

CHAPTER 3

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON POVERTY

In this chapter I explore the biblical and theological foundations of the Church's witness amongst the poor. Reading through the Scriptures one discovers certain foundational principles that are imperative in defining the Christian's mission, ministry and message. This is an attempt to consolidate my theological position as I review the Christian witness and its call for social engagement in a historical context of deprivation. Maguire writes,

“The life and the words of Jesus and the teachings of his Church call us to serve those in need and work actively for social and economic justice. As community of believers, we know that our faith is tested by the quality of justice amongst us, that we can best measure our life together by how the poor and vulnerable are treated”(Thompson 2000:1).

The witness of Christians must also be informed and shaped by a sound and critical reflection of the Scriptures so that we can be in position to serve society with the gospel.

3.1. God and the Poor

3.1.1 The Phenomenon of Poverty

The Scriptures recognize that poverty will continue to be an experience that will accompany humanity in its development, as it has been through all the stages of our human evolution. It is an issue that we will always have to deal with. We read in Deuteronomy 15:11: “For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and needy, in your land’”(cf. John 12:8). “The oft-quoted statement of Jesus, *The poor you will always have with you...* [This] should never be understood as an expression of resigned despair or as a word of indifference toward the poor. As the Father is kind and merciful to the ungrateful and selfish, so should the sons of the Father act” (Lk 6:35- 36) (Pilgrim 1981:171). Poverty is a giant that we as human beings have had to engage through all the

epochs of our history. And in the future, when we advance on all fronts, whether it be in the arena of technology, human sciences, business science and natural sciences we, will still have to deal with poverty, using all the innovations emerging from those fields. We do not fully know the extent and nature of poverty, but it will always be there. God does not shy away from deprivation as if it did not occur. The Scriptures do not endorse an escapist mentality that just withdraws into the euphoric denial of poverty, when it is clearly visible in our society. Poverty has been a multigenerational human challenge. We can trace it into the origins of our societies.

Poverty is an ever-present challenge. It still is a reality that humans cannot simply wish away. All the evidences of poverty are visible in our society. Dussel writes, “Every system, every totality, produces its poor. Every freedom, every revolution, creates new poor. Every morality, i.e. every prevailing social order as a system of practices, as a totality, proves unable or unwilling, to allow for the other as the other” (Walton 1994:147). Deprivation will continue to develop concurrently with all socio-economic-political ideologies, systems and structures. Human existence has never been immune from poverty. Pilgrim (1981:24 – 25) says,

“Doubtless the most familiar sections of the Old Testament on the theme of the poor are the prophetic warnings and judgments addressed to the wealthy and the powerful during the periods of Israel’s monarchy. It was especially during this time of the monarchy in both the northern and the southern kingdoms that greater social disparities developed, bringing with them increasing oppression and exploitation. Out of this social and political period of crisis in Israel emerged the most unique religious phenomenon in the world’s history, the prophetic movement. In the name of God of Israel, who called them...to be his spokesmen, the prophets directed their words against the social injustices of the people and the rulers and became staunch defenders of the poor and powerless.”

Yet, even in our times we still wrestle with the same practices that the early prophets condemned. The prevalence of poverty permeates through sophisticated and advanced societies to the very simple and developing nations. Sometimes the tables are turned; once accomplished and materially rich individuals, companies, regions and nations have

joined the ranks of the poor. Former so-called superpowers are vanquished. We have also seen the once poor progress to the ranks of the ‘haves’, the affluent and the prosperous. Poverty is a human and earthly phenomenon that will continue to be a challenge to us:

- Globally
- Nationally
- Regionally
- Locally
- In the family.

In the Bible one can perceive a sense of pragmatism. It teaches a sober approach when investigating the issue of deprivation. In my analysis of poverty I have emphasized that it is a multigenerational challenge that is part of our human existence. It goes beyond grand poverty eradication plans like the Millennium plans, Agenda 21, NEPAD, just to mention a few. Our predecessors and their ancestors were confronted by this challenge. We also, in our time, have joined the fight against poverty. We must continue the prophetic movement against marginalization. “The citing of evidence against the people is long and all too familiar – ... fraudulent trade (Amos 8:4-5) ... theft of land (Mic.2: 1 –2), violence against the poor (Ezek 16:48), wasteful affluence amid poverty (Amos 4:1, 6:4f)...” (Pilgrim 1981:25). Poverty eradication has been a long struggle that is recorded in Biblical history. The prophets challenged those who committed misdeeds that contributed to the suffering of the innocent. We can add to the list, to include violations of the labour law, consumer rights and a litany of other violations. We are continuing the struggle in an imperfect world, populated by flawed individuals and societies. Dussel says, “But in every human situation there are the poor, the oppressed, who constitute the correlative of sin and domination of sin. These here and now poor are concrete persons, objectively determinable in the real worlds of the Aztecs, Incas, Chinese, Bantus, capitalists, socialists” (Walton 1994:147). This is the reason that even as South Africans we are facing the challenge of poverty. We are no exception. We are probably dealing with poverty that has mutated into different forms to those in antiquity. It is with this insight that we have to pursue our evangelistic endeavours. We have to preach the Gospel in a human situation in which poverty is pervasive. Therefore, our witness will take place in this social and historical context of destitution.

3.1.2 The Phenomenon of Wealth

God does not necessarily demonise wealth in the Scriptures. Some of the saints in the Bible are quite affluent. It does not appear as if this was morally unacceptable before God. “There is a continuous tradition running throughout the Old Testament that regards possessions as a sign of God’s blessings” (Pilgrim 1981:19). Wealth was considered to be a gift of God’s grace. Scripture says, “And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day”(Deut.8: 18). The Israelites, after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, were empowered by God. The God of their covenant, who delivered them from oppression, promised them wealth. By doing this, God was fulfilling a promise, He had made to their ancestors. “This is true already in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, which describe, often in detail, the considerable wealth of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph in Egypt (Gen 13:2; 26:13; 30:43; 40:41)” (Pilgrim 1981:19). There is no sign when reading the Scriptures that God was disturbed by their wealth. Rather, we see these people being affirmed as the icons of faith and obedience to God. They become respected people who continue to inspire the faith of the faithful. “This positive view of possession is also apparent in the latter Wisdom traditions. Although there is a sharp criticism of the rich as well, as we shall see, wealth is generally accepted as a self-evident blessing of life and given due praise... The final editor of Job attributes the double restoration of Job’s fortune at the end of his long period of testing to the hand of God (Job 42:10)” (Pilgrim 1981:20). This tradition has contributed towards a perspective that upholds God as the generous provider of abundance.

Side by side with this positive view of material comfort, there is a focus on justice and sharing. God expects those who are wealthy to be just and generous. Through sharing, wealth can be put to worthy uses in society. “Their proper use occurs within the context of agape-love, where caring for the poor, sharing with those in need, and doing good even to one’s enemies receive the highest priority”(Pilgrim 1981:146). God promises to act

against those who have a prosperity propped up by inequality and oppression. Rather, the rich are challenged to be generous in supporting the poor. Pilgrim (1981:120) says,

“Conversely, there are some passages in the Old Testament which imply that poverty is a punishment from God. We see this in the legal traditions, where poverty is one of the threats used against the violators of the Law (Deut 28:15 – 24; Lev. 14 – 26). Likewise the prophets can threaten evildoers with loss of their treasured luxuries and a life of ‘sackcloth’ instead of their ‘rich robe’ (Is 3:24). The oppressed, too, threaten their persecutors with poverty.”

We can draw an inference from the Scriptures that the rich who exploit the poor will be ultimately condemned to poverty when God’s justice is meted out in the course of history. According to Bosch (1991:99) in his exposition of the Gospel of Luke,

“The rich are primarily those who are greedy, who exploit the poor, who are making money that they do not even allow themselves the time to accept the invitation to a banquet (Lk 14:18f), who do not notice the Lazarus at their gate (16:20), who conduct a hedonistic lifestyle but are nonetheless (or, rather, because of this) choked by cares about those riches (8:14).”

They will not remain untouchable in the power that they misuse against the weak. History bears witness of this, since many oppressive regimes, groups, families and individuals have been vanquished. Some have even been dethroned even peacefully by the course of justice. Bosch (1991:99) says,

“The rich are thus also the arrogant and the powerful who abuse power. They are, supremely, the impious who are bent only on the things of this world and therefore are ‘not rich towards God’ (Lk 12:21) or ‘paupers in the sight of God’ (NEB). In essence this means that, through their avarice, haughtiness, exploitation of the poor, and godlessness, they have willfully and consciously placed themselves outside of the range of God’s grace.”

Even though the Bible seems to entertain a positive view of affluence, the New Testament also contains many warnings about the dangers of wealth. One of them is unbridled greed, which makes people, even when they are wealthy already seek to acquire even more. They become obsessed with an uncontrolled desire for personal enrichment; and refuse to give others a chance to have their needs and aspirations

satisfied. Possessions are harmful when they become a controlling force in your life and sidetrack you from the purposes of God.

3.1.3 God's Concern for the Poor

God takes poverty seriously, and has a greatest concern for the poor. The Prophets articulated God's concern for those who are disadvantaged. The poor have a special place in God's heart. There is no part of their suffering, wherever it occurs, that escapes God's attention and scrutiny. The poor, therefore, are not alone in their struggle, but God is with them.

God Identifies With The Poor

God is a God of the poor. God chooses to identify with them in their repulsive existence. We all know that the conditions of poverty are so abhorrent that many would not like to relate with the poverty-stricken. Yet, God opts to be known as the God of the underdogs, the downtrodden, who are experiencing oppression and hardship. God, who is the focus of Christianity worldwide, whether it is in the 'North' or the 'South' is not ashamed to be associated with the poor. The Psalmist describes God thus: "A father of the fatherless, defender of the widows, is God in His Holy habitation" (Ps 68:2). God is intimately connected to those who are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by the powerful. Disadvantaged widows are chosen to become members of God's family. God's presence is also felt in situations of poverty. God identifies with the poor, God has chosen to be amongst the poor. This means that God is present in the social and historical context of poverty. Therefore, to be deprived does not imply to be forsaken by God.

God identifies with the poor because He loves the poor. This does not, however, imply that the poor monopolize the love of God. Scripture says, "The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His work" (Ps 145:9). God does not love the poor at the expense of the affluent. But God affirms His love for the poor even when people treat them scandalously. God took special care of Israel when they were oppressed and needy

(Ps 68:9 -10). God loves those whose lives are threatened by poverty. This love is not a static love that does not do anything. “God’s love”, says Forsyth “is love in holy action, in forgiveness, in redemption. It is God’s movement towards his creatures for the purpose of communion” (Costas 1989:73). God’s love is expressed through God’s deeds of grace in pardoning those who are sinners, who do not deserve his graciousness. The poor are also summoned to receive God’s forgiveness because they are also sinners who need God’s pardon. The same love that sanctifies through God’s grace that has been abundantly provided through Christ redeems them from all forces of darkness. It is this love that redeems them from poverty, from the deprivation that is wrongly imposed on them, and from the injustice that violates their human rights. As Fung has noted,

“A person is not only a sinner, a person is also the sinned against.... Men and women are not only wilful violators of God’s law, they are also the violated.

This is not in a behaviouristic sense, but in a theological sense, in terms of sin, the domination of sin, and of our struggle against sin ... to the point of shedding our blood (Heb.12: 4).... [Humankind] is lost, lost not only in the sins [of its] own heart but also in the sinning grasp of the principalities and powers of the world, demonic forces which cast a bondage over human lives and human institutions and infiltrate their very textures” (cited by Costas 1989:22).

The poor are sinners, but have also been wronged by others in society. Their marginalization is an abomination against God. Even as we witness amongst them, we need to recognize that they are sinners but they also have been wronged by a society that has created their impoverishment. Thus, in our ministry, we will have to address the issues of their having been disadvantaged.

God’s Preferential Option For The Poor

Gods reveals himself as the deliverer of the poor. The Psalmist says, “All my bones shall say, Lord, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, yes, the poor and the needy from him who plunders him”(Psalm. 35:10). God takes part in the struggles of the poor to end their misery. God sides with the disadvantaged when they are oppressed. “The point is rather that the poor are the first, though not the only ones, on

which God's attention focuses and that, therefore, the church has no choice but to demonstrate solidarity with the poor"(Bosch 1991:436). God is the one who authenticates their struggle against poverty and orchestrates their freedom. "He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap, that He may seat him with princes, with the princes of His people" (Ps. 113: 7-8). God is actively engaged in taking the poor out of the indecent conditions of squalor. According to the Kairos Document:

"Throughout the Bible God appears as the liberator of the oppressed: 'For the plundered poor, for the needy who groan, now I will act, *Yahweh*' (Ps 12:5). God is not neutral. He does not attempt to reconcile Moses and Pharaoh, to reconcile the Hebrew and slaves with their Egyptian oppressors, or reconcile the Jewish people with any of their later oppressors... Oppression is a crime and it cannot be compromised with, it must be done away with... 'God, who does what is right, is always on the side of the oppressed'"(Ps. 103:6)(Logan 1988:33 – 34).

Poverty is socially shameful; no one will welcome it into his or her life. It is rejected and despised like trash. God works in the life of the desperate to give them a good life amongst the most accomplished of his people. God helps them to join the company of others who belong to Him and that He has already affirmed and blessed. When God redeems the poor and the needy, He radically alters their poverty for a far better life. God desires to uplift the poor to a higher level of life where they can no longer be touched by their former poverty.

The poor are constantly exposed to oppression, but God is their defender. In terms of the Scriptures God is described as God who condemns the marginalization the poor. God is therefore, the God of all just courses in our world. According to Boff (1984:59),

"God is not only the supreme guarantor of a just order, as we are accustomed to think. His principal activity is the defence of the rights of the powerless, the persecuted, and the poor. God does not side with the mighty, then, who have the law at their disposition and utilize it to their own advantage. God sides with those violated in their dignity and their justice."

God is the guardian of human rights. In fact, any transgression against the rights of the poor is like a direct attack against God. "The needs and rights of human beings have been

violated and one of the results is poverty. This is not what the Lord wills. That is certain” (Pilgrim 1981:21). God defends the poor when they are taken down. The Scriptures record, “He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished” (Prov.17: 5). God protects the poor because they are human beings that God created in His image. The abject conditions of poverty do not cause Him to be ashamed of them. Though their lack is undesirable, it does not make them lesser human beings before God. Poverty in our world is a cause for mockery. To be poor in our world means to be humiliated. It means to be disrespected as a human being, to be despised even by people who do not know your background or anything about your plight. Poor people are always subject to unkind, discriminatory and abusive attitudes and actions. They are regarded as a nuisance and eyesore in decent neighbourhoods. The very people we despise because of their ‘uncultured’ appearance, and behaviour, however, will be protected by God when we ill-treat them. It is sin to despise your neighbour (Prov 14:21). When we offend the poor, we offend God. All acts of callousness against the poor constitute callousness against God. When we show prejudice against the disadvantaged we indirectly discriminate against their God. But, if we treat them compassionately, God would respond kindly to us. We read that, “He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given” (Prov.19:17). When we are generous to the marginalized, God will be indebted to us.

God as the deliverer and protector of the powerless outlaws any thought and act of discrimination against the poor or any other person. Since, poverty makes the poor easy targets for victimization, God bars anyone from treating them unjustly. “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor, let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother” (Zech. 7:10). It is an unethical practice to exploit others simply because they are vulnerable. To be poor entails more than just living without the basic necessities; it means constant exposure to unfair treatment in society. In Job’s writings we learn that poor people do aspire to a better life (see. Job 15:16). They do not enjoy being trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. They are optimistic and want to progress out of the gutters. But unjust socio-political and economic conditions keep them down. It is discrimination that causes some to resign themselves to the oppressive conditions of

poverty. They submissively accept scarcity as a way of life. They struggle to live a normal life under abnormal conditions. In the bygone era of *apartheid* in South Africa those among the oppressed who opposed injustice, were viewed as troublemakers disturbing the social order. Consequently, many of the oppressed adapted themselves to oppression, due to their fear of the oppressor. They became quiet and passive. Some even developed theological positions to justify their silence. This does not necessarily imply that initially they were hopeless people. They collaborated with the unjust system hoping to gain favour and a better life for their communities. God rejects injustice, especially when practiced by a community that themselves were once treated as underdogs in the past. Israel of antiquity, like South Africans, have a painful legacy of oppression (Deut.24: 18). They are therefore expected to show extreme sensitivity towards the poor, and wrath against any subversion of justice against any member of their community. “With these words, Yahweh affirms his promise to come to the aid of the poor who cry out for relief and to punish evildoers” (Pilgrim 1981:23). Unfortunately, some people suffer from a convenient amnesia; they forget where they come from, and that they were once repressed. In the comfort of their hard-won freedom, they slip into the wicked practices of the past oppressors.

3.1.4 Jesus Identifying with the Poor

Jesus lived in poverty. Christ never experienced a sheltered life. Poverty was a reality that Jesus had to face in his time on earth. It was an experience that became part of his background. According to Padilla (1985:171 –172),

“The picture of Jesus that emerges out of the Gospels is that of a person who knew economic poverty throughout his entire life. His birth took place without the normal comforts; in a feeding trough of animals (Lk 2:7)...Quite early in his life Jesus was a refugee (Matt 2:14). He grew up in Galilee, an underdeveloped region of Palestine (Matt 2:22 – 23), in the home of a carpenter, and this placed him in a position of disadvantage in the eyes of many of his contemporaries (see Jn. 1:46). During his ministry, he had no home he could call his own (Lk 9:58); he

depended on the generosity of a group of women for the provision of his needs (Lk 8:2).”

From the cradle to the grave, he experienced the suffering associated with the poor. He was raised in poverty and he lived in poverty throughout his adulthood. “The first fact of Jesus’ presence among the poor is that it was the presence of a poor Man among the poor”(Escobar & Driver 1978:47). He lived in the same conditions of poverty as the poor ordinary folks of his world. “Jesus’ poverty is a hard historical fact unanimously portrayed in all four Gospels” (Padilla 1985:172). The poverty that Jesus faced was a concrete human experience. “The assumption of our battered humanity (our flesh) by the eternal Son forges a bond of solidarity with him in our anguish” (Boff 1984:108). Christ did not have a metaphysical body that could not be touched by the hardships of poverty. Rather, he had the same physical body that all human beings have, a body that was affected by the death – dealing blows of poverty, just like the rest of the poor (Phil.2: 6 – 8). Christ’s body was flesh and blood, just like ours.

God experienced poverty in the person of Christ. God was subjected to the same pain, suffering and oppression that the poor know so well. God became poor for our sake. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich”(2 Cor. 8:9). God in Christ was subjected to poverty in order to overcome it on behalf of humanity. Boff says,

“The Praxis of Jesus and his disciples was thus one of service and suffering and subversion. It was characterized by truthfulness, inclusiveness, and non-violence. It was a historical community infused with eschatological joy and hope, celebrating in table fellowship the presence of God in the presence of Jesus. That person, rejected and broken, remains for the church the figure of human wholeness” (Walton 1994:233).

Christ went through pain, suffering and death for the sake of his people. God through Christ, entered human history, characterized by destitution. God did not include poverty into the passion of Christ to romanticize it, but rather to destroy its legitimacy. Orlando Costas declares,

“In Jesus Christ, God became part of history, identifying with its most humble expression and suffering its deepest pain.... In him and through him God assumes the identity of the poor, and becomes known as a ‘human and sensitive God,’ the ‘God with a sun scorched face’ who ‘sweats’ in the street” (Costas 1989:27).

The conditions of poverty are not the ideal and ultimate life God envisages for his children. Poverty contradicts the very life that God wants to make possible for His people through Christ. There is, however, nothing wrong when someone chooses a life of voluntary poverty as service to God and his or her community. “It is clear that Jesus did at times demand literal poverty as a condition of discipleship... The renunciation of all we have is genuine to the extent that it is concretely expressed, as it was expressed in the case of Jesus and his disciples” (Padilla 1985:180) (cf. Lk 14: 26 – 32; Mk 10:20). This is a different kind of poverty to the one the poor are facing, which looks like an inescapable reality imposed on them by unjust socio-historical factors. The poor have no other options in life but poverty.

3.2 The Message of Salvation

3.2.1 The Concept of Salvation In The Old Testament Perspective

We start with the perspective that espouses God as the source of human salvation. Throughout the Old Testament God is depicted as the ‘Saviour of His people.’ “Firstly salvation is the work of God. God is always seen as the author of salvation. The people are rescued by God (Hos. 7:7), who alone can save the flock (Ezek. 34:22), for there is none other who can do it (Isa.43: 1). ...Humble, trusting faith is the way to receive God’s salvation” (Sider 1993:85). It is God who initiates all movement towards the deliverance of those who are in distress. Israel as the people of God had a strong conviction that God was their Saviour. They counted on God to save them in times of need, whether in times of famine, leadership crisis and even war. They put their hope in the Lord who would be their deliverer. The concept of salvation in the Old Testament is God-centred. People can only receive salvation as a gift from God. It is granted to God’s people out of the

goodness of the love of God for His people. People have to respond, to accept the gift of God's salvation in their lives. Nicholls and Wood (1996:7 – 8) stated,

“While the good news begins with personal salvation it does not end there. It is about the new and transformed communities of people, living in peace with God and in harmony among themselves. Thus the primary goal of sharing good news is to create households of faith and kingdom communities in which Christ reigns. Community helps to sustain every effort to overcome poverty and oppression.”

The experience of personal salvation must ultimately end in some form of societal change. People must never again be subjected to any form of injustice and suffering.

Secondly, salvation occurs in the concreteness of our societal reality. It is the salvation of a people or person in the real social environment. The experience of salvation should not necessarily result in people downplaying their social reality as if it is beyond God's redemption. “There is a constant tendency in the church to trivialize the nature of salvation, as if it meant no more than a self-reformation, or the forgiveness of sins, or a personal passport to paradise, or a private mystical experience without social or moral consequences”(Stott 1999:38). People who need God's salvation have a socio-historical background that is unique to them. Their so-called ‘spiritual’ and ‘individualized’ experience of salvation has social implications even though it might be tempting to deny them. “... Salvation happens in history and is social, corporate, and communal. Exodus 14:30 is typical: ‘That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians.’.... For Israel, God's single most important act of salvation was a concrete historical event that liberated the whole community” (Sider 1993:86 –87). Salvation as presented in the Old Testament, has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension to it. God's people, Israel, could receive atonement for their sins and also be liberated from oppression with a promise to be relocated to a land where they would be free to worship and serve God. “Biblical faith is, above all, faith in a God who gives self-revelation through historical events, a God who saves in history” (Gutierrez 1988:88). When the Children of Israel were in bondage in Egypt, God delivered them. God freed them from slavery and oppression. “The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and

comradely society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order” (Gutierrez 1988:88). In their struggle against oppression, Israel put their trust in Jehovah. God sent Moses who led their struggle until they attained their freedom and departed from Egypt. “Likewise, to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action, which is moving in its complete fulfilment” (Gutierrez 1988:91). We cannot negate the importance of justice in God’s salvific actions for His people. God as a just God wants His people to be a just community (Isa.30: 18, 61:8).

God’s salvation arises from his covenantal promises to his people. God makes promises that He intends to fulfil. These promises unfold in God’s saving acts that lead people to a life of blessedness in accordance with God’s purpose for them. Their life has meaning, since they live anticipating the fulfilment of those promises. God announced through Jeremiah that He watches over his word to perform it (Jer. 1:12). God has made many other promises that are eschatological in nature and are recorded in the Bible. Gutierrez (1988:91 - 92) says,

“The Bible is the book of the Promise, the Promise made by God to human beings, the efficacious revelation of God’s love and self communication; simultaneously it reveals humankind to itself... The promise is revealed, appeals to humankind, and is fulfilled throughout history... Human history is in truth nothing but the history of the slow, uncertain, and surprising fulfilment of the Promise.”

God thus becomes part of human history, since those who believe in God are guided by God’s promises. These promises embrace all aspects of life, both the temporal and the spiritual realities. The promises shape our lives daily. The future towards which they are guided ultimately becomes the past, a past that has been influenced by God. “The action of Yahweh in history and at the end of history are inseparable” (Gutierrez 1988:95). The God of the covenant is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). God addresses us in the heat of our present situations as we call on him hopefully with our issues. He responds adequately to our present needs, yet also points us to a life that is unfolding with far greater prospects.

3.2.2 The Prophetic Nature of Witnessing

In the Old Testament texts, particularly in Deutero-Isaiah, one is introduced to the prophetic nature of witnessing. “The key text in Deutero-Isaiah’s theology of evangelisation is found in Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him, who brings good tidings,
Who publishes peace, which brings good tidings of good,
Who publishes salvation,
Who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’

Isaiah 52:7 is, therefore, a foundational text for the New Testament, for the work of the New Testament Evangelist is patterned after Deutero-Isaiah’s description of the divine herald, who brings glad tidings of peace, proclaims salvation, and declares that God reigns”(Costas 1989:34).

At the time of Israel’s captivity in Babylon, the prophets proclaimed a message that was the good news of God’s peace, salvation and the kingdom of God. Those who brought such a prophetic message were to be welcomed as messengers of God. This message was given in the socio-historical context of oppression, and was intended for those in bondage. According to Costas (1989:35),

“By peace (*shalom*) is meant social well-being, productivity, creativity, and harmonious relations with the neighbour and the environment. This is made possible by the just ordering of life, which guarantees that the weak and the oppressed shall be lifted up and put alongside the strong and mighty. Similarly, salvation means liberation from captivity and restoration of that which was destroyed; it means straightening the crooked ways, leveling the uneven ground, making plain the rough places (Is. 40:4). In short, it means holistic reconciliation – with God, the neighbour, and the land.”

The prophetic manner of witnessing would set a precedent for the New Testament. It contains a lesson for evangelists not to shy away from dealing with socio-political issues, especially when witnessing amongst the poor who need to be empowered.

Sometimes, when we talk about a prophetic ministry, some people mistake it to mean a doom and gloom ministry, preaching condemnation and judgment. Although there is a place for that when there is no repentance, but obstinate opposition to the will of God, prophetic evangelisation is about sharing the good news with those who are hard pressed. “Evangelisation is thus a positive and not a negative talk, a joyful rather than a tearful announcement, a communication of hope instead of damnation”(Costas 1989:36). It is a witness that brings consolation to those who are suffering. Such a prophetic witness is expressed in both words and deeds. It does not proclaim peace and salvation without practical engagement in helping those who are disadvantaged. This is no mere spiritual ‘pep talk’ without redemptive action. Costas (1989:46) says,

“In a world threatened by death, where life is devalued by poverty, economic exploitation, socio-political oppression, racism, sexism, the arms race, and plain human selfishness, evangelisation cannot be limited to religious gestures and verbal formulas. The situation requires that evangelisation fulfil its fundamental intention – namely, to transmit the good news of *shalom*, to declare publicly God’s salvation and to affirm God’s righteous and liberating reign.”

In the context of poverty, we need a witness that addresses all the socio-historical issues created by impoverishment, one that does not gloss over the needs of the miserable. There must be a deliberate effort in our ministry, to engage in social action in manner that makes us to work for the freedom of the disadvantaged.

3.2.3 The Message of the Gospel

The gospel enumerates the many ways in which God delivers his people from all bondage. God’s people are troubled by many problems, both personal and corporate. Some of the issues are spiritual and others socio-political or economic. God does not abandon people to their own wisdom to solve their own problems. God has been reaching out to humanity through history, unfolding his plan of redemption for humanity. “The gospel is the story of the sending of the only begotten Son of the Father to redeem the world. In this action we see reflected the foundation of God’s existence; holy love. God is

both ‘light’ and ‘love’” (1 John 1:5; 4:8, 16) (Costas 1989:73). Jesus’ coming to the world was part of God’s response to our needs in this world. “The Gospels present Jesus as the Messiah who brings the fulfilment of the Old Testament hope”(Padilla 1985:73). His message, ministry, death and resurrection manifested God’s plan for salvation for humankind. Shorter (1994:3) stated,

“Jesus did not bequeath a set of teachings to his followers, a message that was called Christianity. Jesus himself was the Good News. His teachings are centred – almost scandalously – on himself... It is a living and transforming encounter with the risen Christ, a union with him distinguished by all the characteristics of a relationship of mutual love and trust.”

The gospel is about Christ who comes to be closer to us, to call us into a life-giving relationship with him. God, through the person of Christ, ends the alienation between Himself and us. Christ, the Son of God, not an angel or any other agent, is the one who mediates that communion. According to Shorter (1994:3),

“In the Gospels we do not only find words attributed to Jesus. He proclaims who and what he is through the reported actions of his life. Moreover, there is no hiatus or discontinuity between the earthly Jesus and the Christ of the post-resurrection. The passion and the death of Jesus are a recapitulation of his life and the apostles know that the presence of the risen Christ is rooted in an earthly life that really has been lived.”

Jesus himself authenticates his gospel since he is the good news. He is the good news of God that is our salvation. God’s saving word is represented in his person.

The Triune God fulfilled His wish for our redemption through Jesus Christ. God sent His only Son, Jesus, who was endowed with the Holy Spirit. We see the fullness of God’s nature being manifested in how He – as the Trinity – reaches out to humanity to save them. Costas (1989:75 –76) says,

“Indeed, Jesus’ identification with the world on behalf of the Father in his birth, baptism, and ministry; his suffering death as the Father’s atoning offering for sin and the Father’s true representative of the world who took upon himself the sin of the world; and his victorious resurrection, which confirmed the reconciliation of

the world and set in motion a new creation – all of these aspects of the mission of Christ were accomplished by the power of the Spirit.”

The Spirit empowered the Messiah to holistically minister to those who needed to be saved. The power enabled him to preach good news to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to free the captives, to usher the jubilee, to confront and console those who mourn, to give dignity in the place of humiliation, to give joy for sadness, to bring praise in the place of depression, to rebuild the old ruins and decaying cities, to restore vibrant productivity, reconciliation with God, and restitution of the land (see. Isaiah. 61: 1- 7). The Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity who is the link between the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son are one through the Spirit. This is the message that should permeate our society through our proclamation as witnesses of God. It must reverberate in our evangelisation.

3.2.4 A Call To Conversion

The radical message of salvation contained in the gospel is a call to repentance. It brings an unequivocal challenge to repent in the context of our socio-historical realities. This was the call that the apostles made in their evangelisation of their society. “Then Peter said to them, repent and let everyone be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”(Acts 2:38). “The gospel issues an invitation to experience new life in the Holy Spirit through repentance and faith in Christ”(Costas 1989:112). The gospel summons us to repent. If we wish to live in a relationship with God and His word, we cannot conduct our lives as we used to before. A significant change needs to take place, a transformation that will completely re-orientate our lives. The word ‘repentance,’ has several meanings in the Bible. According to Sider (1993:103):

“The first is a Greek word, *epistrepho* literally means ‘to turn around’. Its Old Testament equivalent is the word *shub*. *Shub*’ has a very important theological meaning of Israel’s turning from sinful rebellion against Yahweh to total submission to God’s will expressed in the covenant. Similarly, *epistrepho* also has

a theological meaning and refers to turning from the ways of Satan to faith in and submission to Christ.”

Included in this call to repentance is a call to be baptized as a sign of the death of our old carnal life and our endowment with pardoning grace for our sins. Thus it becomes possible for God to usher us, the forgiven, into a new life of the Spirit. We begin to live our new life in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The second Greek word is *metanoia*, which means, “to change one’s mind or purpose” (Vines 1985: 525). “Jesus’ call to *metanoia* demanded an ‘unconditional turning from all that is against God. It involves the whole walk of the [person] who is claimed by divine Lordship’(Sider 1997: 103). It means to direct your mind towards God’s purpose, so as to ensure that your life is in line with it. The last word that is used in the Bible is *metamelomai*. It means, “to regret something”(Sider 1993:103; c.f. Vines 1985:525). One should have remorse for one’s wrongdoing if one is to experience genuine repentance. All these words as used in the Bible refer to notable change. “They all refer to radical transformation of the thoughts and actions (initiated by divine grace) that happens when a person is drawn to faith in Jesus and submits to him as the unconditional Lord”(Sider 1993:103). These biblical concepts of repentance imply a fundamental, significant and positive change in one’s relationship with God, oneself and others.

It is clear that the call to salvation is a call to conversion, a drastic transformation of one’s entire life. This life becomes a journey of new beginnings, guided by the Spirit of God. This conversion is not human self-reformation or personal improvement. Costas (1989: 113) says,

“First, conversion means a turning away from sins (and self) to God (and God’s work). Second, this act involves a change of mind, which implies abandonment of an old worldview and the adoption of a new one. Third, conversion entails a new allegiance, a new trust, and a new life commitment. Fourth, conversion is but a beginning of a journey and carries implicitly the seeds of new turns. Fifth, conversion is surrounded by the redemptive love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by the Holy Spirit.”

It is an all-embracing change into the likeness of Christ through the transforming power and the continued presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The rich are challenged to a life of total surrender to Christ. They are no longer to depend on the security of their wealth, prominence, political clout or their network of friends; but rather, to live a life of obedience and total dependency on God. They should be detached from their material endowments and be willing to share them in spreading God's goodwill. Meanwhile, the unjust are challenged to change their oppressive ways and become instruments of God's equity. All people are called to leave their crooked ways and follow Christ into a life that is fully pleasing to God, privately and publicly. "By that we mean that the message of the kingdom involves both repentance and the fruits of repentance; the word of forgiveness and the life of discipleship. The salvation present uniquely in Jesus or the preaching about him carries with it the ethical imperatives of discipleship and obedience"(Pilgrim 1981:166). The hearts and minds of the converted have been renewed to enable them to be credible witnesses of God in their speech and life. They have renounced a way of life that is not compatible with the purposes of God. Whatever matter they refuse to renounce when receiving the saving grace of God will become a hindrance to them in becoming the Disciples of Christ. Such a transformation is not just an instantaneous, one-time experience, but also a life-long process that continues throughout our faith passage.

This conversion has serious implications for the way we live our new life in our familiar social context. We have to begin to live our new life in obedience to the Word of the Lord. This Word places challenges on us that alter our relationships with others to be in line with the will of God. The change that has happened in our inner being must be translated into a God-pleasing public life. But, as we seek to obey God in our society, we experience opposition that would test our commitment to God's demands. "As Christians are coming face to face with the harsh realities of poverty, injustice, oppression, repression, and persecution, they are forced either to stand firm on their commitment and obey God's Word or deny their faith"(Costas 1989:126). Any compromise that would lead us to unfaithfulness to God is an unevangelical option. True discipleship, which is a sign of genuine faith, is an unwavering commitment to obeying God even when one is facing fierce challenges. "This is a faithful saying: For if we died with him, we shall also

live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself”(2 Tim. 2:11 – 13). The only thing that does not change when we compromise our faith, is that God still remains faithful to us, as faithful as He would be if we were obedient to His will. God remains true to who He is and to His Word, irrespective of our response to Him and His Word.

3.3 The Kingdom of God

There are different interpretations of the concept of the kingdom of God. These are influenced by respective faiths, traditions and theological backgrounds. According to Ladd, “God’s kingdom ... is His universal rule, His sovereignty over all the earth” (Winter & Hawthorne 1983:53). To others God’s reign refers to the manner in which God exercises His authority as the Lord over our universe for his own glory (see. Ps145: 11). This term can be approached from a ‘this –worldly’ perspective which mainly relates to current issues, or from an ‘other worldly’ perspective which relates to the future. The issue is not choosing one interpretation exclusively and looking at your ultimate choice in a favourable light and negating the latter. I prefer an approach that allows for both perspectives. For the purpose of this study, I do not wish to explore the systematic theology of the interpretation of the reign of God. Yet, we have to have an appropriate understanding of the kingdom of God because it is one of the key teachings of the Christian faith. Verkuyl indicates that;

“The heart of the message of the Old and New Testament is that God, the Creator of the universe and all earthly life, is actively engaged in the reestablishment of His liberating dominion over the cosmos and all of humankind. In seeking out Israel, He sought all of us and our entire world, and in Jesus Christ He laid the foundation of the Kingdom. Jesus Christ, the Messiah ‘promised to the fathers,’ is the *auto basileia*: in Him the kingdom has both come and is coming. In the person, the words and deeds of Jesus, in his life, his death, and his resurrection, the kingdom of God has come, is present, and is coming in an absolutely unique way and with exceptional clarity. In his preaching Jesus divulges the riches, the

thesaurus of that Kingdom: reconciliation, the forgiveness of sins, the victory over demonic powers. Standing within the tradition of Mosaic Law, He expounds the core message of the *Thora* and the Prophets; He accomplishes the reconciliation of the world to God; He opens the way to the present and the future Kingdom which demands decisions in all aspects of life” (Van Engen, et al 1993: 72).

The message of the kingdom of God has its roots in God’s covenantal relationship with Israel, which is further developed in the New Testament in the life of Christ and the Church. We shall focus on the way the reign of God is revealed in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ and how it shapes our Christian witness. Sider says, “The reign of God, thrust to the centre of history in the Christ-event, is the horizon within which God’s redemptive purpose is fulfilled. The reign of God (*basileia*) originates with God and expresses God’s saving will and purpose”(1993:9). In exploring this concept we wish to conceptualise our evangelisation stance.

3.3.1 The Nature of the Kingdom of God

The gospel heralds the reign of God in our lives, in the community and the universe. It is a testimony about God who is Lord of the world, God, whose influence is not limited to the church but transcends into our world. According to Boff (1984:36),

“The Gospel, in turn, is nothing but the proclamation of the reign of God; the full and total liberation of all creation, cosmic and human, from all its iniquities, and the integral accomplishment of God’s design in the insertion of all things into his divine life. Concretely, then, the Reign of God translates into community life with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in a universal communion of brothers and sisters in solidarity with one another in the use of the ‘fruit of the earth and the work of human hands.’”

God in Christ reconciled all things that had been alienated from Him (see. Col.1:19 –20). It was God, restoring all disrupted relationships between Himself, people and the rest of creation. The kingdom of God is broader than our individualistic concern for salvation,

even when this concern has its place. The kingdom of God has to have this cosmic proportion since creation has been negatively impacted by sin. Padilla (1985:4-5) says,

“The most categorical affirmation of God’s will to save the world is made in the person and work of his Son Jesus Christ... The world is the object of God’s love (Jn 3:16)... Obviously God’s salvation in Christ Jesus is universal in scope... From the universality of the gospel is derived the universality of the evangelising mission of the church. The gospel’s claim on the world, initiated in Jesus Christ, is continued through his followers. As the Father sent him, so he has sent them into the world”(Jn. 17:18).

It is critical that we comprehend this all-embracing dimension of the gospel as it relates to the extent of our mission as Christians. “The lack of appreciation of the broader dimensions of the gospel will lead inevitably to a misunderstanding of the mission of the church”(Padilla 1985:1). Our mission is a mission to the world. This perspective is even more relevant to us currently, since we live in a global society.

The kingdom of God addresses the personal and public aspects of human life, both spiritual and secular. We should guard against the tendency to separate the mundane aspect of life from our faith. Such tendencies cause us to view life in terms of narrow and detachable categories, in which we divide the spiritual from the secular. When we compartmentalize our lives into such unrelated sections, it causes these ‘entities’ to be separated and contradictory. Arias explain that, “The issue is a holistic gospel for a holistic mission”(Snyder 2001: 62). Real life cannot be divided into separable categories of the spiritual and the secular, personal and public, evangelism and social action. Boff (1988:2) says,

“The Reign of God cannot be privatised in any particular region of the human being, such as soul, or in some spiritual goods, or in the church. The Reign of God is all-embracing, proclaiming the deliverance of every human and cosmic reality from all sin – from the sin of poverty, from the sin of starvation, from the sin of dehumanisation, from the sin of the spirit of vengeance, and from the sin of the rejection of God.”

The kingdom of God addresses the universality and particularity of issues of salvation concurrently, without incongruity. According to Newbigin (1995:66),

“The gospel that Jesus preached is the good news of God’s universal reign. It is directed to the whole human and cosmic reality. And yet it is also bound up with particular names of people and places belonging to particular cultures. It speaks the story of Israel, one people among all the peoples, and of the man whose Hebrew name was Joshua, one man among all the billions who have lived.”

The reign of God has cosmic dimensions, yet a specific people and individuals are still addressed by it, in a way that addresses their unique challenges. “God is over all and in all; not a sparrow falls to the ground without his will”(Newbigin 1995:67). God’s kingdom is not so all embracing, such a mega entity, that particularity becomes insignificant. People’s unique challenges do not dissipate into this huge kingdom that deals with global complexities. Jesus is the good shepherd who knows the sheep in this great flock by name (Jn. 10:3). But, even though we are known individually, we do not seek our salvation in isolation from God’s people, we are part of the flock of God.

The reign of God encapsulates the ‘now’ and ‘tomorrow’ aspects of human reality. God addresses us as human beings who are affected by both our present issues and our future challenges. In Christ, God has already dealt with some of the issues that trouble us in terms of his promises of salvation. But, what we have is the first significant instalment. The fullness is still to come in the glory of the *Parousia*. Sider (1999:56) says,

“In Jesus’ thinking, a fundamental break in history was occurring: ‘The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John [the Baptist]. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom is being preached’ (Luke 16:16). The messianic kingdom has begun... Jesus knew that the kingdom had not reached its culmination. The parables of growth demonstrate that the kingdom grows slowly from now.... Sin and evil continued to flourish so Jesus looked ahead to the close of the age when the kingdom would come in its fullness (e.g. Luke 21:27)... The kingdom had broken decisively into history in the person and the work of Jesus the Messiah. But it would come in its fullness only at the return of the Son of man...”(Matt. 24:30).

The reign of God has not been fully realized yet, but that does not mean it is irrelevant to our present situation. John Driver indicates, “The ministry of Jesus is only the beginning of the end. All that he did, points to the *Parousia*. This messianic presence of the future fills the church with hope and determines the mission of the messianic community”(Shenk 1993:95 –96). Due to its eschatological nature, the end is already revealed in the beginning. In the beginning, God reveals the mystery of what would be the consummation of this kingdom in terms of God’s plan of salvation for humanity and the entire creation.

The kingdom of God is a unique entity when compared with the systems and institutions of this world. God’s kingdom is not an advanced version of our societal systems, institutions and structures. God’s kingdom cannot be reduced to the limited and sin-infected structures of our world. This is how we are to understand Jesus’ assertion, “My Kingdom is not of this world”(John 18:36). “The meaning here is that the reign of God is not of the structure of this world of sin, but of the structure of God in the objective sense: it is God who will intervene (via the mediations he himself will select), and who will heal in its root the whole of reality, raising this world from old to new”(Boff 1984:128). God’s kingdom does not undermine our human systems but seeks to redeem and transform them into realities that will make people live life to the fullest. What we have to understand is that the kingdom of God is a mystery:

“The reign of God is a mystery we do not grasp fully. Although the whole of Jesus’ words and acts was a running commentary on God’s will and reign, at no point did he offer a ...definition. Instead, he spoke in parables and performed deeds that brought God’s saving power into the lives of people. Nonetheless, surprisingly few caught its larger meaning. Even the disciples who formed Jesus’ inner circle did not discern what it was about until after his resurrection and ascension (e.g., Lk 24:25 –27, 44 – 49; Acts 1:3). In the end, the kingdom could be apprehended only through the eyes of faith. It is neither subject to human control nor can it be manipulated for selfish ends”(Shenk 1999:10).

This kingdom will elude our understanding unless we earth our understanding on faith that relies on God’s revelation of this reign, especially in Christ. Furthermore, God is still

actively engaged in our world by His Spirit, and the Spirit keeps on disclosing the purpose of God, God's plan of redemption for the whole creation.

3.3.2 The Proclamation of the Kingdom

Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 9: 35). The paradigm of the reign of God was central to his ministry, and his deeds corresponded to what he was proclaiming. It was a message that announced the imminent reign of God in our world. "Jesus points to the kingdom as the purpose of his coming"(Sider 1993:51). Thus the church also preaches the gospel of the kingdom, and Christ is at the centre of its proclamation. Driver (1993:103) writes,

"The gospel of the kingdom is best proclaimed by the church when, in the power of the Spirit of the King, it preaches, teaches, and dedicates itself to authentic kingdom activity in the confident hope that God's universal salvific reign of righteousness and peace will be manifest within the church itself, among all humankind, and over all creation."

The good news that stands out of our Christian witness to the world, is the news of God's reign. The gospel of the Kingdom deals with issues covering our entire human life. Verkuyl said in his exposition of the gospel of the kingdom:

"The gospel of the Kingdom addresses itself to all immediate human needs, both physical and mental. It aims to right what is wrong on the earth. It enjoins engagement in the struggle for racial, social, cultural, economic and social justice. Kingdom-centred missiology frees us from the sham dilemmas responsible for much of historical and present evangelical divarication, delivers us from the theological zero-sum game involving false, unbiblical dichotomies between individual and corporate *shalom*, vertical and horizontal reconciliation, word proclamation and comprehensive approach, witness and service, micro- and macro-structural concerns, and so forth. The good news of the Kingdom has to do with all of these things"(Van Engen & Gilliland 1993:73 -74).

The good news of the kingdom is not a neutral and irrelevant notion. Rather, it is the message about God who encounters us in our societal realities, and seeks to transform our settings, and us because they should be in line with God's purpose.

The Gospel to the Poor

Jesus was the messenger who brought good news to the poor. He brought a message of salvation to the impoverished (cf. Lk 7:22). He announced to them, the truth of God's care for them in their destitution. Christ came to make that truth a reality and not just cheap words. Jesus was compassionate to the desperate masses that were responding to his ministry (cf. Mark 8:1 – 10). Thompson (2000:181) says,

“The Hebrew word translated as ‘compassion’ is the plural word for womb. It connotes giving life, nourishing, caring, and tenderness, a warm and gentle embrace... For Jesus, then, God is like a mother who feels for and loves the children of her womb; as followers of Jesus, Christians must imitate God, being compassionate toward each other. Compassion is both a feeling, being moved by the suffering of others, and a way of being, a willingness to share that suffering and do something about it. In and through Jesus, God shares the suffering of humanity and transforms it into new life. Christians are to be compassionate as the Father is compassionate”(c.f. Lk. 6:36).

We cannot be witnesses who harden our hearts and ignore the hardships of people as we share our faith with them. We must not be cold preachers who do not have Jesus' heart and sense of solidarity with the marginalized. Jesus' compassion had a cataclysmic social effect that shook the religious practices of the day. “When compassion led Jesus to touch a leper, heal a woman with constant menstruation, feed the hungry, forgive sinners, and share a meal with tax collectors and prostitutes, it was moving him to challenge the dominant socio-political paradigm of his social world”(Thompson 2000:181). Jesus' compassion caused him to transcend all barriers that segregated the poor, sick and sinners. It is a transforming compassion that confronts social and religious structures that undermine human freedom. These systems are inappropriate because they create

stratified societies that are characterized by inequality. They ultimately prejudice those who are excluded from the benefits and resources of society.

Healing and Deliverance from the Forces of Darkness.

The witness of Christ was accompanied by His acts of healing and banishing of demons from people's lives. Jesus was concerned about the wellness of people who responded to his ministry. He looked at their need for healing in a serious light. This is the reason that the multitudes who congregated around him were sick people (Mk 1:32 – 33). Pilgrim (1981:50) says,

“While sickness strikes everyone, it seems as though the most unfortunate persons are brought to Jesus, so that their sickness and poverty go hand in hand. The exceptions are duly noted by the evangelists, such as a centurion's servant or daughter of a ruler of the synagogue. Most of the sick are the suffering poor – the blind, lame, crippled, paralysed – and the lepers who along with beggars cry out for mercy to the son of David.”

Jesus served them in a society that ignored their needs. In certain instances the religious establishment disapproved of Jesus' ministry. They condemned Jesus' healing ministry that seemed to violate orthodox practices. But Jesus prioritised ordinary people's needs above the demands of conformity to orthodoxy. Jesus opted to heal them on the Sabbath day rather than sending them away troubled, to return on another day. The poor had always been forced to wait, neglected by the established religious and socio-political system of the era. Now the reign of God had dawned – and they were the favoured ones. Jesus also dealt with the demonic powers that disturbed people. Jesus liberated ordinary people from these unclean forces that bound them. “His exorcism of demons is a sign that prior to the eschatological destruction of Satan and his angels in the eternal fire (Matt 25:41) God has invaded Satan's realm as one who enters the strong man's house and binds him” (Matt 12:29; cf. Lk 11:21 – 22)(Padilla 1985:74). Christ came to put into effect the Lordship of God over sickness and evil powers that disturbed his people. Jesus engaged these demonic powers that contested the will of God, and terrorized his people, diminished their quality of life and hampered their liberation.

A Welcome to Social Outcasts

The ministry of Christ embraced into God's fellowship those who had been excluded by discriminatory practices that existed in society. Jesus included those who were ostracized from society through all forms of religious and social norms. These people had probably been declared unholy as a result of moral indiscretions. Christ, however, invites them into the holy fellowship of God. Walton (1994:233) says: "Holiness took the form of wholeness, healing, and inclusiveness. In a discipleship of equals, women, slaves, and children found themselves in prominence. The outcasts and the marginalized found themselves in a new household of brother, sister, and mothers under the gracious parentage of God." Jesus received people who were highly despised in society. He even welcomed the bad people into his fellowship, the kind of people who could be called sinners, extortionists, tax collectors and collaborators with the oppressive systems (c.f. Mark 2:13 – 17). Some of them, especially the tax collectors, were treated with contempt in society. "It is generally assumed that the tax collectors were both wealthy and hated because they consistently cheated and overcharged and because they worked for the Roman oppressor and his puppets. Hence they were socially and religiously ostracized in Jewish society" (Pilgrim 1981:52). These people might have committed social sins. They included the so-called sinners, people such as prostitutes and thieves, who might have had a lifestyle that was contrary to the required morality. Christ did not invite them into his fellowship to condone their sinfulness. Rather, he welcomed them so as to lead them through conversion into the kingdom of God. He refused to be like the conventional religious leaders of the time that snobbishly condemned and excluded these sinners. Their piety was discriminatory and insensitive to those who were religious novices, rather it promoted their religious hierarchy and elitism. "For his critics, the fact that Jesus associated with them [sinners] was sufficient proof that his entire movement stood beyond the pale respectability and was contrary to the intent of God and the good of the community" (Pilgrim 1981:53). People were disqualified for their failure to be orthodox enough in terms of the demands of the established religious fraternity. They were damned for their iniquity, without necessarily being shown the way towards

righteousness. “Therefore we are again put to notice by Luke that the people to whom Jesus ministers are those living on the margin of society, socially, ethically, and religiously. To them the good news is proclaimed, a good news having something to do with the offer of a new status and worth before God and humanity”(Pilgrim 1981: 73). Christ restored those who had been excluded, to fellowship with God and the community of the faithful. Jesus affirmed their dignity as God’s people. “In their encounter with Jesus they met a friendship and acceptance and a new lease of life that led them to genuine repentance and discipleship” (Pilgrim 1981:54). In our witness, we must be inclusive. We must not myopically disqualify people from God’s grace because of our prejudice.

The Cross

The Gospel of the Kingdom is about Christ sacrificing his life for humanity. Christ identified with the poor to the point of death in seeking to ameliorate their suffering. The crucifixion indicates the commitment of God to deal with a plethora of human issues. “Jesus’ death was not a tragic accident but the revelation of God. Indeed, it revealed the mystery of his life and ministry – namely, the provision of a redemptive service for many. Thus the cross became fixed to the identity of Jesus”(Costas 1989:88). We do not interpret Jesus’ death independently from His resurrection – which affirmed his ministry. Jesus had come to enable people to experience life at its best, through his ministry. In the Gospel according to John (10:10), Jesus says, “The thief does not come except to steal, kill and destroy: I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” There is a tendency to regard the life that Christ was referring to as a purely spiritual and private course of life, without recognizing its other facets. But, we cannot live as if socio-political, economic, cultural and environmental issues were irrelevant. “Life should be understood not only as personal and spiritual – that is, as living in communion with God – but also as global and social, as living a reconciled existence with our neighbours and the whole of creation”(Costas 1989:98). As human beings we need to fully embrace all aspects of life. Jesus’ ministry addressed us as beings in totality on the cross. He was not just interested in the ‘soulish’ aspects of life, downplaying our

corporeal reality. Christ, as a suffering Servant crucified, saw people as whole beings who needed to be redeemed from everything that did not agree with the will of God (Is. 53:1-12).

The crucifixion was the culmination of the shame, contempt and rejection that Jesus faced in his quest to save humanity. For this reason, the cross became such a stumbling block and foolishness to many, that they failed to see its salvific significance (1 Cor.1:23). They saw a Saviour who died in humiliation, crucified together with criminals. Although he professed to be a holy man, he died as a convict. They regarded the story of this Saviour as a scandalous affair, which they could not reasonably embrace. Costas (1989: 99, 100) says,

“According to the New Testament, Jesus was handed over to Pilate as a messianic pretender. The Jerusalem leadership reasoned that the fact that he was crucified showed he was bluffing.... The shame of the crucified Messiah, felt so keenly by Paul, has continued across the years. The Christian message of the cross carries with it the scorn of rejection by the very community to whom it was first addressed.”

Through his suffering and shame on the cross, God in Christ fully identified with the poor, repressed and social outcasts, who still continue to be frequently disgraced in society. One can just marvel at the fact that God has chosen to reveal his redemptive plan through the scandalous event of the cross. Though this appears to be a very illogical way to save humanity, it was ingenious. “Thus the shame of the cross before the world is the very glory of God in the world, for it is through its message that God has chosen to save the world from its foolish and self-destructive ways”(Costas 1989: 105). It is through the image of weakness and meekness that God chooses to show his salvific power. God did not choose the trapping of power adopted by the military, political and economic superpowers of the time. The cross is a critical factor in our proclamation as witnesses of Christ. The good news of the kingdom is that of the Christ who was crucified for the world. “The proclamation of the cross is, therefore, the communication of liberating news – the message of life, of hope and love through faith in the one who suffered death and shame for all, that all might live, look to the future with hope, assured of God’s love,

which surpasses all odds. We live, accordingly, hoping and loving”(Costas 1989:xiv). The Christ of the cross also overcame death in his resurrection. Having overcome death, Christ has authority over the power of death. “Proclaiming the reign of God means also proclaiming the reign of Jesus, whom God has made the Universal Lord and Christ”(Shorter 1994:11). Christ then becomes the life-giver to those who receive his redemption. Death in its various manifestations does not have the final say. Jesus is Lord over death, thus limiting its power over God’s people. The final victory of life over death will be revealed in our resurrection at His *Parousia* (1 Cor.15: 12 –58).

The Power of the Kingdom

The kingdom of God is manifested in Christ’s life, ministry, death and resurrection in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ inaugurated God’s reign in our world because he was endowed with the Spirit of God. McClendon writes,

“As the mission of Jesus the messiah unfolds, the Holy Spirit is shown to be the leader: at the conception (Matt.1:18; Lk 1:35), Simeon’s revelation (Lk 2:25 – 35), Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:16 -; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22) and temptation (Matt 4:1; Mk 1:12; Luke 4:1), inauguration of ministry (Lk 4:18), inspirer and guide of Jesus (Lk 10:21; 12:10; Jn 3:34), the one who enabled Jesus to bring his sacrifice (Heb 9:14), the power by which Jesus was resurrected from the dead (Rom 1:4; 1 Tim. 3:16), and the one who accompanies Jesus’ disciples in the continuing mission (Lk 24:49; Jn 20: 21 –23 ; Acts 13: 1 – 3)”(Shenk 1999:14).

The Holy Spirit was the central figure present in Jesus’ entire life. Jesus pursued a life of a consistent and intimate fellowship with God. “The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus to enable him to do the deeds of love and justice and speak a message of hope”(Goheen 2000:143; See. Lk.4:18). The good news and good deeds that characterized the life and ministry of Jesus, were the visible presence of the power of God upon his life. When Jesus’ detractors spitefully accused him of exorcising the powers of darkness using the chief of those wicked forces, Beelzebub or Satan (Mk. 3:22f), Jesus warned them sternly that their accusations were bordering on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God empowered Christ to heal the sick and destroy the works of Satan in our world (Acts

10:38). This power does not bring Charismatic *glossalalia* only, but transforms its recipients into instruments of healing and social transformation, people who are able to reverse the tide of evil in our communities. “The task of discerning the work of the Spirit in history and participating in His work by forwarding and completing the general progress of human society defines the mission of the church”(Goheen 2000:188). Just as Jesus mandated his disciples, we read in Acts 1:8, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The church that is the locus of the Spirit of God continues to be a witness of God. The Church has been given the grace to share in God’s Spirit, through whom it ministers. Verkuyl says, “The keys of the Kingdom have been given to the Church. It does not fulfil its mandate by relinquishing those keys but rather by using them to open up the avenues of approach to the Kingdom for all peoples and all the population groups at every level of human society”(Van Engen 1993:73). The Christian community must continue to mimic Christ in serving God by serving people in our society as they face their socio-historical issues.

3.3.3 The Kingdom of God is about the Revelation of Justice, Peace and Joy

The reign of God brings justice, peace and joy. “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom.14:17). It is not meaningless celebrations and excitement about our private relationship with God and the splendour of our religion. It is a call into a life that is founded on justice, peace and joy as a people of God. All these three kingdom values have serious implications for both our personal and social reality. God’s reign brings a just dispensation that leads to the improvement of the quality of life for all people. Thompson’s (2000:2) position on justice and the kingdom is that,

“A Christian perspective is grounded in the conviction that God is sovereign and that God’s rule is loving and just. In creating human beings in God’s image, God has bestowed upon each and every person an intrinsic dignity and an infinite value. This human dignity is nourished and developed in community. Humanity is God’s people – called to love and care for one another and for the Earth. As co-

creators with God, human beings are responsible for creating a just community conducive to the flowering of each person's potential."

In our witness we have a responsibility to herald the course of justice so that those who face inequality, and repression may be relieved. "The kingdom comes whenever Jesus overcomes the Evil One. This happens (or ought to happen) in its fullest measure in the church. But it also happens in society" (Bosch 1980:209). Thus, the church must incarnate God's justice and affect its community with its righteous fruits. "Therefore we should speak of the coming of the kingdom and presence of salvation when society enjoys growing freedom and justice" (Sider 1993:197). That justice should be saturating society from the church. It must infiltrate all aspects of societal life and order.

Peace and joy are the other good 'side effects' of the irruption of the kingdom of God. God envisioned our society to be peaceful. Thus the gospel lauds those who are activists of peace (Matt. 5:9). "This describes a harmony of right relationships between people and God, with each other and with the world's resources"(Samuel & Sugden 1999:365). The peace of God also promotes respect for our environment. We must work for peace as part of our mission as ministers of the reign of God. O'Brien and Shannon wrote: "Peace is both a gift of God and human work. It must be constructed on the basis of central human values: truth, justice, freedom, and love" (cited by Thompson 2000:1). God's people must do their share to create just relationships in their society. They have been enabled by God to be peacemakers. It is in the context of these just relationships that peace becomes a reality. Peace prevails where people are valued and treated with respect as God's priceless children in obedience to the Word of God. "*Shalom* is experienced in justice, compassion and mercy and need to be expressed in law, covenant and regulated commitment;" cf. Jer. 32:38-39 (Samuel & Sugden 1999:374). Furthermore, the dispensation of the kingdom of God, characterized by justice and peace, leads to rapturous joy in society. The scriptures encourage us to rejoice always in all circumstances whether bitter or memorable (Phil 4:4). This joy is a celebration of freedom, since unjust and repressive systems will ultimately be obliterated. It is a kind of bliss that grows from the assurance of God's promises of justice and his presence with us, even when our circumstances are discouraging. It is joy, sometimes in the midst of pain,

loss and rejection. It is the kind of joy that we continue to have in our continuing struggle to eliminate human repression. The Apostles Peter and John had this kind of joy, even in persecution. We read, “So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer the shame of his name”(Acts 5:41). They did not seem to have a sense of regret for their faith for which they suffered. Neither did they show a sign of bitterness against their persecutors. Their pain was real, but their attitude was joyous in the midst of suffering, because they knew that God’s agenda for justice would ultimately prevail even when opposition against it did not seem to be abating.

3.3.4 The Kingdom of God is the Goal of Evangelism

When we witness, we seek to guide people to faith so that they may believe and confess that Jesus Christ is their Saviour. They must come to acknowledge Him as their Redeemer, the One who came to free them from sin and reconcile them with God and others. The church can only then be the servant of the kingdom of God, if it calls people to return to God. Castro said; “We are not to call people to recognize in Jesus Christ only their Saviour; they are invited to recognize in him the Saviour of the world, the liberator of all creation. The kingdom of God is in the horizon of the mission of the church”(Van Engen et al. 1993:133). The church should summon people to be reconciled to the Lord of the world, not of the church only. As Driver (1993:98) puts it, “The kingdom is God’s righteous rule in human history to which people are invited to respond in loyal commitment. God reigns in a radically new order. Those who responded to Jesus’ call were incorporated into the messianic community.” Furthermore, it creates a possibility of transforming their lives in line with the demands of the kingdom of God. This is what our evangelistic endeavour seeks to accomplish, to lead people to a place where they have a confession of faith in the Lordship of Christ in their lives. “To confess Christ is to believe in the kingdom of God, since Christ embodied it in his life, proclaimed it in his ministry, and made possible its anticipation in history through his death and resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus, God his Father revealed the liberating rule of the kingdom and thus inaugurated a new order of life”(Costas 1989:82). The resurrection has created a new hope in which people who welcome the kingdom live in expectation that God’s new

order can irrupt into our present order to change our status quo. J.C. Hoekendijk “criticized the church-centred missionary framework and called for a focus on the world and its needs. Mission increasingly was equated with bringing in the Kingdom”(Van Engen & Gilliland 1993:156). Thus we approach our life in the world with a new perspective, that we cannot accept our socio-historical circumstances as a static phenomenon that cannot be changed, if they are not in line with God’s order. God’s Kingdom has come to renew our world and address all its needs according to God’s redemptive power and grace that is possible through Jesus Christ.

As messengers of the gospel, we challenge people in our society to receive the gift of God’s kingdom. People need to respond to the call of the reign of God that invites them into the joy of God’s salvation. They have a challenge to respond to God’s kingdom in childlike faith. In the light of this call they cannot remain neutral. Mark 10:15 quotes Jesus saying: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” According to Klaiber (1997:144),

“The simile ‘like a child’ is obviously related to the predicate of the sentence: ‘to receive, as a child receives a gift,’ i.e., to allow oneself to be given something, to stretch out one’s hands toward the gift with full expectation, to be able to rejoice over it without reservations. Only someone who turns towards the reign of God with such an openness and undivided relationship and receives it into his or her life will participate in the reign’s fulfilment.”

People choose to receive the reign of God according to their freedom of choice. Although we may reason with them in our articulation of this proclamation, yet we can neither manipulate nor coerce them into responding to this call of salvation. It is a gift that they must accept without undue pressure from anyone, despite the urgency and fervency of our evangelisation. Hegel calls this,

“A proclamation which calls us to the acceptance of salvation, to personal faith, and to concrete repentance with the urgency of the love of Christ, does not once more put the human agent to work, but it is a tool to enable God’s work on the human beings to reach its goal. It is one part of the way in which the God who

seeks us takes towards us; the voice of the one who calls the lost in order to find them”(Klaiber 1997:175).

The reign of God is God moving towards us with God’s gracious gift of salvation. In our dilemmas and struggles, when faced with this gift we have the option to accept or reject it; God gives us space, and the assurance that He will ultimately lead us out of our quagmire when we yield to Him. In the Scriptures, we learn that it is the goodness of God that leads us to repentance (Rom 2:4) Therefore we must not squander our opportunities to welcome the riches of God’s grace in our lives whilst we have a chance.

3.3.5 The Church and the Kingdom of God

The Church is the creation and witness of the reign of God. The Church is not the Kingdom of God. Instead, the Church is the product of the Kingdom of God. Verkuyl says, “The good news of the Kingdom also has to do with the formation and the in-depth growth of the Body of Christ throughout the world and to the end of time... The Church constitutes the firstling, the early harvest of the Kingdom. Thus, though not limited to the Church, the Kingdom is unthinkable without the Church” (Van Engen et al 1993:73). Therefore, it must embrace a vision of the reign of God in its mission. “The church is not the Kingdom of God, but it is the concrete results of the Kingdom... The church must not be equated with the Kingdom, but it must not be separated from it” (Padilla 1985: 191 - 192). The church is a community formed by Jesus through the Spirit to further the purposes of God’s kingdom (Matt 16:18; Eph 4:4). Driver (1993:98) described it in this manner, “The kingdom of God and the church are closely related; however, they are not identical. The church preaches and teaches the gospel of the kingdom. It continues Jesus’ kingdom activity. It exercises kingdom authority” (Matt. 16:19). This is why the Lord’s Prayer encourages us to pray for the manifestation of the reign of God in our communities (Matt.6: 10). Our communities have not fully experienced life in its totality in terms of God’s will. Our societies are attacked by evil that manifests in the form of crime, violence, poverty, corruption, moral degeneration, and other chronic social problems – even when we acknowledge that there is relative peace, democracy, rule of law and social order. O’Brien and Shannon declared,

“If evil is structured into society, then its remedy must include social transformation, that is, changing the structures and institutions of society. Christian responsibility, then, must include both charity, personal acts of compassion in response to the individual suffering, and justice, social and political action aimed at transforming the root causes of evil and suffering. Christians should be found in soup kitchens, tutoring programs, and inner-city clinics, and on picket lines political campaigns, and congressional [parliamentary] lobbies” (Thompson 2000:192).

The church has a God-given mandate to contribute towards making society a model of the kingdom values of justice, peace, love and joy. Therefore the church must fulfil its mission in its entirety without neglecting any aspect of that mission.

The church is a community that should model kingdom life. The reign of God becomes evident through the life of the church, in how it deals with issues of diversity, human rights, justice, peace, and power (political, economic and social). “The church is the sign pointing men and women to the kingdom of God. The church is the first fruits, deposit, or foretaste of the kingdom. It is a community that already has a real enjoyment now of the salvation of God’s kingdom”(Goheen 2000:32). Christians are expected to be the light of society (Matt. 5:14 –16). The light of Christians shines through their deeds of righteousness in conformity to divine purposes. We are supposed to exemplify what we are teaching in terms of being a community of the kingdom of God. Driver (1993:98) directed challenging words to the church: “It must maintain its integrity as a community which lives under God’s rule.” In the Bible the church is warned against worldliness that can taint its integrity (James 4:4, 1 Jn 2:15). Christians in their witness must not allow themselves to be conformed to the bewitching patterns of this world (Rom. 12:1-2). Padilla (1985:30) states,

“When the church lets itself to be squeezed into the mould of the world, it loses the capacity to see and, even more, to denounce the social evils in its own situation. Like a colour-blind person who is able to distinguish certain colours but not others, the worldly church recognizes the personal vices traditionally

condemned within its ranks but is unable to see the evil features of its surrounding culture.”

Worldliness has a corrosive effect on the life of the church that erodes its prophetic thrust. It waters down its passion for its mission as an instrument of God’s salvific power in its community. As Kuitse (1993:118) said, “Mission is not merely activities, not only going, but also being.” As messengers of God’s kingdom, our lives must be compatible with kingdom values. Any form of pretence and hypocrisy will discredit our mission. Through the grace of God we must live an exemplary life because we are a book that is read by others (2 Cor 3:2). We are instruments of God’s redemptive love, and worldliness would hinder this evangelisation. Kuitse (1993:120) wrote,

“Love is the new reality to which faith leads. The encounter with God’s compassionate love embodied in the life of one person. This unconditional and unrestricted love guides the believer in his or her relations to fellow human beings and to God’s created order. This love is not and cannot be confined to the inner circle of the Christian community. Such a love would not reflect God’s love for the world. Mission is sharing faith with others; mission is acting in love toward the neighbour who is in need of help and support.”

God wants us to be a church that reaches out to its community in love and service, but that is also approachable when its community approaches it in times of need. The church must be a place of refuge for its society.

The manifestation of the power of the kingdom through the church creates tension. When the church embraces a kingdom life and prioritises kingdom values, it sometimes encounters opposition from those who are unsettled by it. “The parable of tares makes clear that the presence of the kingdom of God precipitates an encounter with the power of darkness (Luke 22:23)... This brings suffering... The kingdom is not a smooth, continuous movement of progress towards the realization of God’s purposes. History ‘between the times’ is characterized by conflict, struggle and suffering”(Goheen 2000: 142). The early church was persecuted tremendously for embracing the vision of the reign of God. It suffered at the hands of the established religious system, economic barons and political regimes. It is the church that countered persecution with faith and

endurance through the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit. They understood and accepted the trials of their ministry as God's instruments. I quote the Apostle Paul's response to such tribulations in encouraging the church in Corinth:

“We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed – always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.... For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:8 – 10, 17).

The early church did not romanticize its ministry, as if the church's engagement in mission had been an easy endeavour without hindrances. They paid a heavy price, as they were persecuted by those who opposed their witness. This opposition did not stop with verbal abuse and bigotry stemming from religious intolerance. The disciples were beaten, imprisoned, turned into refugees and even killed. They took courage from Jesus' words that they should selflessly take up their cross and follow him (Mk. 8:34). The call to be witnesses of the kingdom was a call into 'costly' obedience, as serving Christ often led to subjection and suffering.

The challenge to the church today is to emulate Christ, who heralded the kingdom of God. We need to embrace the message of his life and ministry, his teachings and actions and follow his example in our ministry. “Mission in Christ's way for the church would mean the presence of all the dimensions: the power of the Spirit, words, deeds, and a life that points to the kingdom, prayer, weakness and suffering, and contribution to the formation of a community that embodies the kingdom”(Goheen 2000:146 –147). The church needs to be endowed with the renewing power of the Holy Spirit that also sanctifies and equips it for effective witness in the world. Then it will be able to pursue its ministry and call people to repentance and assimilation into the community of disciples. Whoever embraces the vision of the kingdom should also embrace the struggle for justice and peace, to fight repression, enabled by the Spirit of God. Goheen (2000:183 – 184) said,

“The Spirit continues to be present in the community in power, producing a corporate life and deeds that bring about a missionary encounter... The Spirit is sovereign in mission; He initiates and controls all that happens. The church is the attentive servant called to listen to and follow the Spirit’s leading...So it is clear that the Spirit cannot be domesticated by the church for its own design.”

The church has been created to be a habitation of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). It must continue to be aware of the presence of God within its community, so that it may continue to be an obedient servant of God’s kingdom through the power of the Spirit, fulfilling God’s purpose. The Holy Spirit has a mission to renew the Church continually so that it may remain effective and passionate and able to fulfil God’s purpose in the world, as it faces new challenges. The Church is the arena in which the Spirit of God is present, and through which it reaches society.

3.4 The Church and the Poor

3.4.1 The First Century Church and the Poor

The church of the first century began to deal with poverty right away. It was a church that knew and understood suffering since it was born out of persecution. It never enjoyed the privilege of having a cosy relationship with the political powers of the time. The political powers of the era harassed and incarcerated members of the early church, and even murdered their leaders. As it began to expand beyond Jerusalem into the Greco-Roman world, it had to address the poverty that prevailed among the increasing numbers of the faithful. Many of the converts who were joining this church were destitute. The early church practiced some form of communalism, sharing their shelter (they hosted the homeless), wealth (from the sale of assets), food and clothing to meet the needs of those who belonged to their fellowship (Acts 2:42 – 47). “Poverty as an economic issue was not prominent in the early church, for it exercised generosity towards the needy”(Nicholls & Wood 1996:60). They were developing a community spirit to care for each other’s welfare as an expression of their faith and love as a Christian community. This was practiced to such extremes that people almost ceased to have private property. The early

church also supported widows. Those women had been disadvantaged by the death of a spouse in a patriarchal society. They had been dependent on their husbands who had taken care of all aspects of their lives including those of children. The church offered them some relief in their distress. We note that the first century church, as it expanded, had to deal with the challenges of diversity. It had to embrace the faithful from other nationalities when it had been predominantly a Hebrew church. We read in Acts 6:1 – 8 that the faithful, who had a Hellenist background, complained about their widows being neglected, when relief aid was distributed. Pilgrim (1981:155) noted that,

“Discrimination against the poor, favouritism of one group over another, the dominance of the wealthier members over the poorer, even the large gap between the rich and poor, none of these belong to the nature of Christian community. True, the church has always been far from perfect; yet this never negates the sinfulness of its imperfection, or the need to take action to remedy the wrongs. Perhaps, too, this text shows that the willingness to share ‘all things in common’ must have as its counterpart the concern for a structure that will insure the faithful and just administration of funds.”

Thus the apostles initiated a process in which capable leaders were selected to address these grievances and resolve the problem. Apparently, the church that was fighting poverty was itself carrying the scars of poverty. It was adversely affected by the racial polarization that was predominant in society, which resulted in some of the poor being overlooked in the distribution of food.

The apostle Paul encouraged the churches to take responsibility for the care of the poor amongst them. He can be credited with teaching members of the church to be productive so that they should not be a burden to anyone, also, to share with those who were deprived (Eph 4:28). The Church responded so well and absorbed this benevolent spirit to such an extent that Paul had to warn some of the followers to look out for fraudsters who might seek to exploit their generosity. Those who were able to be productive, but too lazy, were to be disciplined by not being given provision that they were not willing to work for. Paul also supported a decision to raise funds for the Church in Jerusalem in a time of distress due to famine (Acts 11:29 –30). According to Pilgrim (1982:156),

“Two principles emerged from this description. The first is that of giving relief according to their ability. That is, the aid is given in proportion to the wealth of the giver. Thus Luke recognizes the differences between both the wealth of the members and their ability to give.... The second principle found in this text is that of Christian solidarity in need. The whole church stands together in solidarity of Christian love for one another. One community of believers in one nation should come to the aid of the believers in other lands. We might here echo Paul’s words, ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together’ (1 Cor 12:26)....”

We see individuals within the church who were mentored by Paul responding generously to the needy. Prominent women like Dorcas initiated projects to assist the poor (Acts 9:36 – 43). She was renowned for her charitable works within her community. Her good deeds benefited mainly the poor and widows. This church exemplified true Christian solidarity in their support for the distressed. “The hope for the poor in the present for Luke lies in the fellowship of a new community, where justice, equality, and compassion are living realities” (Pilgrim 1981:162). They show us what true fellowship is, since they recommended sharing the necessities of life to affirm their mutual love, faith and hope.

The early church stressed the need for a practical faith that would respond appropriately to poverty. James warns us against the kind of faith that is impractical, insensitive and inept, the kind that responds to a poor person with mere verbal encouragement. It fails to respond to the real and pressing material needs. “The hungry man has no ears,” says an African Proverb. “One cannot expect someone who is starving, or numbed by pain, for example, to be convinced by verbal argument. One must first attend to his or her bodily needs before the argument can appear cogent” (Shorter 1994:7). Faith that does not even recognize its own inefficacy, when it fails to respond to the material needs of people must be blind indeed! (James 2:14 – 20). James insists that authentic faith responds to those social issues that make people desperate (James 1:27). Doing things that help the poor, should not be left to social workers or development agents. Our inspirational proclamation to the needy must be balanced with good practical activities to meet their needs. The Manila Manifesto says, “Good News and good works, are inseparable” (Sider 1999:173). Evangelism and social action go together. The witness of the Church must be

in word and deeds. The message that Christians are preaching should be a message that they are also practicing. The ministry to the poor is an inescapable responsibility of a witnessing church. As they witness amongst the poor, they have to assist the poor in dealing with the challenges of being hungry, homeless, unemployed, sick and naked. A witness that does not join faith to real life, that is unable to include in its discourse on God the manifold drama “of existence, ends by alienating its hearers, and becoming historically irrelevant. It has almost nothing to say, because it does not take seriously what is serious and important for life” (Boff 1991:76 – 77). In our witness, we must relate to the world of those who are disadvantaged and be able to share the good news in such a way that we can give hope to them in their situation. We should never allow ourselves to become callous or insensitive to people who are struggling.

3.4.2 The Church Serving the Poor

The church is a community of the faithful who have been assigned the task of communicating the good news to their society. Like in South Africa, the majority of people in that society are the poor. Just as the Church is expected to serve all members of society, it must be sensitive to recognize that those who are impoverished are more disadvantaged than the rich in society. “Preaching the gospel to the poor is essential to the church’s faithfulness. It is a test of the church’s apostolic mark. It is a mark that, spiritually speaking, the church is genetically related to Jesus and is being conformed to his likeness”(Snyder 2002:27). The gospel cannot be disseminated into the communities without the participation of the Church. Therefore, in looking at the ministry of this community,

“Evangelisation is neither a mission that belongs to individual believers or the private property of the ecclesiastical institution represented by clerical elite. The gospel has been committed to a community, and demands a community. Without community there cannot be a living representation of the gospel. It is the community of believers that announces the kingdom of God as a reality, which proclaims a new order under the sovereign action of God, which revitalizes all authority, including that of other institutions. To be sure, evangelisation is

nourished and facilitated by individuals. It takes place practically through individuals. But it is a witness that cannot be offered without the ecclesiastical community. It is by and through local communities of faith that Christians can share with others what God has done and is doing in their lives” (Costas 1989: 135).

The faith community must strive to exemplify the life of the kingdom of God; otherwise it will just be like any other social group in society. If its community life contradicts its proclamation, its evangelism will be discredited. “This witness has no meaning, however, if it is not backed by a community whose love is translated into works of mercy, a community whose faith is manifested in a commitment to social justice and whose hope is reflected in the struggle for a just peace”(Costas 1989:135). The nature of our community life must be entrenched in the kingdom values of love, peace, and justice. We cannot profess to be a faith community, if we do not respond to the cry of those who are disadvantaged and repressed.

In its witness, the church must appropriately interpret the message of the Gospel for today’s people, the gospel in context. Part of that social reality is characterized by poverty, crime, unemployment and HIV/Aids occurrence in disturbing proportions. “Christianity must be a force that moves outward, and a Christian community is basically in existence ‘for others’. That is the whole meaning of a Christian community” (Donovan 2001:84). The church must respond in its witness to the bread and butter issues that affect its community. It must show care to the poor, unemployed, and survivors of HIV/Aids and crime in its interaction with them. “The commitment of God’s people to the covenant was manifested in their treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger...Christians stand with the poor because God stands with the poor” (Thompson 2000:194). Our spirituality as a Church is going to be tested by our treatment of the deprived. The nature of our neighbourliness is a mark of our discipleship (1 John 4:20 –21). People will dismiss and doubt our witness if it remains apathetic to the struggle and suffering of others, if it sees the hardships of the poor, cry of the repressed, and the desperation of those who are marginalized and yet it does not become compassionate. “No approach to evangelisation may leave this perspective out of account, under the pain of actually losing

God and the Lord Jesus who appeared in the form of a suffering servant among the poor”(Boff 1991:78). We must imitate Christ in our acts of mercy that are aimed at benefiting the poor. Human suffering must be noticed. The way our Lord suffered too in order to redeem people from burdensome hardships, must touch us. “Christian love extends beyond the bounds of Christian community to embrace all people and above all the poor and the suffering”(Pilgrim 1981:171). We must not limit this love to our own faith community, for then we may alienate the poor, who are not members of our church with discriminatory attitudes of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Even the impoverished outside our fellowship, must be invited to share in the provision that God has abundantly provided for Christians. Christians are just stewards of the Lord’s resources, which they must justly distribute to all those who are in need.

3.5 Conclusion

In the same way that Christians were challenged by the questions of indigenisation and enculturation in their witness in South Africa, we are faced with the challenge of poverty. Thus it is necessary to assess our biblical and theological position on poverty, so that we may formulate a biblically and theologically sound response to the challenges of impoverishment, that characterize our missiological context. God’s overwhelming concern for the poor has implications for our evangelism and missions. We believe that our mandate to evangelize the world is a God-inspired mandate. Therefore our mission is God’s mission. Aagaard states, “Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is a church because there is a mission” (Bosch 1991: 390). We have already indicated that the God, who invites us to be involved in His mission, is a God who loves the poor. If the God, who identifies with the poor, assigns this task to us, we must show concern for the poor, and reflect on the nature of God’s care for them. To accept God’s mission means, “to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love”(Bosch 1991:390). God is sending the church into the world to be a transforming agent that tackles all the evils that hinder humans from enjoying life to the fullest. One of these difficulties is poverty that haunts the people who are precious before

God. Therefore, in our witness we have to pursue a ministry that also deals with social change in order to deal with the factors that have created impoverishment. God's kingdom is a kingdom that welcomes the poor and legitimises their struggle against exploitation and domination. Christ, as the incarnation of the gospel of salvation condemned the subjugation of the poor. He calls the poor into repentance and welcomes them into the fellowship of God's new community. But Jesus also heals them from disease, frees them from repressive satanic powers and feeds those who are hungry. Jesus gladly dines with the tax collectors and sinners, but invites them into a life of radical discipleship. Christ's ministry was characterized by a challenging proclamation and salvific action. Padilla (1985:197) also stated that,

“Evangelism and social responsibility are inseparable. The gospel is good news about the kingdom of God. Good works, on the other hand, are the signs of the Kingdom for which we were created in Christ Jesus. Both the word and deed are inextricably united in the mission of Jesus and his apostles, we must continue to hold both together in the mission of the church, in which Jesus' mission is prolonged until the end of the age.”

The writing is on the wall that as Christians we must have a witness that addresses the challenges of poverty. The early Christians set a trend when they became the church of the poor. We cannot silence our own conscience when we reflect on their witness, and how they served their generation without excluding the poor. The biblical and theological evidence of the Christian witness to the poor is compelling.