The Bible and Ecumenism in Africa Christianity,” in Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Waligo (eds.), *The Bible in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1997), pp. 68-85.

3. Isaac Zokoue, “The Crisis of Maturity in Africa,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* (1996), pp. 354-64.

(the HIV/AIDS pandemic). Although faithful Christians cry *shalom*, *shalom*, there is no peace. We understand the word “Christian” to refer to all baptized people who believe in Jesus Christ. They may be young or old, committed or non-committed. They live in all parts of our nations: cities, towns and villages. They engage in all sorts of professions. Some receive monthly salaries, others are self-employed, while some are unemployed. In spite of this, God appeals to them to contend for the faith that was once entrusted to them as contemporary saints (Jude 3). With this new focus, they are challenged to pass on the biblical teaching that was committed to them to the future generation (Mt. 28:19-20).

With this clarification in mind, let us turn to the word “church.” The word “church” means an assembly of God’s people (Acts 19:39) or a local congregation of Christians (Acts 9:31; 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:22) or a place of worship for the people of God—the powerful as well as the marginalized. Faithful Christians are challenged to know that there is only one Church, gathering under the leadership of Jesus Christ. But on earth, the Church is seen wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Mt. 18:20). To explain the relationship between the one and the many would take us beyond the parameters of this paper because beyond the biblical image of the Church are many denominations.

The word “wealth” means owning a lot of assets (money), or “having more than others.” The Bible does not condemn it. Two examples drawn from the New Testament will suffice. Joseph of Arimathea is described as “a rich person” and as “a disciple of Jesus” (Mt. 27:57). Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax-collector, promised to pay back to the people he had cheated four times what he had taken, and to give half of his possessions to the poor. This presumably means that he kept the other half, apart from what he paid back to his victims. Yet Jesus said that salvation had been given to him (Lk. 19:8-10).

On the other side of the spectrum, “poverty” means not having sufficient access to resources, or the lack of necessary materials to meet the basic needs of life. Socially and economically, poverty becomes unacceptable when we observe it in the ghettos of Johannesburg, shanty areas of Bujumbura and slums of Kampala.

We may not experience the economic hardships that the poor encounter in their daily lives; however, we can try to view the poor from the vantage point of being in solidarity with them in their present predicaments or being committed to working in partnership with them.

It is hoped that the reader of this paper will gain new insight into the role of Christian education in the Great Lakes Region, and will be encouraged to develop even more interest in this challenging area through reading and research.

Biblical Justice and Economic Relations

Reading the Bible expectantly and honouring its teaching enables faithful Christians to realize that biblical perspectives on economic life revolve around several images. A few examples will suffice. The first image in the Old Testament focuses on the Jubilee year that was to be observed every fifty years. Those suffering under the yoke of economic depression and social oppression were to be remembered and cared for. The Jubilee year was a period of reallocation of wealth in such a way that the fruits of the land had to be shared more equitably by all (Leviticus 25). It was not merely seen as an emergency measure to deal with temporary maladies but as a principle that had implications for and was governed by social, economic and religious relations at all levels.

There are two basic principles relating to the biblical perspective on economic and social order, and these are paramount. The first has to do with the ownership of property, and that is: *Absolute ownership belongs to God and God alone*. Human beings were—and are—merely stewards.

The second principle is the vision of a “new earth” that is embodied in the book of Isaiah. The early soundings on this motif reveal that “they who build houses shall inhabit them” and “they who plant vineyards shall eat the fruits thereof” (Isa. 65:21). This new principle of human relationship here links ownership and labour. With this distinction in mind, the alienation of work from benefit is a clear challenge to be addressed as a fundamental source of oppression and suffering. Widening the scope of our discussion further, justice as a relational term involves two people who share membership in a civic community. To be faithful to this relationship is to be just. This paradigm is not an abstract concept. It is down-to-earth and embodies the stories of the mighty acts of God visiting those who are oppressed.

One of the most promising instructions for the contemporary situation is that the Bible tells Christians to express love to their neighbours. This fits well with the African philosophy described by Professor John Mbiti, who rightly puts it, “I am because we are; since

we are therefore I am.”⁴ Those who are faithful Christians must promote the position of John the Baptist, which stresses that a person with two tunics should share with those who do not have, and the one who has food should do the same (Lk. 3:11). As if that is not enough, when a person sees another who is dressed in rags, such a person can say to his or her money: “Come forth Shilling! Or dollar! You must be on your way to empower such a person with decent clothing.” This is a good gesture, which faithful Christians must emulate.

At the heart of this challenge is the notion that the bias of faithful Christians should be towards those who are wronged, who suffer, who are weary, and who are weak, oppressed, subjugated and victimized by the present economic and social order.

It should be recognized at the outset that in recent times, consideration of the above two biblical principles has been conjoined with a social hermeneutic of the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Mt. 6:12). In some countries that are victims of foreign debt, this line of thought in our Lord’s Prayer takes on incredible social and economic significance. Several questions need to be raised and explored:

1. What does it mean to Christians to pray these lines in the present economic predicaments?
2. What does it mean that Jesus included and remembered indebtedness in his prayer?
3. What does it mean that Jesus petitions for the erasure of debts?

The Lord’s Prayer stresses the principle of forgiving indebtedness and yet economic disorder results from irresponsible borrowing. “Borrowing causes inflation!” is an oracle of the suffering and exploitation of the poor. Colossal debts create intense deprivation, stunt economic recovery, siphon off limited resources, enhance inflationary conditions, stifle workers’ rights and engender monetary devaluation and wage control. To clarify this argument, foreign debt, along with the superior political powers, are the instruments of governance whereby subservience is imposed through control of loans. The Great Lakes Region continues to languish under perpetual dependence. Foreign debt—in which so many states in the region are immersed and by which so many

4. John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 141.

are crippled—is not an instrument of relief. Evidence from the Great Lakes Region experience relating to currency crisis and massive inflation is of particular importance. As Professor Magesa convincingly says, “it is almost literally true that when the IMF sneezes, some states shake and when the World Bank frowns, others tremble.”⁵ I believe that the parameters of repayment of foreign debts owed by some states in the region must be revisited—with the intent to erase them or to waive them.

The next step is to emphasize Christian involvement in the economic ministry of promoting open discussion between the churches and the states in the region, in light of the corruption that is so rampant, wealth that is in the hands of a few, and the poor working for the rich while receiving very little in return. All churches in the region should provide seminars for pastors, nuns, seminarians and the laity on such issues.

In the New Testament, Paul states that the “love of money is the root of all evils” (1 Tim. 6:10). We are challenged not to misquote him. Paul did not say that money is evil. However, money in the hands of unscrupulous persons creates social, economic and religious problems culminating in income poverty, food poverty, infra-structure poverty and spiritual poverty. Although Solomon’s view (Prov. 14:20) is a good critique of a number of societal structures, institutions and patterns of life that affect the poor,⁶ there are still unsolved economic and Christian ethical issues, which leave faithful Christians with unresolved moral problems. The problem is how to attain spiritual maturity and self-understanding as well as to justify the desire for more money and wealth on the basis of need rather than of love for it. Jesus cared for the hungry, the homeless and the sick. In economic terms, he came to persons who experienced basic needs for human dignity and integrity: food, clothing, shelter and health care. On this note, I am neither

5. Laurent Magesa, “Africa’s Struggle for Re-definition during the Time of Globalization,” *Afer* (1998), p. 321. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank often impose financial policies on debtor states that create tremendous economic hardship for their citizens.

6. Matthew Theuri, “Poverty in Africa,” in Mary N. Gitui and Emmanuel A. Obeng (eds.), *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1999), pp. 230-42; N.H. Taylor, “The Contextualization of Christianity in the Early Church,” in *Reflection on Church Faith: An African Context* (Mutare, Zimbabwe: Africa University Press, 2002), pp. 41-54.

exaggerating nor using the subject of the poor to bash the rich. Nevertheless, poverty is rampant in the nine major aspects of life: religious, economic, spiritual, moral, mental, social, cultural, physical and political.

Admittedly, poverty is dangerous, dehumanizing, pervasive and acute. At the same time, the condition towards which acts of justice move is *shalom* (Isa. 11:2-5; 61:1-2; Ps. 72:1-4). *Shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of the community embracing creation. It refers to all those resources that enhance harmonious, joyful and effective living. *Shalom* covers all human relationships with nature, whether storm, destructive rain or fruitfulness of the land. *Shalom* involves communal harmonious economy; social, political and religious order; new life found in the feeding of the needy, the hungry, the refugees, widows, widowers and orphans. The poor within the parameters of *shalom* obtain justice and are delivered from economic injustices. Forces that contradict and oppose *shalom* endanger the possibility and attainment of peace. Therefore, *shalom* is not a condition, but is a continuous struggle. *Shalom* must be created, aspired to, and maintained again and again—against the powers and instrumentalities of destruction and depravity.

In the communities of faithful Christians, *shalom* must include giving food to the hungry, restoring sight to the blind, healing the sick, granting justice to the prisoners, forgiving the sinners, granting freedom to the oppressed and preaching the good news to the masses (Lk. 4:18-19; 7:22). To seek and pursue *shalom* is to be engaged continuously in the struggle for love, goodness, honour, prosperity and justice. Although *shalom* goes beyond justice, there cannot be *shalom* without justice, because in *shalom*, human beings experience and enjoy justice.

With this in mind, and in order to ensure that our discussion leads to concrete actions and does not remain only at an academic and theoretical level, we may ask: *Should some Christians be poor?* The poor show faithful Christians that the real world is an ocean of scandalous and massive poverty in which thousands of people live and where a few are allowed to wallow in wealth. Thinking that they are using considerable foresight, most churches are full of incidents where people give their hearts away in order to gain prosperity and wealth, which

gives the grimmest and most unrealistic witness.⁷ The practice of simony during the Dark Ages, selling indulgences (prior to and during the Reformation era), modern-day lotteries, fundraising functions on church premises and many additional practices are eloquent examples of unprecedented and unimaginable schemes for the acquisition of wealth.⁸ Today, a pastoral survey confirms that some faith-based institutions own a lot of resources and property: universities, schools, hospitals, hotels, banks, buses and buildings as rental property. Shockingly to faithful Christians, some churches have become overwhelmingly the institutions of the rich. At best, the Church must be an anchor of hope in times of darkness (Jn 8:12).

It must be made very clear that the poor are neither passive nor economically impotent. This is crucial in many ways. They need money, as most of us do. Money is the medium of exchange. Having it or lacking it creates a barrier between persons. The rich and the poor are caught up in the web of needing more money. They trade part of their time when they find themselves in need of it to balance their expenditures in the areas of quality education, medical services, decent houses and adequate clothing that match their tastes. As a pastor, I do not want to overstate by saying that it is only money that is important in life. Nevertheless, without it, life is miserable. Unfortunately, the dichotomy between the rich and the poor is growing.⁹ The quality of life is lowered. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening.¹⁰ The inequality between the “haves” and the “have-nots” has grown

7. Mary N. Gitui, “Moral Things in Contemporary African Society,” in J.N.K. Mugambi and A. Nasimiyu-Wasike (eds.), *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1992), pp. 60-72; Review of Ronald J. Sider, “Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* (1980), pp. 70-83.

8. It is significant to note that one can be materially rich and spiritually poor or materially poor and spiritually rich. See how Laurent Magesa deplores the unwanted situation to the church in his article, “Some Critical Theological Pastoral Issues Facing the Church in East Africa,” *African Christian Studies* 4 (1988), pp. 43-60; and see A.E. Harvey, *Strenuous Commands: The Ethics of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 117-25.

9. The *Manica Post* newspaper of Zimbabwe reported that an old man of 103 years was sentenced to three months prison for growing *mbanje*. In giving evidence in court, the old man said that he used the drug as a medicine for his eyes as he could not see without taking it (*Manica Post*, 7-12 October, 2005), p. 7.

10. See www.globalconnections.co.uk/oneworld.asp.

worse in the last three decades. No person with religious conviction and integrity should allow this situation to remain unchallenged, because poverty hits the poorest people the hardest in this cut-throat competition with rich powerful nations.

When some Christians read the Bible through the lenses of such background, the rescue they often seek from God is in terms of the right amount of money at the right time and in the right place. More significantly, God's creation must be a central model that promotes the themes of stewardship on planet earth, sustainability of all living things and holistic responses to issues of hunger, agriculture and water. Enlightened decisions regarding practical matters must be addressed as the Bible does in regard to social victims. As the faithful set their hands to promote biblical and theological teaching, may they never turn back, but press on with intent to fulfill the high calling of God in Christ Jesus of supporting those crippled by poverty at the community level.

*The Attitude of the Church to Poverty and Wealth
in the Twenty-First Century*

While critics are increasingly attacking the Church from all sides, the fact remains that she has a noble cause to address. She must slowly and determinedly teach her followers the vocation of their Christian service (1 Tim. 5:18), and to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, in order that they may carry the indelible marks of the gospel (Mt. 7:18-20). She must encourage her members at the community level to learn new skills, which will under-gird their daily programs. If she will do this, no doubt many people who now seem lost will recover and the Great Lakes Region will receive new life. Intensive farming will start, a strong philosophy of self-reliance will be promoted and individuals will acquire new skills in planning and management. Instead of losing heart, folding their hands, walking in self-pity and weeping over spilt milk, people will be encouraged to improve their situations, guided by Christian economic ethics.

If the historical churches promote Solomon's teaching that the rich and the poor rub shoulders and the Lord is their maker (Prov. 22:2), then a new Christian ethic in the African context, governed by a new economic, political and Christian teaching, has to be advanced, whereby the rich must live more simply than the poor may simply

live.¹¹ From such understanding, churches are challenged to open up opportunities that will enhance strong campaigns aimed at producing job-creators but not job-seekers. Christianity is a religion of new life and hope. To stress the point in simple language, in this century, new life and hope undertaken within the orbit of Christian teaching, preaching, witnessing and counseling hopefully will enable the poor to retrieve their justice, particularly in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. Martin Luther King called this new hope a “dream.”

It is therefore in this context above all that we mention some of the issues that hamper this new eschatological hope, which churches in the region must address: terrorism, homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, child-abuse, witchcraft, sorcery, spouse beating, drug abuse, devil worship, alcoholism, mismanagement of funds and embezzlement. More than ever before, all churches have to address new ideologies that stare their members in the face and cause their eyebrows to rise either out of curiosity or in condemnation, because they trash their family values and retard development. Examples abound in the unrestrained pornography in the media (TV, internet, newspapers and films). All these are maliciously damaging the authentic fabric of cultural heritage and religious values of church members. In fact, their economic, cultural and ethical values have been shaken.¹²

What Has Been Done

Far too often, churches have allowed themselves to be backed away from their responsibilities into the little corner of their “spiritual” provinces. And strangely enough, even some of the blazing prophets within Africa Initiated Churches (AICs) or the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Renewal movements, who argue with relevance about the place of their religious institutions on the contemporary scene, are not finding a

11. Gwamna Je ‘Adayibe’, “Where Your Treasure Is: A Consideration of Jesus’ Teaching on Possessions,” *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (2000), pp. 29-45.

12. Keith Eitel, *Transforming Culture: Developing a Biblical Ethic in an African Context* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1986), pp. 94-105. Amplifying this subject, Eitel stresses that biblical teaching indicates that materialism and wealth will be the major threats to the lives of faithful Christians before God. The trio must be dealt with and Christians must put them in their proper place or else the Lordship of Jesus Christ will be compromised (Mt. 6:19-21; Lk. 12:33).

response. To say it differently, although these churches are departing from the classical patterns of sharing the Christian faith and promoting a new tradition of door-to-door ministries or person-to-person evangelism they are strangely silent when the subject of “the attitude of the churches to biblical economy, poverty, wealth and prosperity”¹³ in *the Great Lakes Region, let alone in African Christianity*,¹⁴ is top on the agenda for discussion. This being so, all leaders of churches and spiritual movements must be reminded that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and Christians constantly turn to them when they feel the pressure of darkness at all levels (Mt. 5:14-16; Mk 4:21-28).

In this respect, churches are called upon to pay critical attention to causes and symptoms of the moral degeneration that badly affects the poorest of the poor. And for this to happen, they must face the real issues of economic justice, which accelerate poverty, greed, corruption, hunger, ignorance, disease and famine. They must restore the image of the Garden of Eden, which is taken to mean *a place to feel at home* (including rivers, wetlands, plants and animals that grace this planet).¹⁵ God’s Spirit should be allowed to enter churches and blow where he wants despite their systematized confessional traditions, to say nothing of their flawed economic and political ideologies. Only when the churches cherish just economic and social principles can they rise up with boldness and begin to see that they have a tremendous role to play and *a word to speak about the restoration of the image of the Garden of Eden*.

It is precisely for this reason that some biblical claims and Christian ethical principles are significant. Admittedly, Christian education that promotes economic justice is what every missionary since Paul, every

13. John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), pp. 273-81; Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 126-55; Theuri, “Poverty in Africa,” pp. 230-242.

14. Peter Kanyandago, “The Disfigured Body of Jesus Christ and African Ecclesiology,” in J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (eds.), *The Church in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Initiatives Press, 1990), pp. 180-92.

15. Going to church has yielded indigenous Christians who have reduced religion to a kind of uniform, something they put on one day and discard the rest of the week. Ardently confessing Christians go to pray on Sunday, only to return home to prey on each other! Sadly, one is no longer surprised to see respected Christians who desire material possessions using wrong channels to acquire them at the expense of the eternal possessions that are found in religion and God.

preacher since Peter, every biblical student since Apollos and every bishop since Timothy has promoted. Today, we call this process “contextualization.”¹⁶ Functionally, if “contextualization” is joyfully shared, it will make the biblical economic message properly expressed, felt and lived in the cultural context of all people in the Great Lakes Region, Africa, and the world at large. That said, however, it is good to note that when faithful Christians face harsh economic realities in life, they are comforted to know that they are following Jesus Christ who did not carry money or own any. He had no silver, no gold, no cash income, no property, no current account, no savings account, and no financial reserves. He had nowhere to lay his head. He was less well-off than foxes and birds of the air. Renouncing his heavenly wealth, he was born in a borrowed stable and died naked on a rugged cross. On the positive side, it is true that he did not come from a destitute family, but was from the artisan class of skilled people of the province of Galilee. Like his father, he was a *tehton*—a Greek word that means “mason” or “a carpenter.” With this distinction in mind, we can still say that he founded what was largely the original Church of the Poor, a fellowship of the oppressed, the exploited, the powerless, the deprived, and the dispossessed. And he commanded his first followers not to carry gold, silver and money in their pockets. Nevertheless, it is readily understandable that he lived by what he taught and his impact on the world was and is still enormous. Although many questions remain unanswered, I have tried to open up some space for further in-depth study.

How Should Faithful Christians Respond?

To respond more appropriately to the current state of affairs in the Great Lakes Region, where some Christians are deeply involved in

16. Max L. Stackhouse, “Contextualization and Theological Education,” *Theological Education* (1986), pp. 67-84. By definition, contextualization comprises what homileticians call “application” and is exemplified in the Bible itself. See also O. Imasogie, “Contextualization: Constructive Interaction between Culture, People, Church and the Theological Programme”, *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* (1993), pp. 19-23; Tite Tienou, “Issues in the Theological Task in Africa Today,” *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (1982), pp. 3-10; Bruce Framing, *Contextualization of Theology: An Introduction and Commentary* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), pp. 67-68; Fabian Maganda, “Contextualising Jesus: ‘The Only Mediator’ for the Sukuma People of Tanzania,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (2002), pp. 147-64.

squandering national and church resources, where some people in positions of responsibility promote a culture of dishonesty, where some people are marginalized because of their exclusion from positions of decision making, where some people earn low wages unworthy of human beings, where some people in charge of church projects use institutional property to promote their own projects instead of using it for the purpose it was meant for, where some people in high positions are appointed to such offices because they are either friends or relatives but not because they are competent, there cannot be a better time to address this topic than now. These examples give a gloomy picture of some people in the churches, who are culturally undisciplined, morally perverted, religiously blind and spiritually bankrupt.¹⁷

It must be re-asserted: all Christian churches—historical, Pentecostal, African Initiated (AICs) or Charismatic—are challenged to accept the above reality in order to address matters squarely relating to prophetic, spiritual and pastoral issues. Theologically speaking, if they are bread-breaking and justice-seeking, then their followers are ambassadors of hope. If they fail to do that, these thorny issues will spill over from the sanctuary into the public arena, especially in some nations with a strong Christian heritage. Thus, to fulfill this noble task, all churches have to strengthen their biblical economic and spiritual campaign in order to safeguard moral and spiritual ethics.¹⁸ Based on these observations, they have to teach their followers to protect the environment: forests, swamps, rivers, minerals and other energy and natural resources. They have to challenge their governments to promote human rights, establish new economic policies, create employment, eliminate personal greed, and rehabilitate industries, agricultural enterprises and trade.

Some Concluding Biblical and Theological Comments

In conclusion, it is significant to note that biblical and theological observations have shown that wealth in itself is not evil but economic growth does not eliminate poverty in the region. Inequality between “rich” and “poor” will continue to grow. Righteousness—not money—

17. F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 184.

18. George Kinoti and Peter Kimunyu (eds.), *Vision for Bright Africa: Facing Challenges of Development* (Nairobi: IFES Anglophone Africa, 1997), pp. 194-96.

will exalt faithful Christians and churches. For this reason above all, churches must take seriously the mandate of teaching their members to understand the central biblical teaching in respect to biblical ethics and economic justice. What is paramount is biblical economic theology and contextualized theology, which will enhance the idea that money should be devoted to the programs that are in the mind of God; not only some of it but all of it. Visionary church leaders are needed who are strong in body, tenacious in spirit and have a will to lead their followers from egocentricity to Christ-centered interests, geared to spiritual maturity. Another point that needs to be high on the agenda is to sensitize faithful Christians who are materially poor to secure loans from the ECLOF (Ecumenical Church Loan Fund) and to tap the economic and religious potential offered by other Christian lending organizations. The poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden have to master the art of money acquisition and prudent spending. Positive responses will create big differences. All churches in every corner of the Great Lakes Region should be shown how to promote biblical economy, and enhance constructive engagement and poverty alleviation programs. Christian educators should never advocate lowering the morality of their followers and their Christian ethics in order for them to survive economically. Based on biblical and theological economic research, devotional studies and lessons learnt in life, without money, there is no economic security. Christian churches have at their disposal the manpower, the brainpower, the spiritual power and the technological know-how. Behind such observation is the concern to come to the rescue of the poor and needy and give them a chance to live a decent life. But sympathy does not mean sentimentality. Church sponsored agencies; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community based organizations (CBOs) should enhance programs and projects to help these targeted groups. At a practical level, the materially poor are challenged to jump on the (Christian) economic bandwagon and ride holding boldly the ECLOF and other Christian lending agencies' banners. All they need is the will to do it. Clearly stated, unless a desire for easy money is replaced by determination for hard work and sweat, the materially poor¹⁹ will not see light at the end of the tunnel. Their future is doomed.

19. Materialism is not the mere possession of material things, but an unhealthy obsession with them. It is but a short step from wealth to materialism, from having riches to putting our trust in them, and many take it. But it is foolish. There is no

With such a perspective in mind, an economic system that produces many poor people does not embrace the meaning of God's justice and *shalom*. No one who has perceived the work of God or heard the good news of Jesus Christ will dare to think that the Creator of all men and women can be satisfied with an economic order that divides nations and peoples into rich and poor. God's compassion is clear: the barren woman conceives and gives birth; five loaves of bread feed five thousand people and Jesus Christ is raised from the dead to be the Saviour of the world. This is the God on whom the poor count "for scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts...for putting down the mighty from their thrones...for filling the hungry with good things...and for sending the rich away empty" (Lk. 1:46-53).

With a unified front, let faithful Christians shift their gaze to the challenges facing church leaders of all denominations in this century. Laying the foundation on which subsequent efforts must be built, they are challenged to teach their followers who sit in the pews every Sunday, visit them at their places of work (where their wealth lies) and help them to know the significance of their assets (banks and property) and how to use them profitably, not the *ten percent only* but the totality of it. Unless these resources are utilized for the right purposes, in the end, our churches will ultimately prove to have had minimal spiritual impact upon their adherents, let alone their respective nations. Wealth acquisition that does not take care of the needy, the marginalized and the poorest of the poor, is inhumane and brutal.

To stress this truth, all churches must teach their followers the holistic culture of prayer, which will under-gird their programs. In fact, behind every extraordinary supernatural move of God are people who have dedicated themselves to earnest prayers. Prayers prepare the hearts of God's people for his blessings. Without prayer, the churches cannot successfully fulfill the God-given mission of articulating the Christian gospel (*euangelion*) to their adherents at the grassroots community level, a mission which is vital in African Christianity.

All this makes clear that faithful Christians must be apostles of hope rather than of despair and pessimism. They are challenged to turn from greed for money and to repent. This kind of repentance requires them to embrace a new covenant with God through Jesus Christ, the ultimate mediator, who alone became the initiator of the new creation of belie-

security in wealth. It is not for nothing that Paul writes of "uncertain riches". Burglars, pests, rust and inflation all take their toll.

vers. Nowhere else is victory over economic injustice so decisive as in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The inescapable conclusion is that as faithful Christians face the twenty-first century, they need to be reminded of Jesus' teaching with respect to wealth acquisition and not be consumed by the crazy chase for possessions or follow economic winds of change, which has led many astray into all kinds of evils. The faithful should recall that they believe in a cosmic God. They belong to a universal Church. Thus, churches can no longer stand aside. It is now their task to map out concrete strategies geared to evaluating, reviewing and planning. These programs have to support food security and trade, debt reduction, effective conditions of disaster relief, HIV/AIDS prevention programs, conflict resolution and peace building—the list is long. Above all, they are to promote a prophetic ministry of rebuking evil and showing Christians the light that alone can redeem planet earth. This needs to be seen as a positive process. If they fail to do this, mammon will win, the poor will suffer, the rich will not be brought to conviction and Christians will not see the light at the end of the tunnel. I place an accent on holistic biblical economics and social justice in relation to God and welcome down-to-earth reflection on this subject.

Some Suggestions

Having studied the situation in which many faithful Christians live in our nations, I believe that the following issues need to be addressed:

1. Along with fund-raising programs in and for the benefit of the churches, should churches also raise funds for some practical projects for the poorest of the poor?
2. How can visionary churches promote projects that will alleviate the plight of many jobless people including faithful Christians in the region?
3. Can the governments in the Great Lakes Region make concrete plans for graduates so as to cut down the number of job seekers?