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1 A BIG PROBLEM

The doorbell rings - again! Although it could just be a friend, or someone arriving for business reasons, the ringing of the bell is likely to produce a negative reaction from those in the house. Opening the door is likely to reveal a group of anything up to a dozen or even more scruffy urchins, or a little less commonly, a grown man, sometimes with a woman in tow, inevitably then with a baby. The demand of the urchins is always the same, "sicela isonka" (we ask for bread); that of the adults is more likely to be for money, but food and clothing is also wanted.

They come to us at least partly because we are close to the centre of town
and because our front door is directly onto the street, so that there is no front garden with big dogs to keep people out. But they also come to us because they know that we are Christians, and so have an obligation to give.

But do we? Should we blindly just give what we are asked? Any money that we give to the urchins is likely to be used for drugs, any money given to the adults likewise, but more likely for drink. Giving money is likely to do more harm than good. It even encourages the problem of begging, for why should people seek a better income if they can be fed just by asking? They even cause problems in the area, making us unpopular because of increased litter and noise, and also the perceived threat of burglaries. Then if we do the obvious, and give what we are asked, the problem may be solved in the immediate, but in the longer term is likely to get worse; those who receive are likely to be back the next day, probably with even bigger requests, and if it gets around that we are a "soft touch", there will be countless others also trying to get as well. Not the least of the very practical problems is that once we are at home, the incessant ringing at the door stops us doing much else. And, although probably the least of our concerns, it does cost quite a bit, even if just in bread, jam and the time needed to get them on a regular basis. Would you blame us for wanting to shut out the problem, to escape to a different part of the world, or at the least, not appearing to be at home now and again?

But each ring at the door represents a real human problem. (Actually not always; we discovered a while ago that some kids were ringing at our door just because others do! They have perfectly good homes and meals provided!) Usually there is real hunger, the clothes are ragged, there is an obvious need of care. And scratch the surface a little, and you will find that the urchin is there because the parents have died from AIDS, or that he (usually, girls on the street are not so common) is an unwanted child, conceived as a result of promiscuity, or has one parent only, who now has a problem, so cannot, or will not, care for the child. Quite likely the problem is of unemployment, running in the area at over 60%, so of poverty, likely complicated by drink.

Then the man is there because quite frankly he has no alternative. His children are crying with hunger at home, and what else can he do but beg? Is it also surprising that the crime rate, both petty and more serious, is astronomical? We ask ourselves how we would feel if we were in his shoes (or lack of them!). In particular how does he feel when he has asked someone for a little money, and been refused, then watches the person that he asked climb into his Mercedes or BMW?

And what do we do about the ex-prisoners, who really have no hope of finding a job when there are so many who are hopefully more honest. What to do with the plain lazy, who when asked to earn a little money by doing a simple job just disappears, or complains of sore hands? And what do you say to the one who is reeking of alcohol, and is so drunk that understanding what is said is unlikely anyway? Or to the idiot, who is probably such as a side effect of some sexually transmitted disease?

We have solved the problem of the constant disturbance by a little rule. People are only fed late in the afternoon. Anyone coming before then is told to come back later. Usually they do not, presumably because their needs were met somewhere else, but quite often they do, indicating that the problems that they bring are real, and that there is a measure of desperation. But are we right to do that?
We are Christians. What would Jesus have done in our circumstances? It would not seem that he would just have handed out all that was asked. Sometimes indeed he fed, as the five thousand, sometimes his approach was different. Certainly, as for us, the problem of money and of poverty was pressing on him, but he sought to go deeper than just scratch the surface, or give superficial answers. He said more on the question of money than about any other question. That is our example as well, to look at the problem, and try to find what a really Christian approach should be.

1.1 A complex problem. A quick look at those coming to our door has shown that is is not simply a matter of empty stomachs and disintegrating shoes. Behind the plain request lurks the bigger problems of morals, and so of AIDS, of unemployment, and of laziness. These are bigger than can be dealt with by a handout of a piece of bread and jam, but have to be dealt with if the question of begging is really to be solved. Moreover, of course, the little scenario that we are confronted with is just one tiny fragment of the enormous problem of poverty in the world as a whole. And behind those problems, at a still deeper level, is the need of a better human society, of more adequate relationships, of better caring by those who have for those who have not, of the right attitudes to employment. Still deeper, the Christian will see the need of correct relationships to God, and perceive that what God did for the human tragedy was to send his Son to deal with sin by a cross and resurrection.

But again, that Son did more than just die and rise, but taught, and gave. He was not only concerned about the ultimate problem, but about its manifestation in hunger, in disease, and in other forms of suffering. And so must we. We must ask ourselves what to do about the urchins, whether we do right to feed them, and what we can do about the deeper underlying problems. What is the Christian answer? Is there a specifically Christian answer? Is it a problem that Christians, as Christians, should be concerned with in any case?

The need to develop a specifically Christian approach is by no means immediately obvious, but rests upon a number of assumptions, which must at least be noted at this stage. These are that poverty is bad, and that the world should be improved, that action to do this is largely the responsibility of the rich, and especially of Christians. Lastly, the assumption is that there is indeed a Christian approach to the problem.

1.2 Poverty is bad.

It may well seem obvious that poverty, whether on a personal or collective level, is wrong. It hardly seems to be a question worth considering. Certainly it would seem to be an unquestioned assumption in the modern Western world, which puts such a high value on material possessions and personal comfort, that lack is inevitably a bad thing. Yet in other cultures, such as in various Eastern religions, at different times, such as in the early Church, material possessions have been rejected. Even in the modern West, people are prepared, at least for a time, to deny themselves the normal benefits of life. Indeed, from an affluent Western perspective, tired of the pressures of life, a simpler lifestyle may well be viewed idealistically, and there may arise a desire to escape into nature into a peaceful harmony free from the distractions and pressures of the material. It is the developed, not the poor, who commit suicide (Bauer 1981:115).
Christians will also be aware of the fact that their Lord became incarnate, so humbled himself (Phil 2:6), and voluntarily accepted poverty for the sake of our salvation. Christians even call the day of his death "Good Friday", so surely his adoption of poverty was also a good thing?

However, it is one thing to choose to deprive oneself, and entirely another if lack is inescapable. It is hardly possible to doubt the wretchedness of poverty, and the stresses that it produces. Mooneyham (1975:38) points out that poverty breaks marriages, and Today (Dec 1985:10) reports: "Lord Scarman in his report on the 1981 Brixton riots said: 'the common strands in many of the major disorders... are to be found in shared social conditions, in economic insecurity and perceived deprivation, in an enforced idleness because of unemployment, and in the hostility of at least a section of young people to the police.'" Poverty does not produce peace and contentment but even fosters materialism, where a little matters so much. Poverty cannot just be ignored, as all are responsible for the good and evil that others experience. The world has a unity that has never been experienced before (Schumacher 1987:14).

It is also no good looking back to the less materialistic civilizations of the past, and say that poverty was acceptable then. They in any case had their problems, and the world is far different today. Such attitudes do not appreciate the changing nature of the world, particularly the growing population, which can only be provided for if development occurs. Genischen (1971:91) points out that the issue is not aid to a somewhat better lifestyle, but in very many cases a matter of survival. An attitude of ignoring poverty, hoping it will go away, will contribute to disaster. Ruether (in Pannell 1980:20) insists that the question cannot be solved just by relief or by concentrating on evangelism if the poor are to survive. From a Christian perspective, Gutiérrez believes that poverty cannot be God's will, citing the mandate of Genesis 1:26.

1.3 The world should be improved.

Improving the way in which the world operates so that poverty becomes just a thing of the past may well seem to be an obvious step. If the economic system is developed such that there is sufficient production of food and other necessary goods, and that these are adequately distributed, this would seem to be an improvement on a system in which there are shortages and lack of adequate distribution. This requires a measure of economic restructuring, in short, development, and would seem to be obviously necessary.

However, it must be noted that the whole concept of development is basically a Western one. Sine (1981:71) even calls it the secular religion of the West. It not only gives the material priority over less tangible values, but also incorporates a distinct idea of progress. Indeed the Marxists in particular see this as inevitable (Sine 1981:72, 1987:2). There is not such a desire for health care or for economic products when time is seen in cyclic rather than linear terms (Bauer 1981:72). It is also particularly from an Enlightenment viewpoint that development is seen as possible. From this perspective, change may even be seen as desirable just for its own sake, irrespective of its value for humanity or for Christian reasons. The West assumes that development is good (Genischen 1971:95), and will even see a standstill as really underdevelopment (Gheddo 1973:25).

Development is then often perceived as introducing Western values and
lifestyle to an area, a "modernization", simply assuming that these are superior (cf Nankivell 1978:83), forgetting that other cultures have had their own solutions to poverty. Some of these, such as the exposure of infants, may not be acceptable, but others are, and should not just be rejected outright. Development is then likely to be rejected as the imposition of foreign values, an implicit paternalism which sees Western culture as superior to that of the third world (Seers 1979:29). Moltmann (1988:14) sees development aid as largely subjecting the recipients to a Western rational lifestyle. It tends to say that what the rich feel is best is necessarily best also for the poor (Schumacher 1973:156). May (in Steare 1984:155) says that this is hardly surprising that a superficial imposition of the Western socio-economic system onto a different culture rarely succeeds. Other cultures have different values from the material (Taylor 1965:12); for example Africa values family life and community. Western development tends to be individualistic, but a sensitive approach in Africa will be based upon the whole community. For World Vision, development is to move whole communities towards Christ (Sugden 1981:91). Moreover Africa may well seek development, but not because of poverty as such, but to overcome the division between powerful rich and impotent poor; a high value is put on power (Nyerere 1987:117).

It is at least partially for this reason that many development projects fail. They may seem to be good from a Western perspective but may be inappropriate, either because they use the wrong sort of technology and are too expensive or impossible to maintain, or perhaps more seriously, their value is just not appreciated by the people and so they are never accepted. Kenyon (1985:94) says that "the African landscape is littered with ill-conceived and inappropriate projects". Moreover of course, each failure leads to a growing reticence to try something new.

Particularly the Eastern religions reject development as an attempt to subdue the earth, and do violence to it. They reject the Western (and Christian) concept of dominion, preferring to live in harmony with nature. The Buddhist ideal (Schumacher 1973:50) is of maximum wellbeing with minimum consumption, the good of character not satisfaction of wants. Finn (1983:6) feels that traditional religions give an ideal of fulfilment which is more than wealth, comfort and control. Such attitudes may of course themselves contribute to poverty, as when fulfilment is seen as lying in a multiplicity of children (Bienen 1983:213, who reports that Caldwell says that 80% of Yoruba value children more than wealth). Although African traditional religion has sometimes reacted positively to development (Ranger 1978:490), this is possibly due to the influence of Christianity. Non-Christian religions also rejects the concept of progress in favour of stability and constancy. Moreover there is no desire to increase materially. Poverty is accepted as natural and may even, as in Christian asceticism, be seen as positively good. Clearly the attempt at development will not succeed in such an environment.

Here a Christian world-view does accept the idea of development. Its view of history is one of change and progress. God does act in specific historical circumstances to improve, or develop situations, notably of course, in the incarnation. Christianity does see the world as changing, and that there is an ultimate goal. In such a framework, the idea of economic improvement is clearly acceptable; poverty is not simply to be endured without seeking its elimination.

The fact that development is not necessarily acceptable in other cultures does however mean that it is then necessary, in any approach to the question
1.3.1 Development may be bad. It must not be overlooked that there is a growing realization of the negative aspects of the attempts at development. The attack on poverty does not only do good. This may well be the ugliness of industrialization and urban sprawl, particularly in the slums where the poor tend to be, but also in the obvious damage to nature and in pollution (Seers 1979:10). The way development is practised can even be ultimately detrimental to the poor in that it leads to their oppression. In the interests of profit, more charitably of economic growth, the labour of the poor may be exploited, and land used for cash crops rather than for subsistence food. The poor may find themselves serving a growing world economy without benefitting very much themselves. Such perceptions cause a negative evaluation of development and growth and inspire the rejection of the approach. A clear example of this is in the Liberation Theology of Latin America.

Development may be criticized also as it often mainly benefits the richer segments of society, or may be embarked upon as a palliative to the consciences of the rich (Dickinson 1970:210). Such problems can be solved when the search for an escape from poverty comes from the poor themselves, who motivate themselves and do what is necessary. However, many, such as Dickinson (1975:102), feel that external involvement must take place if poverty is to be approached at all efficiently. Roberts (1985:114) comments that there is no human solution without outside help.

Of course, even successful projects do not always succeed in solving the problems of the poor. They may work but be insufficient, or they may actually be counterproductive, such as where boreholes have caused desertification by increasing the number of livestock which then denude the land. Kenyon (1985:94) says "As we look at the African scene, it is evident that traditional development strategies are failing." Famine, and the threat of famine, are among the most obvious signs of floundering development policies.

Whereas peace is a universally desired goal, the attempts at development can then often be seen as producing violence in oppression, or in the envy produced by the perception of a gap in wealth (Dammers 1982:193). It is seen as violent to the environment which is exploited for resources, or polluted by waste. It is even directly connected with the military as in the industrial production of armaments, and the growth of security and defense requirements that the rich require to protect themselves from the poor (Genischen 1971:104). This however does not mean that development as such is not right, but that great care needs to be taken in the selection of what must be done and the way in which it is done, so that the people who benefit are the ones who really need to. Of course, if they themselves perceive that they are the ones who benefit, development is more likely to be accepted, and then more likely to succeed.

1.4 The responsibility of the rich.

If development largely needs to come from outside the situation of poverty, this means that it comes from the rich. The poor are often simply unable to
help themselves. Indeed, Paul VI (1968:112) feels that development is a special concern of the better off nations because of social justice, charity and of human solidarity. Thus although the accusation is often made that the poor are lazy, it would then be the laziness of the rich in not acting adequately for the poor that would be determinative. Wolterstorff (1983:ix) is probably closest to the truth when he says that too few people in the Western world are persuaded that things ought to be different. "The problem of the third world' is first the problem of our world, this so-called First World.... The poor are poor, and becoming yet poorer, because we are inordinately rich" (Hall 1982:85).

If it is true that the relief of poverty is a special concern of the rich, this means that it is also a special concern of Christianity, as it has been, at least until comparatively recently, basically the "Christian" nations that have been affluent. As Hall (1986:15) points out, the United States, the richest nation on earth, is dominantly Christian.

1.5 The responsibility of Christians.

Christians are naturally concerned, or should be, about poverty, simply due to concern for their fellows. In addition to this basic motivation, Christians, particularly in the affluent West, should be involved in the attack on poverty not only by belonging to the richer segment of the world, but must act because poverty is not simply a material matter but is a spiritual, a theological concern. Their faith does not insulate them from the world, but on the contrary they have perhaps more reason for a concern for the poor than others, so for them it is vital that their approach to economic policy is correct.

Christians, like most other people, are naturally more concerned with their own problems than those elsewhere in the world (Dickinson 1975:36). There is, quite naturally, even a resistance to hearing; people do not want to hear about suffering, particularly if they suspect that they are being accused of being at least partly responsible for it. In this regard, Dickinson (1975:37) points out that churches which stress social responsibility tend to lose members. Thus particularly when the Church itself is declining, the issue of poverty tends to get shelved (Edgington 1982:9). In any case, there are other issues which are important, ultimately even more so. So often the stress on such vital matters as eternal life has left no room for concern for such mundane matters as poverty, even when there is no actual rejection of the need to act against it.

However, "the scale of poverty in the world is an assault on the Christian conscience" (Adegbola 1985:89). If Christians can do anything, they should, motivated by the example of Christ, and also by direct Biblical injunctions, such as in James 2:14f. Christianity must also be involved in poverty because it sees poverty as a result of human sin (van Deventer 1988:24), and just as sin led to the death of Jesus, so it leads to death in the world of today. The Anglican report "Not just for the poor" (1987) argues that extremes of wealth are a result of sin (in Forrester & Skene 1988:105). Forrester and Skene (1988:62) also cite the oft-quoted remark of Berdyaev, the Russian theologian, "Bread for me is a material question, bread for my neighbour is a spiritual one." The motive for development is sometimes put as a sharing in his continuing creative work (Dickinson 1975:99). In this case, the question of poverty becomes a vital theological task for today (González 1990:vii). It cannot be right for Christians to simply leave the
issues of poverty and development to the secular agencies (Hancock 1979:76).

Certainly religion has often inspired development and an attack on poverty (Dickinson 1970:211). White (1989:31) cites Ahlstrom who refers to the "Great Awakening" in the American colonies in the mid 1700s. "Equally certain is the fact that the Awakening had many far-reaching, even permanent, results ... [in] the social and political legacy of the revivals." It produced many associations for good causes, injecting Christian values into American culture (Smith 1988:272). Likewise World Vision's "starting point is understanding human need has always been theological" (Kenyon 1985:102). There is evidence that spiritual conversion is more effective than simply increased awareness of need. Thus although an African politician expressed the hope that the Brandt commission would "contribute to the development of world wide moral values" (North-South 1980:7), increased awareness at simply intellectual level often leads to dulled rather than enhanced sensitivity, perhaps due to an appreciation of the enormity of the problem and a feeling of inability to do much about it.

It is then sad that Gheddo (1973:9) can say that too many Christians have no concept of the practical consequences which derive from Christian inspiration in the social and political fields. Anderson and Harris (1984:1) remark that many Church reports on socio-economic affairs contain little theology and just repeat secular arguments. Rather Christians should be concerned that proposed projects and activities are theologically valid (Schumacher 1987:22), and conform to what Christians believe concerning the nature of God, the world and humanity.

1.5.1 The inadequacy of economics. Because the understanding of poverty is not just economic, not only Christians, but people in general have found it very difficult to decide what is the right approach to the poor. There are even differences between economists on such fundamental questions as whether or how much poverty is due to oppression and exploitation, and it is certainly not for a theologian to do more than note the opinions being held. As someone has said, where there are two economists, there are three opinions!

The problem is twofold. On the one hand economics has to do with people as well as with commodities, and although people in groups are relatively predictable, they are not absolutely so, and so the results of a particular policy are never fully as expected. The processes are not fully understood, leading, as Nankivell (1978:12) admits, to frequent economic crises. Part of this is that humanity is often viewed idealistically, and the effects of a sinful nature are not taken into consideration. Both capitalism and socialism, with roots in the Enlightenment, tend to view humanity as rational, and fail to take irrational and sinful behaviour into account. Economics also fails to take into account all the idiosyncrasies of the individual such as asceticism, extreme charity, or even Christian conversions, which may have a pronounced social effect (Nankivell 1978:26). To give an example of this, the revival preaching of Billy Sunday caused a collapse in the liquor trade in some areas which could not have been predicted by economics alone (Frank 1986:178). Equally irrational from a capitalist viewpoint is that at one point in its history, the Ford motor company gave 90% of its earnings to philanthropy (MacKenzie 1988:309).

On the other hand, also due partly to human nature, economics is unable to put a monetary value on everything so cannot give a complete picture of life and its values. Nobody has yet been able to price pollution, or even the
use of natural resources, which are the very basic requirements (Nankivell 1978:55). Even less likely is that such intangibles as danger, family satisfaction, or leisure can be measured against other more tangible assets such as a motor-car. There must be "... a recognition that the merit and worth of individuals do not correspond to the material rewards of the market economy" (Griffiths 1982:36). The problems of the third world are deeper than economics and politics, and theologians should be the first to realize that (Neely 1989:394).

Such problems have caused the neglect of economics, particularly by evangelical Christians, who feel that their action must be based upon a greater authority than diverse opinions, and feel that economic action must be as in other areas of life, based upon the Bible. However, they are more likely "not in danger of the wrong path but of no path at all" (Hunger 1985:20), forgetting that ignoring the issue of poverty is in itself also an approach to it, and that people are not simply debating an abstract issue, but that real issues of suffering and death are involved. Nobody in practice can ignore the need for involvement; Christians in particular should be concerned.

This highlights the need for an approach distinct from that of secular economics. Not only does this assume that development must be good, which is by no means so clearly the case, but it ignores the spiritual aspect of humanity.

1.6 Is there a Christian solution to poverty?

Some deny that Christian theology has any role at all in economics and to the poor. "The development activists regarded theology as irrelevant" (Elliott 1987:45). "It is by no means to be taken for granted that his contribution [the theologian in the development debate] is at all wanted ..." (Genischen 1971:80). As there are differences even among professional economists over some of the most basic issues about which a Christian is concerned, such as whether capitalism is in fact oppressive in practice, it is felt that it is hardly possible for the theologian to pronounce authoritatively on economic issues. It is often felt that they should concentrate on the "spiritual" (Dickinson 1970:210). As Novak (1986:56) says, the Bible deals with a pre-capitalist system so cannot deal with modern situations and ideologies.

Therefore, some Christians feel that a specifically Christian system is impossible, and that action must be taken only at a more individual level. Christianity deals primarily with the relation of individuals to God, and their relation to others will also be on an individual level. The system of Israel in particular is no longer applicable to the Church.

Despite the fact that "Jesus spoke to the question of economics more than any other single issue" (Foster 1980:73), and that "the whole meaning of existence for the disciples of Jesus was determined by their attitude to money" (Pallares 1982:68), and despite the fact that some systems are more in keeping with Christian principles than others, some (eg Brunner, in Krueger 1986:30) then deny that there is an economic system which is specifically Christian. Donovan (1982:164) asserts that there is no New Testament blueprint for a socio-economic system, the gospel is not development, and Griffiths (1984a:45) says that Jesus was not concerned directly with the creation of wealth or the removal of poverty; as he said (Matt 4:4), "man shall not live by bread alone." After all, he never
addressed decision makers on the subject (Fuller & Rice 1966:34). Catherwood (1975:7) likewise queries whether there can be a Christian system; Diehl (1984a:101) writes, "there is no economic system which is inherently Christian in nature." It is significant that the Ten Commandments are only positive when dealing with relation to God, but are negative prohibitions when it comes to human relationships, not giving a positive system, but rejecting what is wrong. The same may be seen as implicit in the attitude of the angel who appeared to Joshua before the battle with Amalek (Josh 5:14), who denied that he was either on the side of Israel or its enemies but was there "as captain of the Lord's host". However if that attitude is pushed to a conclusion, a Christian will have no opinion on anything. Neutrality to economic issues is really impossible (cf North 1984a:33).

One reason for rejecting a search for a Christian system is that situations do change, and one system may be right only in one situation. J F Robinson cautions, "evangelicals must be careful not to tie their faith to any ... theory of change. [They are] vulnerable to changing scientific thinking" (Samuel & Sugden 1981:61). Webber (1979:184) likewise denies that there can be any correct model, seeing the Church as adopting a separatist attitude under communism but a transformational one under American capitalism.

Another danger is of cooperation with agencies whose main purpose, unlike that of Christianity, is the removal of poverty. The idea of sharing with the poor is after all not specifically Christian. They will advocate development for its own sake, but result in Christians being influenced by, and even adopting their ideologies (Genichen 1971:102). As Letwin (in North 1984a:59) says, theological judgement is often suspended in the face of economic issues. "What distresses us most about programs for the alleviation of poverty or the equalization of society is that so little thought seems to lie behind them" (Johnson 1981:139), even though "every economic theory reflects necessarily a spiritual message" (Haan 1982:123). What the Christian and non-Christian is aiming for cannot be absolutely identical. In economics the Church had, admittedly, tended to follow secular ideologies (Elliott 1987:25). "...the secular definitions [of economics] have stayed largely intact, and the Church has grafted on a moral or theological critique" (Storkey 1986:cover). This danger has meant that Christians, rejecting some aspects of an ideology have rejected all of it. The obvious case of this is the rejection of the economic aspects of communism just because it has been linked with atheistic materialism. However as Taylor (1965:82) says, it is really no problem for Christians if Mao had right ideas as well. Likewise cooperation is possible with other religions (Hancock 1979:101), but only with qualifications. Ultimately, Christians, Marxists and Buddhists must have different notions of development.

1.6.1 Israel as an economic paradigm. The purpose of the New Testament may be contrasted with that of the Old insofar as the New by its emphasis upon salvation deals with individuals in their relationship to God and then in relation to other people, while the Old Testament clearly centres on the nation of Israel. Thus although economics cannot be absent from the New Testament, it is in the Old that economic structures may be expected to be found. Christians see God's choice of the nation of Israel as due to the need for Christ to come in one particular nation, and also that God, because of that choice, laid down for Israel his desires for its structure and economic organization.
Some believe that the laws and structures of Israel are still valid (Wright 1983:90), at least in principle, not only for Jews, but also for Christians, indeed for all. In this case a Christian economic system is not only possible, but seen in Israel. This is of course the view of reconstructionism. If what we have in the Old Testament is God's desires for one nation, some argue that these requirements can be taken as universally applicable, as people are the same and God remains the same, such as the need for a rest day (Schluter & Clements 1990:38). Although this has been generally accepted by Christians, particularly where the whole Bible has been accepted as the Word of God, such an approach may however be questioned.

Firstly, it is clear from the Bible that the laws and structures of Israel were not given to humanity as a whole, but only to Israel. Moreover, these were only given to Israel subsequent to their choice and acceptance of the covenant. There is no indication that they are intended to be for all, indeed the New Testament explicitly denies this. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) limits the requirements to be laid upon Gentile converts, and Paul likewise denies that a Christian is under Law. The most that can be said is that if it was good for Israel, it is probably good advice for all.

Secondly there are few if any Christians who would accept the entire Old Testament legal structure as binding. Most would seek to accept some and to say that the rest was applicable only to Israel. The difficulty here is that there is no real indication how the material is to be divided.

A second approach is to see the value of the Old Testament not in its legal and structural material but as a record of history. Israel is not just the channel for God's love, but the symbol of it, an approach particularly taken by liberation theology, which although it does not emphasize Israel's laws and structures, sees God's acts especially the Exodus, as essentially repeated in later history (Witvliet 1985:159), in other nations. Again however, the existence of Israel is an indication of the possibility of a Christian system. The problem here, of course, is that situations are never exactly repeated.

A further common view is that the only significance of Israel is that Christ came through it, and that the laws and structures are incidental, with no lasting value. Thus the prophets see salvation in the future (Koch 1983:114). On the other hand it is just because of the coming Christ that Israel can be a paradigm (Wright 1983:90). The fact that he was to come did affect the nation; God did seek to make them a suitable place for Christ and for his work to be done. Indeed, what Christ did is really only explicable in terms of the Old Testament. Israel is thus seen by most Christians as unique, and therefore its laws must be of more than temporary relevance. The prophets, after all, even with a future orientation, and seeing their situation as in many ways irredeemable, saw the law as morally valid (cf Koch 1983:11). It may have referred to a different time, a different situation, and a different political structure, but could still be used as God's censure on the oppression and sin of the day.

Perhaps validity can be seen not directly but in a permanency of principle. If God's desire was expressed in laws valid in that situation, and he acted in a certain way at that time, the principles should still be valid as God is constant, and people in principle are the same. The details would then require careful working out in application to a later environment. The principle of the validity of a Christian economic system would follow, and that it must bear some considerable relation to that of Old Testament
1.7 Towards a Christian approach.

There are many quite different approaches to human need which are being practised with different degrees of success, often prompted by religion. This not only motivates concern but also gives the approaches a distinctive nature. Christians in particular must have a concern for the poor at least to some extent, so must be concerned about how compatible their faith is with the various approaches which have been suggested.

First there is a particular need to investigate the two extreme secular approaches to poverty, those of capitalism and socialism. Even if neither exists as such in the real world, the economy of every country is a mix, in different proportions, of the two basic sets of ideas. Capitalism in particular has changed the world in a fundamental way, and its basic ideology affects most areas of life, especially, of course, in the Western world. Socialism has been even more effective in some parts of the world, the former Eastern bloc, affecting the lives of everyone there. The conflict between the two has dominated the world for decades.

What is striking is that there are so many people who accept the tenets of each system as the solution to human need, and who denounce the other as completely wrong, and try to purge every vestige of it from the practice in their own situation. They see even tinges of the opposite philosophy as damaging, and productive of poverty. Each side can produce evidence in support of its assertions; both believe that the evidence demonstrates that it alone has the solution to poverty. Such beliefs are sincerely held, and by many people, but it is hardly possible for both to be correct. In this case, the beliefs also need to be examined from a different viewpoint.

A Christian perspective will have to examine the presuppositions of each system, to see how consistent they are with the Christian faith. Just like the rest of humanity, they will judge the claims of economic systems from the effects that they are perceived to have, but for them there is a more vital criterion for judgement; the validity of a set of ideas lies in its conformity to the Christian message. Christians are followers of the one who claimed to be "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6); if this is indeed the case, it gives a basis for the examination of any approach to poverty. In particular, Christians will look at the alleged drawbacks of each, such as the accusation that capitalism generates oppression, and socialism laziness, and suggest that just as human sin is the ultimate cause of poverty in the first place, so these poverty-producing effects of the secular systems are also due to sin, and should be overcome in a perfect Christian society.

Christians are however conscious that they live in the real world, which is far from perfect and so cannot accept them as the only solution. It is then not surprising that Christianity itself has produced several distinctive approaches to poverty. These are quite diverse, ranging from a belief that wealth is totally wrong, or at least should be limited, to a belief that abundance is the right of Christians; from a belief that a Christian form of capitalism is God's will to a belief that Christianity must lead to a form of socialism; from those who approach the problem as individuals, to those who see political action as imperative. This gives rise to the need firstly to assess each one, and then to decide in fact how consistent with the Christian faith they are, or whether, as in the medieval polity, they are
excessively influenced by other factors. Then because the various approaches exhibit considerable diversity, there is a Christian duty to see how consistent they are with each other, so if they can be seen as aspects of a single approach. After all, despite Christian diversity, there is considerable agreement on at least the basics of Christian faith, so it might be expected that there should be consistency in its application to social need. This should lead to a more efficient attack on poverty.

An overall view would also be of value in considering an approach which has proved to be a hopeless failure in one place. This may well lead people to conclude that this approach is simply wrong, whereas it may be just what is required elsewhere. Different actual situations of poverty will require not different approaches, but rather the emphasis of different aspects of an overall approach, but without neglecting aspects which are still pertinent. An overall view should result in a better approach to any particular situation. Thus Webber (1979) isolates three basic approaches which he refers to as the attempt of the Church to separate itself from the world, to identify with the world, and to transform the world. He emphasizes that all three models are Biblical, all three are valid, and a coherent whole requires all three; a Christian approach should be multi-faceted. Which is emphasized will depend on the particular cultural situation. There must be, he says, an ongoing work of Christ by the Church which is only complete at the second coming.

What is necessary is for Christians, if they are not to give up in the face of world poverty, or simply to join the quest for the best mix of the secular ideas, to develop a distinctive approach, which can fulfil the obligation to act, and which can be practised in a largely secular world. Cotterell (1990:278) writes primarily of missionaries, but this is surely applicable to all Christians:

To be a missionary... is to hear the cry of the world, even the cry which sheer hunger and exhaustion and despair stifle at its birth. It is to hear that cry as God hears it, and to respond not with more books and more international conferences, but with a truly biblical praxis, which is not Marxist, nor yet capitalist, but a praxis which incarnates the will of God in an as yet unredeemed world.