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Preferential Poor in Biblical Narrative: A Missiological Reflection in Context of the Church in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Nigeria has been sluggish in curbing its rottenness on corruption and poverty mainly due to the colonial mentality discipling and building a legacy of dependency ideological principles thereby downplaying economic empowerment and spiritual vacuum with Nigerian citizens both in public and private sector, even religious instructions. Non-governmental organizations and churches have simply repeated colonial legacy of dependency syndrome inculcated in the minds of Africans in Nigeria. Rather than empowering members of their congregations to develop sustainable skills that are aimed at eradicating poverty among the poor, they have contributed in laying much emphasis on the British ideas of training people to seek for employment that is no more obtainable in Nigeria. A critical phenomenon among evangelical mission outfits was how they saw and perceived concept of involving economics as tied to faith and farm as non-Christian and barbaric. Yet, biblical principles promote holistic social activities that encourage empowering individuals who are impoverished to exit from the status of being poor to becoming a community of faith that could show case the world with kingdom values that transform the society. It seems clear that the church in Nigeria still has minimal impact on wider society because her strategic and required mission is not visionary at such to build and empower their members to become viable and agents who would create creative ways of empowering the grass roots units towards poverty reduction and ensure sustainable resources and skills to make individual members of the church to better serve as visible witnesses and become active participants in addressing the plight of the poor and poverty alleviation in their decaying and provide a recommendation for action and precaution to be applied .

Key Words: Nigeria, Preferential poor, missiology, poverty, Church, social justice, discipleship, empowerment, transformation

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Introduction

The questions that continually rolled around the mind is why is there poverty and the poor? What causes some people to be poor and some people are rich? Who are really poor? Should the church in Nigeria have preferential treatment of the poor? If so, how binding should it be for contemporary missiologists, theologians, pastoral care givers now and for the future? Poverty remains a fact of life despite the economic programmes both by individuals and nations. What is available here and there are improvements on economic status. These improvements are not even stable. There have been economic ups-turns and downturns. This is what is known from experiences. Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you,” (Matthew 26:11NIV), is historically and globally the same today especially in context of Africa. Institute of Security Studies Statistics (ISSS) accessed March 25, 2020, has it that in 2015, Sub-Saharan Region accounted for only 14% of the world’s total population. But about 44% of the world’s population that survive on less than US\$1.90 per person per day. According to (ISSS), by 2030, Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to represent about 20% of the global population, 65% of global poverty. Economic growth is necessary, but insufficient for condition for sustained poverty reduction.

By 2050, 60 million people will be living in poverty. This scenario has implication for other areas of human development. According to the Seattle Washington world News it placed Nigeria as the poverty capital of the world. In Nigeria, about 86.9 million people live in severe poverty which is about 50% of its entire population. One of the UN’s sustainable goal is end poverty by 2050. This pose a problem for Nigeria as a nation. Nill Kwaku Sowa notes that the World Bank report documents that “Nigeria is one of the poorest nations in the world. Six out of every ten Nigerians are jobless. The average income per person for a month is N110.00” (Sowa2000:20). Certainly, the scenario described by Sowa is not to say that poverty is inherent in the nature of man or of the poor people. Rather it often comes as a result of some imbalances in social and structural processes.

The result of the 2020 poverty corruption perceptions situation of Transparency International indicated the seriousness of the worldwide corruption and poverty problem. Despite the fact recent decades have seen a global public awareness and an increase in attempts by various governments to eradicate corruption and poverty. It is still an on-going problem. It seems that legislation is not the best and effective measures to curb the menace. It needs at also to be tackled at the grassroots by involving a theological-missiological approach which is biblical, to draw the attention individual citizens, church and those in the public square in dealing with poverty to be able to care for the poor. At a personal level, it requires a person’s honesty and a lifestyle that is exemplary living. The biblical injunction serves a guiding post for everyday life, by doing to others what you want them to do to you (Matthew 7:12). On the public square level, it needs the determination and willingness to act as advocates of employing the policy to protect the interest of the poor.

Churches are called upon and sanctioned to participate actively in putting preventive measures that will address the needs of the poor and end corruption and poverty. This phenomenon cannot be addressed without returning to the biblical narrative to evaluate how

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the plight of the poor people was responded. This article first begins with the statement of the problem. Then, second, it examines issues with regards to the poor and poverty in the light of a missiological reflection of the poor in the Biblical narrative in the Old and New Testaments with an aim to applying its principles that can empower churches and individuals in Nigeria to better care for the poor and reduce corruption and poverty in the lives of citizens. Third, it takes cognisance of the poor in the early church. Fourth, it offers practical steps for poverty alleviation and good care of the poor. The measures include positive suggestions to adapt biblical social justice; discipleship and empowerment principles and a conclusion.

The Statement of the Problem

Nearly, one million people, which is almost one out of every four persons on earth live in a state of “absolute poverty”. They are trapped in conditions of illiteracy, malnutrition, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy. Almost 20 million people die each year of starvation or hunger related illnesses. Nigeria’s poverty rates are currently going in the wrong direction. While Nigeria is known for its oil riches, the reality of the nation is that corruption, unemployment and inequality have destroyed the nation’s economic framework, thereby causing it to be the poverty capital of the world.

Corruption is the major reason why poverty is such a high rate in Nigeria. In fact, many economists have declared that it is the simple greatest obstacle that prevents Nigeria from prospering. Corruption is present in the everyday lives of citizens from business to the government and even to religious institutions. Consequently, poorer communities are suffering and the economic structure has experienced disruption. The high rate of unemployment also lead to extreme poverty Unemployment typically exists among the young population. In reality, only about 44.6% of young people have employment. That means being more than half of the population is unemployed. A major cause of unemployment is the fact that people tend to focus more on oil production rather than a variety of other industries. Not only does the country suffer from a lack of employment. But it also suffers a lack of development progress and diversification of its industries.

Along with corruption and unemployment, another major driver of poverty in Nigeria is the presence of inequality within the nation. Nigerian women are subject to unequal treatment in terms of labor, education and poverty. Ibrahim Bakoshi (2016:4) raised a serious concern that “When gender is used as a weapon for oppression as it is common in Africa and beyond today, then something is fundamentally wrong is beginning.” While about 79% of women make up the rural labor force, they are the least to own property. Apart from this, only about 6% of Nigerian women have achieved literacy. The rest are all illiterate. Inequality in Nigeria are a result of poorly allocated resources and corruption. While Nigeria has plenty of resources, they are typically reserved for the wealthy who can afford them. Along with this, corruption within the government leads to further inequalities between the political elite and those living in poverty. The situation in Nigeria has a missiological rationale to tackle. There is urgent need to evaluate issues of corruption and poverty using Biblical principles to empower the churches in Nigeria towards reducing poverty and the number of poor people in the nation. Thus, there is need to begin with a missiological implication.

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Missiological Framework for Caring for the Poor

Many people and organizations view poverty in economic terms. The world bank has described poverty as pronounced deprivation in well-being. This conventional view primarily limits well-being to the ability to have command over commodities. By this definition of poverty, the poor are those who do not have enough income. But how does this conventional view align with how the Scripture describes the poor? How does the Bible define poverty? The preferential option for the poor refers to a trend throughout the Bible of preference being given to the well-being of the poor and powerless of society in teachings and commands of God as well as the prophets and other righteous people. Dudley Woodberry (1996:79) wrote that, “Today the option for the poor significantly affects choices for missionary insertion of most missionary opportunities. This option is also an important missiological concept for formation and education of missionaries.” This has a missiological implication in context of the poor. What is the missiological framework for caring for the poor? D.A. Carson (2010:147,170) notes that “The Latin verb *mittere* is linked to the Greek verb *apostellein* in the New Testament and so mission is not exactly an extra biblical terminology. As a noun, mission does not appear in the Bible.” David Bosch (1991:1) acknowledged that mission “Presupposes a sender, a person or persons sent, and an assignment. Going by Bosch’s (1991:1) view, “mission implies: being sent and being given a task.” Carson’s (2010:147) point makes more sense *mittere* “to send.” Andreas J Köstenberger (1998:199) wrote that “mission is the specific task or purpose which a person or group seeks to accomplish.”

Christopher Wright (2006:199) argued that “Genesis 12 bursts out with the promise of universal blessing which is a spot of good news and a marching order for Abraham.” Wright (2006:199) reiterated that “Everyone recognizes Genesis 12 as a key passage in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation, others also see it “as a missiological reading of the Bible.” Reggie McNeil (2009:27) wrote that “The people of God are charged with the responsibility and enjoying the privilege to bless everyone.” (Wright (2006:214) reiterated that “Abraham’s covenant is a moral agenda for God’s people as well as a mission statement by God.” What then is theological and missiological response does the Old Testament have towards the plight of poor people? Harvey Perkins (1977:28) wrote that “The concordance to the Bible listed two hundred and forty-five references to the poor, poverty and or lack in the English Scriptures.” Poverty affects human dignity and poses some threats to stewardship of humanity. These are part of the reasons why godly people especially Christians should be concerned about poverty.

Human is made in the image of God, but can a poor person reflect the image of God properly? Poverty inhibits freedom because freedom is part of the image humanity share with God. Therefore, poverty tempers and marred God’s image and plan for humans. Harvey Perkins (1977:28) wrote that there are five root words associated with the poor in the Old Testament and they are: “*Ebyon*: needy and dependent (61 times); *Dal*: the frail poor, (57 times); *Rush*: the impoverished through dispossession (31 times); *chaser*: to suffer lack of bread and water, to hunger (36 times). *Ani*: poverty caused by affliction and oppression (80 times). Conrad Boema (1979:18) wrote that “*Āni* is used in the New Testament for the poor, *ptochos* is the translation of the word *anaw* which in turn derived from *ani*. *Anaw* at times means “the humble,” Wright (2016:13), contended that the root causes of poverty are identifiable from Testament texts are natural disasters, laziness and oppression.” But how does the biblical record present the poor?

Biblical Records of Caring for the Poor

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Biblical record shows that prior to the Monarchy of David and Solomon as recorded in the Pentateuch and in Job, societies were built essentially around extended families or clan structures. Riches were the blessings of God. In the Pentateuch, there are specific passages that contend for the poor and these are adequately. In Exodus, the warning is not to take advantage of a widow or an orphan (Exodus 22:22). These categories of the poor are not to be denied legal justice (Exodus 23:6). During the seventh year, let the land was to lie unploughed and unused. This was to allow the poor among the people so that the poor can get food from it. The people were to do the same with their vineyard and their olive grove. (Exodus 23:11). God commanded Israelites not to go over their vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. He commanded them to leave them for the poor and the alien (Leviticus 19:10).

The leaders were commanded by God not to pervert justice. They should not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge their neighbor fairly. (Leviticus 19:15). When they reap the harvest of their land, they were not to reap to the very edges of their fields or gather the gleanings of their harvest. But they were to leave them for the poor and the alien (Leviticus 23:22). God reminded the Israelites that he defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, by giving them food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:18). In Samuel, the same care for the poor is pointed out. God raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor." (1 Samuel 2:8). The Psalmist shows how God rescue the poor from those too strong for them; the poor and needy from those who rob them (Psalm 35:10). Another reference of Psalm shows that God prospered the righteous with material possession (Psalm 112:1-3).

The writer of Proverbs opines that some poverty is caused by sin and some poverty also causes sin. The broken social structure creates an environment which exercises little social control over sin. Poverty causes people to steal. Proverbs offers this sound counsel: "Keep falsehood and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, who is the Lord? Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God" (Proverbs 30:8-9). Isaiah prophesied judgment against the elders and leaders of his people who plundered the poor is in his house (Isaiah 1:17). Isaiah further warned the leaders not "to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless" (Isaiah 3:14, 15). Merrill F. Unger (1996:5) noted that Isaiah 61:1-3 is "Messianic hope for God's people who feel lost in the midst of exile. James Strong (2000: 14) explained that "God promises the light of deliverance, victory, and renewal."

Bruce B. Walke (2007: 887) noted that "The major prophet captures the hope of God's future kingdom and glory that will be ushered in at the arrival of the anointed One. There is a textual variant that appears in the middle of verse 1 and that is the word *anav* "poor" which can be translated "afflicted and "poor." Edward Engelbrecht (2009:1190) provided a missiological context of Isaiah 61 that "The Redeemer of Israel will bring His penitent people out of the darkness of their sin into His everlasting light. Both spiritual and temporal wealth comes to us as gifts from God. We should make it our goal to use this wealth for the blessings of others, rather than selfishly seeking and searching for more." Unger opined that it is: "The message of hope for God's people who feel lost in the midst of exile." Therefore, the quotation from Isaiah, is where the poor are lumped together with the "broken hearted," and all who mourn," as understood in Isaiah. The Hebrew word *ana'im* in verse 1 can be translated "poor."

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Green (1997:60) wrote that “The social world was defined around power and privilege, measured by a complex religious purity, family heritage, land ownership, vocation, ethnicity, gender, education and age.” Mary Douglas (1966:139) opined that “This social classification was part of the Old Testament boundary between the “pure” referring to those who were part of the Israeli people and those who were considered “the impure.” These last groups were marginalized and categorized as “sinners.” Amos 2:6-7”Hear this word, you cow of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, Bring us some drinks!” Amos 4:1”Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land.” Amos 8:4”Buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.” Amos 8:6”Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor.

Thomas Finley (1985:411) wrote that “Amos has much to say on oppression and the plight of the poor in Israel. It so natural that Amos book has become a focal point for discussion on social justice.” There are at least three aspects of the issue that Amos dealt with which concerns the nature of God, the role of the individual and the role of the social system. For Amos, justice among people must begin with the Lord himself. That individual ought to behave in a certain way toward each other cannot be understood apart from a deep awareness of the character of the Lord justice (Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12). Nowhere in the book of Amos does the Lord ever make reference to poverty as the fault of the poor. Proverbs often teaches about the importance of Industry and wisdom in making a man wealthy or poor (Proverbs 6:1-11; 10:4-5, 26; 12:24,27). Richard Patterson (1973:223) argued that “This is not a fundamental disagreement between the wisdom and prophetic perspectives on the causes of poverty But Amos and the other prophets do not speak of these issues.” This illustrates two complementary ways of looking at the problem. Amos’ purpose desired only to uncover the evil that leads some to impoverish others for their own gain. Why it is evil? The Lord never deals with his creatures in that way. Such behavior is offensive to him. Therefore, God shows compassion for widows and those afflicted, he expects his people who are called by his name to do same in caring for all categories of people.

The individual aspects of the social evil can be easily discerned in Amos’ prophecy. Amos presents his listeners with concrete images of those who temper with scales (Amos 8;5) who violates should be treated like a member of the family (2:7). The individual merchants and wealthy landowners are dishonest and greedy for more money and powers; they should be righteous and merciful in imitation of him. If they would turn back to the law of the Lord and meet his requirement. This graphic description of the morality of leaders, business men and land owners is similar of what goes on in Nigeria. There is however, the need to also keep in mind the social setting in which Amos operated. J. David Pleins (1986:163, 164, 165, 167, and 181) noted that “The Law of Moses was given for individuals to know right from wrong. But also, to set up a social structure that would have a potential to express the Lord’s character.” Pleins (1986:168) explained that the “Ten Commandments combine worlds about worship of the Lord with those about relating to family, neighbors, and slaves.” Prophet Amos was particularly concerned because he could see the social system set up by the Lord disintegrating (Amos 6:6).

The land tenure system provided at least a means for each individual to participate in the social process (Amos 5:11). But Amos saw a rapidly expanding social class of the poor people. They were incapable of making enough for even subsistence, and they were forced to sell themselves into debt slavery (Amos2:6-8). In Nigeria, this vividly is what happening among the rural poor farmers whose farm lands are being forcefully taken away by Fulani

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Herds men who are conquering them with their own AK 47 guns. The Federal Government of Nigeria seems incapable of defending the cause of her citizens especially the poor people just as in the days of Amos. In contrast, were individuals of wealth and prevailed position who were securing greater riches and power by taking advantage of this poor class. Pleins (1986:169) noted that “Amos spoke out against existing economic practices which were bleeding out of the peasant population.”

Willy Schoftroff (1984:27, 28, 29) argued that “by these business practices and economic structures, the members of the upper classes were guilty of taking property that rightfully belonged to others...land, grain, or clothing.” Again, the courts provided a setting as a result of much unjust activity which was condemned by Amos. God had set up a system of judicial council of elders during the period of wandering in the wilderness (Exodus 18). After time, the King and several advisors, as well as appointed judges when compared with (II Samuel 15:3-4; I Kings 3:9; I Chronicles 23:43; 26:29). Reading from the various text of Amos, the fatal disease that Israelites society had contracted became evident as Amos spoke of their bribery, false testimony, inequitable rulings, and perverting injured parties from finding justice through the courts (Amos 5:12; 5:10; 2:7,8). The way people behave in the market place or how they judge in the gate directly relates to their religious practices. If the Lord demands fair and merciful actions, there must be as much a part of worship as singing and sacrifice (Amos 5:21-24). When the Israelites defrauded the poor, they were just as defrauding the Lord himself. Amos began with the justice of God, then, showed how that affected justice in society.

The book of Amos shines a powerful light on Israelite society and revealed its dishonesty, corruption and violence. That being the case, God is perfectly right to bring the overwhelming disaster of which Amos spoke. Elements of social justice in Amos can be viewed from a universal perspective. What does God expect of a just society? Amos expected a system that makes possible for people to thrive in a system free of corruption that would deprive them of what they need to survive and flourish. In context to Amos’s rebuke, Zechariah and Malachi announced judgement on those who treated the poor unjustly. Zechariah said “in your hearts do not think evil of each other” (Zechariah 7:10).

Malachi also announced judgment. Against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice (Malachi 3:5). Putting Amos in context, it is expected the Nigerian society should run a system where merchants are honest and judges are incorruptible in Public Square and in religious institutions. It should be a system where those who have been treated unjustly have free access to relief in courts. The book of Amos states: Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream in a given society (Amos 5:24). From the book of Amos, it connects to the New Testament where Jesus commanded the rich to sell their possessions and give to the poor.

Sell Your Possessions and Give to the Poor

The wellbeing of the rich was not Jesus’ only concern with regard to the wealth. He cared for the wellbeing of the poor. “Sell your possessions” and give alms (to the poor (Luke 12:33). If hoarding of wealth is harming the rich, how much more is it harming the poor? There is no instance in the Gospels that show Jesus setting a literal prisoner free. Otherwise, John the Baptist should not have been confused (John 7:18-23). Naturally, captivity and oppression lead to spiritual bondage. It is not inappropriate then to see a fundamental spiritual aspect to “the poor” in Luke Gospel. The slightly wider context makes the same point (Luke 4:25-27).

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Jesus mentions two examples of the type of persons who experienced the Lord's favour in the Old Testament. (i) is the widow of Zarephath. She was materially poor (Luke 4:25-27). The other example is Naaman, the important Syrian general who humbled himself by dipping seven times in the Jordan River. And, (ii) is Naaman, the important Syrian general who humbled himself by dipping seven times in the Jordan River (I Kings 5:1-19).

Walter Kaiser (2000:50) wrote, "Elisha and the company of the Prophets likewise delivered the message of the saving grace of God to Syria as well." Kaiser argued that "Jesus cites this same line of thought in his Nazareth sermon in Luke 4." If these are examples of good news proclaimed to the poor, then it appears the poor in this context is inclusive: physical and spiritual poverty. Köstenberger and O'Brien (2001:117) wrote that, "The poor to whom the good news is announced are not to be understood narrowly of the economically destitute, as most scholars have suggested, rather, the term refers more generally to the dispossessed, the excluded who were forced to depend upon God."

Joel Green (1997:69) argued: that "Luke's Gospel emphasizes the inclusiveness of the community being created by Jesus. In this context, "the poor," has become a cipher for those of the low status, for those excluded according to normal canons of status honour in the Mediterranean world. Although "poor" is hardly devoid of economic significance, for the third Gospel, this wider meaning of diminished status honour is paramount." Green (1995:24,25) further makes it clearer that "Salvation is neither ethereal nor merely future, but embraces life in the present restoring the integrity of human life revitalizing human communities, setting the cosmos in order and communicating the community of God's people to put God's grace into practice and among themselves and forward ever-widening circles of others."

Green (1995:24, 25) continued that: "The third evangelist knows nothing of such dichotomies as those who sometimes draw between social and spiritual or individual and communal. Salvation embraces the totality of embodied life, including its social economics and political economics." Wright (2006:714): concluded "The rich are tested on the ground of their wealth, whereas others are tested on loyalty toward their family, their people, their culture and their work (Isaiah 9:59-61)." Angel and Dryness (2000:80) wrote that Luke 4 underscores that "Jesus' mission was focused on the materially destitute and downtrodden. He came to bring the year of Jubilee to the oppressed and to transform social structures and bring God's creation back to shalom." Angel and Dryness (2000:80) reiterated that "The mission of the church in keeping with Christ's mission is at least in part-if not in its central expression to extend the kingdom by infiltrating all segments of society, with "preference given to the poor and allowing no dichotomy between evangelism and social transformation (Luke 4:18-19)."

The Poor during the Early Church

Richard Horsley (2005:240) wrote that "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint, when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." Horsley wrote, "These are not burning issues in patristic studies." Horsley (2005:245) opined that the "Early Christian attitudes toward wealth and poverty presented what was the cause of poverty." Peter Garnsey (1987:125) wrote that "The Roman system of inequality developed mechanisms for retaining multifaceted inequality and promoted justification that made the inequality appear normal or inevitable." Rodney Stark (1996:29) described that "Christianity in the early century of the Empire as a movement of the dispossessed was-a haven for Rome's slaves and impoverished masses." Stark (1996:29) maintained that "Christianity was

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originally a movement of oppressed people: It first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of people subjugated or dispersed by Rome,” Seven Eriksen (2008:19,36) provided three fundamental ideas on system of inequality practiced in the Roman Empire: (i). Roman imperial economy was preindustrial. The majority of people lived in rural area with only ten to fifteen percent of the population in big cities of ten thousand people or more. This means that most of the population worked in agriculture and that large scale commercial activity was rare. (ii). There was no middle class in the Roman Empire. This was because the economy was primarily agricultural and wealth was based on the ownership of land. Most land was controlled by a small number of wealthy, elite families.

These families earned rent and produced from the subsistence farmers or slaves who actually worked the land. With their wealth and status, these families were able to control local and regional governance, which allowed them to profit also from taxation and from governmental policies. These same families also controlled public religion. (iii) Poverty was widespread both in rural and urban areas. However, Acts of the Apostles portrays systematic economic sharing to meet the needs of the poor and needy (Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-37). One example is the renunciation of private property in the early Jerusalem assemblies (Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-37).

A second example is the care for widows in the Jerusalem assemblies (Acts 6:1-7). But in the light of Acts 6:1-7, it suggests that the way to end inequality was hampered by ethnic and cultural favouritism. Furthermore, the author does not deal with the root causes but treats it as an administrative problem solved by appointment of more administrators. A third example was an attempt to restrict reference to economic inequality in the narrative was with regards to Paul’s collection for the destitute in Jerusalem (Acts 20:26).. Paul’s own letters showed that Paul himself undertook the collection as a crucial part of his ministry. The collection was a dramatic initiative by Paul and it was designed to accomplish several goals. It was aimed to provide for the needy saints in Jerusalem. It was aimed at building bridges between Jewish and Gentile congregation. It was to back material expression to his proclamation of the gospel (Romans 15:25-27; 2Corinthians 9:13). Paul’s gospel called for a network of horizontal sharing among the Mediterranean assemblies (2 Corinthians 8:13-15), and not an exploitative vertical flow of resources, that characterized the imperial system. The collection rather, would be built with many gifts from many moderately poor saints in order to provide for brothers and sisters who were desperately poor (I Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:10-12).

K. F. Nickle argued that “Luke presents personal gifts and household hospitality as the normal method of economic sharing for the assemblies after the early period.” However, after this model of caring for poor Saints, there is no indication of a communal property or redistribution as the proper alternative. From there, Peter goes down to the coast and raises Tabitha from the dead, a woman who was known for assistance to widows (Acts 6). Her good deeds are presented as acts of charity, not as assembly policy. Peter then, goes up to Caesarea, where Cornelius, the Gentle centurion got converted to Christianity. Cornelius is described as a man whose piety is manifested in the giving of alms (Acts 10:4, 31). As the narrative moves beyond Judea and Samaria the shift from community property to faith-based initiatives is almost ended (Acts 11:27-30). Beyond Palestine, the normal model for assemblies is hospitality and charity.

Lydia offers hospitality for Paul and his companion in Philippi (Acts 16). Jason provides housing in Thessalonica and it goes on and on (Acts 17:7; 18:3; 20:33-24; 24:17;

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28:30-31). Therefore, this unfolding narrative tend to suggest that the early period of systematic redistribution in Jerusalem was over and it appeared for a long haul, the standard economic practices would be individualized charity and household hospitality. James showed displeasure that resources are distributed unequally in society because landowners exploit workers. This is so because the rich manipulate the justice system, and squandered their immoral gains on self-indulgence. The system survives because those who are exploited participated in the system. They reproduce the system of honour for the wealthy few and dishonour for those who are financially disadvantaged. In terms of its economic analysis, this perspective draws on the conceptual world and public protests of the prophets of Israel.

There is special concern for the poor and disadvantaged, and strident criticism of wealthy elite. The roots of this prophetic critique are in the ancient history of Israel's struggles with its own ruling class or elite. James relocates this ancient critique to the contemporary oppression of the urban poor by the local aristocracies of the Roman Emperor and greater focus on the abuses of those who are rich. James denounces injustice and advises the community to share what resources they have until the Lord of Hosts avenges the cries of the exploited workers. In context of Africa being poor, does not only means economic poverty, but the marginalized, discriminated, and one who is oppressed physically, socially, politically, emotionally or religiously. The Scripture affirms that the poor will always be with us (Matthew 26:11).

The poor and poverty in context of Nigeria, pose several questions to ask. These questions include: Have Nigerians manage their natural resources well and they are still poor? How should Nigerians both Christians and non- Christians use the resources? How well should it be distributed? Should those of the Christian faith resign and watch or fold their arms from facing the reality of poverty and hunger in our land today? To keep absolute silence on their plight is a disgrace to the Church and humanity. Thus, there is the need for provide some guidelines to empower churches so that they can better take of the poor.

Empowering Churches in Nigeria for sustainability

There are guidelines churches in Nigeria can put in place to empower their members to become liberated from poverty and thereby reduce the number of poor people. Some of the ways are for churches to implement biblical social justice, empowerment principles, and holistic discipleship.

Social Justice:

The church in Africa cannot remain silent. As an organic body of Christ, she is to consciously serve as advocates of social justice. Social justice is a concept that it cannot be divorced from its modern-day context. Social justice is often used as a rallying cry for many on the left side of the political spectrum. "Social justice is also a concept that some use to describe the movement towards a socially just world." In this context, social justice is based on the concepts of human rights and equality and involves a greater degree of economic egalitarianism through progressive taxation, income redistribution, or even property redistribution. These policies aim to achieve what developmental economists refer to as more equality of opportunity than it may currently exist in some societies, and to manufacture equality of outcome in cases where incidental inequalities appear in a procedurally just system."

The key word in this definition is the word "egalitarianism." This word, coupled with the phrases "income redistribution," "property redistribution," and "equality of outcome,"

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says a great deal about social justice. Egalitarianism as a political doctrine essentially promotes the idea that all people should have the same (equal) political, social, economic and civil rights. Hornby, A.S(2006:254) described an egalitarian as one who “Believes that all people are and deserve equal rights and opportunities.” This meaning promotes the idea that all people should have the same equal political, social, economic and civil rights. Economically, the driving force is behind socialist life. It seeks to remove the barriers of economic inequality by means of redistribution of wealth. This can be implemented in social welfare programs where progressive tax policies take proportionately more money from wealthy individuals in order to raise the standard of living for people who lack the same means. In other words, the government takes from the rich and gives to the poor.

The problem with this doctrine is twofold: first, there is a mistaken premise in economic perspective in a sense that the rich have become wealthy by exploiting the poor. Much of the socialist literature of the past 150 years promotes this premise. This may have been primarily the case when Karl Marx first wrote his Communist Manifesto. Timothy Palmer (2015:48) wrote that Karl Mark’s idea, “are units in economic system. Economic reality then is everything.” This shows that socialist programs tend to create more problems than they solve. Millard Erickson (2013:462, 470) opined that “They do not work. It has failed to remove the class distinctions in society. Instead, all it does is replacing the nobility/common man distinction with a working class/political class distinction.”

The Bible teaches God is just in all his ways (Deuteronomy 32:4). This supports the practice of social justice in which concern and care are shown to the poor and afflicted (Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17; 27:19). Jesus’ Olivet Discourse mentions caring for the “least of these (Matthew 25:40). James wrote that “true religion (James 1:27). Waldron Scott (1980:64, 65, 66, 67) wrote that “a hunger for God throws us not into pietism, but into the thick of injustice on this planet-earth.” Jose Miranda argued that “Justice and righteousness is a phrase similar in a concept of social justice.” In executing personal justice there is personal dealings and peace-making to bring reconciliation. There is a responsibility in establishing movements of people who live justly that would cause change at the higher levels of society (Ezekiel 18:7-9). Celia Castillo (1980:349) wrote that “A well-researched analysis of the structures causes and effects of... rural poverty is the major cause of urban poverty.” A practical way of doing justice among the poor in Nigeria is to establish movements of believers who demonstrate justice in their lifestyles with each other rooted in corporate prayer and leadership of their immediate communities.

John Perkins (1982:105) described the growth of a community of believers who demonstrated justice in their relationships to a racially torn community. Perkins (1982:105) wrote that “Mississippi, a community of believers reconciled to God and to each other; to bring together a fellowship of blacks and whites, rich and poor. Such could make positive difference in the lives of a community enslaved by poverty and racism. However, implementing empowerment skills can help the church in help the poor and reduce poverty.

Empowering Members to Become Free from Poverty:

Christiana Best (2020:7) wrote that the concept of “empowerment became popular in the 1980s in the field of communication with reference to the disadvantaged groups.” Best (2020:7), opined that it was generally accepted as “The process of becoming stronger and more confident in controlling one’s life and claiming one’s rights.” However, it has been noted that empowerment can have many different meanings to different people depending on their experiences, circumstances, homes and dreams. Chandra Mandal (2011:7) explained that empowerment can be classified in five: ‘Social educational, economic, and psychological

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categories.” Interestingly, an essential category that is omitted in Mandal’s categorization is the spiritual dimension, which is called holistic empowerment. This is so because at the grassroots levels programs and policy debate on empowerment has often substituted areas such as welfare, community participation and poverty alleviation.

In terms of the popularity in the use of the term empowerment, many people cannot explain it clearly. However, spiritually and religiously minded people have been concerned about empowering the poorest of the poor and highly disadvantaged. Sharma (2001:92) argued that “Empowerment is both a process and the result of that process and is manifested as a redistribution of power, whether between individuals, gender, races, classes or nations.” Through the empowerment, the disadvantaged people gain access to new worlds of knowledge and can begin to make new informed choices in both their personal and public lives. But such changes are not sustainable, if limited to a few acceptable people. This is where discipleship and mentoring become central in all sustainable efforts, particularly in the church or in other relational environments.

Role of Holistic Discipleship and Mentoring,

Tim Elmore (2004:16) wrote that “Mentoring is a relational experience through which one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources.” Daniel Egeler (2003:75) affirmed that “This relational process or connection is the foundation upon which a mentoring relationship is built. Some common variables important to a relational connection include time, proximity, needs, shared values and mutual goals.” Discipleship plays a role in poverty reduction. This is because if the mind is properly disciplined, it leads to inward transformation. Greg Ogden (1980:16), wrote that “Partners are to be empowered to disciple others, so that multiple generations of Christians are firmly rooted and reproduce” (more and more). Ogden affirmed (1980:15) affirmed that “this approach is grounded in the Biblical model of Jesus and Paul, who intentionally grew followers into responsible reproducing disciples and disciples’ makers.”

Poverty caused by personal sin. Poverty caused by oppression and poverty by laziness. Discipleship changes the poverty caused by all three: personal sin, oppression and laziness. Membership in God’s kingdom brings love, releases guilt, heals bitterness, and breaks the power of drunkenness and gambling. Therefore, there is the need to empower men, women, youth, and children of wisdom through discipleship and mentoring. Every generation needs people who understand the times and seasons who know what to do at a particular time and season. It is not the mental knowledge of the Bible only, rather it is knowing how to apply the truth of God’s word to the issues of contemporary situation. Mipo Dadang (2021:36) wrote that ‘The Bible is the inscripturated Word of God and as such presents the truth in ordinary language in all matters which it treats.’ God is therefore able to empower leaders to live a life based on the truth of his word. Churches have been empowered to employ the truth as Jesus did. The children of Issachar did not only understand the times, but they also discerned the seasons so that they could execute their plans at the right season. Klaus Detlev Schulz (2009: wrote that: “The Church is missional, and as God’s redeemed community, she continues to receive life from God but also unselfishly passes on the gift of life in Christ to the world (John 3:16).

The church is sent because Christ was sent and the church goes in his name, and under his authority. What? The mission of the church consists of preaching, teaching, announcing, testifying, and bearing witness to the world. The mission of the church focuses on the initial and continuing verbal declaration of the Gospel, the announcement of Christ’s

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death and resurrection and the life obtained in him when repentance and conversion and believe take place. Where? The church is sent into the world and the mission of the church is the message of salvation for every people group, near or far and everywhere. How? The church goes out in the power of the Holy Spirit and in submission to the Son just as he was obedient and dependent upon the Father. When?

The mission began at Pentecost when the disciples were clothed with the power from on high with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The mission will last as long as the promise of Christ's presence lasts. That is to the end of the age. To whom? The church is evangelical in that she possesses the salutary Gospel as the only remedy to sin, death and the devil. The church is evangelical through witnessing, preaching and administering the Gospel. Schulz (2009:38) wrote that "Mission is concerned with salvation and a particular understanding of it. God wishes to free people from their guilt and have them receive a new life. This means that mission represents the task of calling every individual to turn away from sin toward God." Schulz (2009:38) reiterated that "Mission also calls these individuals into the family of God, that is, the church.

The church is vocational in her service to and in the world." The church's mission is confessional in that all proclamation and every Christian's vocation witness must be articulated clearly and with fidelity to scripture. (Matthew 16:16). She recognizes the fact that her proclamation does not take place in a vacuum because mission happens within a given context. The church must learn to listen in order to respond to the cries and the crises in our time. The church is always assured of the Lord's presence "to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). I believe this is the mission recorded in the New Testament and the mission of the church today is to care for the poor until the end of age (Revelation 22).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, drawing from biblical and missiological reflections on the preferential option for the poor, it is clear from both the Old and New Testaments that God cares about our attitude toward and actions regarding the hungry, the oppressed, the widow, the stranger, and or the orphans. Scripture portrays the good life as sharing in the essential aspects of social life. It is learned that the justice of a society is tested and judged by its treatment of the poor. Justice includes helping people return to the kind of life in communities of Nigeria that God intends for them (Leviticus 25:35-36). From Biblical and missiological perspective, justice demands both fair courts and fair economic structures. It includes both freedom rights and benefit rights. Precisely, because of its equal concern for wholeness for everyone it pays special attention to the needs of the poor and marginalized. The people of Nigeria are required to make a choice to lift up the poor and disadvantaged in very real and concrete ways. This is because God puts high regard in honesty and sincerity to ensure a just and judicial system in the country (Exodus 23:1). Human beings, especially God's people are instructed not to lie, or deceive one another (Leviticus 19). God expected from Nigerians, just as he did from the Israelites that integrity is to control and show in their actions and words. This will ensure trusting and trustworthy citizens in Nigeria, Christians, Muslims, and or pagans, where there is no need for law enforcement agencies like the police or other anti-corruption agencies in the country to check on people, rich or poor. The people of Nigeria as a nation, will advance and it will be cheaper to govern because all citizens will form part of the productive workforce. For this to happen, it requires some concrete recommendations at specific levels to address the concern of corruption and poverty that affects poor people.

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Recommendations

In the analysis of this article, it has shown that people the world over are living and working in corrupt and poor societies. It was further shown that government and religious programs and legislation have not effectively fought against corruption and poverty to be able restore the poor to dignity. It is therefore, my candid opinion that the problem needs to be tackled at both personal and public levels and that is at the grass roots level involving common citizens which includes Christians who are willing to report acts of corruption to relevant authorities. They may not remain passive any more as the case may be. They should get involved in the transformation of their communities and the nation at large. I offer recommendations on a two-fold level which are built on a personal and public levels:

(1). At a personal level- individuals especially Christians, should guide against the temptation of becoming corrupt nor to oppressed the poor. They should also live exemplary lives by being hard working and not idle or become lazy. Ronald Sider (2002:99), cautioned that “People who work should not be poor. Those who play by the rules should not lose the game.” Unemployed youth should not wait for government work. They should get involved skills and vocation learning that would liberate them from becoming poor.

(2) At the public level- Both government and voluntary agencies are to provide economic empowerment to citizens by giving them the means to be in control of their economic destiny. They should encourage the unemployed and the poor by giving them opportunity to access skills that lead them towards being self-sufficient in managing business and training in improved production. Side (2002:120) noted that “The Creator of the galaxies became a carpenter, demonstrating the dignity of work. It is that divine worker who summons all who know him to lead this wealthy society to do justice to all who work.”

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