A Christian ethics of poverty and riches is thus embedded in a wider framework of moral and religious values that give meaning to people’s lives and offer many reasons for obedience to such ethics. The chances of the ethics being implemented are thus higher than any ethics standing on its own or not linked to a broader framework claiming to give meaning to life through a personal relationship with a Higher Being.

_Equal human dignity._ A Christian ethics of poverty and riches will have to strongly affirm the equal human dignity of all people, regardless of their socio-economic status. All people share the same value before God as His creatures. The poor are explicitly mentioned as sharing the equal human dignity that God gives to all humans. The strong identification of Jesus with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised reinforces this point. These people must be treated as if they are Jesus, thus with appropriate respect for their human worth and dignity.

In this respect, a Christian ethics can support the liberal-democratic rights to equal respect that express the equal dignity and worth of all people. Christians can therefore insist that these rights of poor people must be respected at all times and under all circumstances. The implications of the equal human dignity of poor people must be pointed out in detail, such as that poor people may not be embarrassed, humiliated, or discriminated against. Another implication is that others may not take pleasure in their misery, nor laugh at them. Equal human dignity also means that non-poor people should not ignore their plight, nor fail to notice them or show concern. The significance of equal human dignity shows in the following quote from the pastoral letter of the American Roman Catholic Bishops called _Economic Justice for All:_ “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be actively treated or passively abandoned as if they were non-members of the human race” (Hollenbach 1988: 82).
Not only does equal dignity mean that non-poor people must refrain from doing things that violate poor people's worth as human beings. It requires that non-poor people must positively do certain things to affirm the worth of poor people as human beings. Poor people must be enabled to participate in communal festivities as full members, as they did in the Old Testament at the feasts of ancient Israel. Furthermore, non-poor people must treat them as special by inviting them to festivities, like Jesus commanded hosts to invite the poor, who cannot repay their hosts, to feasts and dinners.

Poor people must be treated humanely by non-poor people. To be poor is open to public eyes and often a shameful matter. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must demand that poor people be treated like Jesus when given aid. Jesus identified with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people to such an extent that relieving their needs was considered the same as relieving the needs of Jesus Himself.

Commandments about treating poor people with respect so as to protect their dignity are part and parcel of the shared values that God's followers agree to. Commandments that lay duties and obligations on non-poor people thus create correlative expectations in the poor that they will be properly treated. Poor people can thus insist that they be treated properly, as the shared values of both the poor and non-poor specify. In this way a right to human dignity can easily arise.

Values for helping poor people. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has a number of values specifying how to help poor people. These values have their basis in the character of God. God is portrayed in the Bible as the One who deeply cares for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people in society. He takes up their cause and demands that His followers should do the same. Part of becoming like God is through being holy and caring deeply for
the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people in society. In their pastoral letter called *Economic Justice for All*, the American Roman Catholic Bishops say that, “no one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world” (Hollenbach 1988: 83).

Ethical values for helping the poor are of fundamental importance in the broader framework of ethical and religious values of Christianity. To help the poor belongs to the core values that practically demonstrates believers’ commitment to God. Helping the poor functions as yardstick for a person’s faith in God, indicating whether it is authentic and true. God’s followers ought to take care of the poor in their midst and use their God-given abundance of resources to make a difference to the lives of poor people.

Care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people of society must become effective in the ways non-poor people give aid to them. The Bible knows of two kinds of aid that God’s followers must render to people in need. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief. People in desperate need of aid to satisfy basic needs must be helped without any questions being asked. This kind of aid is unconditional for people in desperate need thereof. Helping people in this way belongs to the core of the message of the Bible.

The other kind of aid is aid to help poor people escape from their poverty and to restore them to self-reliant, interdependent people similar to the others in society who are non-poor.

Several commandments contained in a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches have enablement of the poor as aim. Some examples are the following. The cancelling of all outstanding debts in Sabbath years, the right to buy back land lost through poverty, and cheaper alternatives for prescribed religious offerings without any loss of religious significance are all measures aimed at
enabling poor people to escape from their poverty (cf. Roy 1993: 99). These measures do not make sense in our world today, but the underlying principle that poor people must be enabled to use their limited resources to escape the traps of poverty can be implemented in a variety of ways. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must consult specialists on aid to the poor to find out what forms of aid are effective in specific cases for reaching such goals. More important though, is to listen to the poor themselves and to let them take the initiative and control in the process of change. The Christian Church must avoid treating the poor as recipients of aid, rather than equal partners. Non-poor Christians must allow poor people to minister to their needs as much as they minister to the needs of poor people. In that way poor people’s equal worth and dignity are practically recognised (Philpott 1993 84).

The reciprocal moral values about aid to the poor places moral obligations on the non-poor and accord poor people legitimate claims to appropriate treatment and ameliorative aid from members of their community. These legitimate claims of poor people and the correlative duties of the non-poor combine to guarantee aid to the poor, i.e., to give poor people rights against Christians to the basic necessities of life. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983: 82) illustrates this point as follows: "If a rich man knows of someone who is starving and has the power to help that person but chooses not to do so, then he violates the starving person’s rights as surely and as reprehensibly as if he had physically assaulted the sufferer." Christians thus ought to support political programs in favour of rights that secure the fulfilment of people’s basic needs.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches ought to have detailed views on ways how people can abuse aid to serve their own interests. A Christian ethics will insist that honour and praise for aid belongs to God for empowering His followers to give shares of their resources gladly and generously to
people in need. Aid to promote a person's own image, or theft of resources for aid through corrupt officials are examples that need detailed analyses and preventative measures. Similarly, procedures to safeguard the integrity of even trusted Christians like the apostle Paul ought to be worked out. No doubts about honesty or self-enrichment must be allowed to tarnish the integrity of Christians involved in aid work. Co-operation with, and consultation of, specialist aid workers and experts in accounting and development aid would be useful.

**Stark contrasts.** Stark contrasts between rich and poor who share a small rural community — or the whole earth, for that matter — ought to be rejected outright by Christian ethics. No situation can be condoned where suffering poor people live next to exploitative rich people. These kind of judgements are not to be made in abstract terms that are divorced from any social context. Such judgements on stark contrasts must be made of the concrete circumstances where rich and poor live together, from the micro contexts of very small communities to the macro context of the global community of states where all 6 billion people created by God eke out a livelihood. For these kinds of judgement a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth needs to co-operate with scientists in the fields of politics, economics, and statistics.

A Christian ethics on poverty and riches thus have the responsibility to promote economic policies that would aim at greater equality between rich and poor, thus drastically reducing the scandalous wide gap currently existing between rich and poor (cf. Roy 1993: 100).

Poor people can be empowered by normative evaluations of their desperate circumstances resulting from skewed distributions. They become aware of the moral wrongs they are suffering. A divinely sanctioned disapproval of their poverty empowers the poor to challenge the exploitative and oppressive circumstances they are living in. They can thus become agents of their
own liberation from poverty, capable of making a stand for their own interests against powerful and exploitative rich people.

Responsibility. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must apportion blame for poverty. People who are responsible for causing poverty must be identified. A Christian ethics will be thoroughly aware of the myriad ways in which many kinds of people can cause poverty or exacerbate already existing poverty. As before, this awareness implies co-operation with scientists in other disciplines, as well as with the poor and rich people involved in the situation under investigation to better know what is going on.

Holding people responsible implies more than just identifying the people who cause poverty. Their precise role in causing poverty must be determined to show the degree to which they are responsible. Furthermore, their deeds and behaviour must be morally assessed to find out to what extent they are blameworthy.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has strong values condemning non-poor people for failing to notice and attend to the desperate situation of the poor, although they have more than enough means available for giving aid. Deliberate ignorance and refusal to aid are to neglect the explicitly prescribed duties of both the Old and New Testaments.

Ideal lifestyle for Christians. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be able to prescribe an authentic Christian lifestyle to guide Christians through the dangers of riches and the sufferings of poverty. What is an ideal lifestyle for Christians?

An ideal life-style for God's followers - both rich and poor - is one that keeps their moral and religious integrity intact and keeps them from violating moral norms that will turn non-believers away from God. Neither poverty nor
Riches must drive people away from God. He must remain first priority in their lives.

What God wants for His followers is that they must be "rich" by having quality relationships with God Himself, other people, and the rest of creation. He wants His people to have lives abundant with well-being and meaning.

Both being poor and being rich are judged negatively by a Christian ethics. To be poor is unacceptable and bad, with many negative consequences for poor people. A life of material wealth is likewise bad and unacceptable, as riches can corrupt people's moral and religious judgement, scramble their priorities, and make them short-sighted to value the true meaning of life, and cause them to be conceited and rude to other people. Riches have many uncertainties and place extra burdens on people. Riches can be lost in the blink of an eye and its ability to do worthwhile things for their owners are limited, as riches mean nothing in the face of the greatest crisis of human life, i.e., death.

However, rich Christians obeying God's commands to give gladly and generously to the poor can contribute valuably to poverty relief. For Christians to have resources to contribute to the poor, they must live a relatively simple life so as to have extra resources to give as aid. The example of Jesus is powerful in this context. As Son of God, He sacrificed the riches of heaven to come to the poverty of the earth to save human beings. During His earthly life He chose to live a simple life of very moderate means. His life contains a message that God values a life lived in simplicity through which the poor can benefit.

There are Christian churches with a tradition that some members choose voluntary poverty as an expression of solidarity with the poor and a public protest against their poverty. This practice makes a lot of sense, although
not necessarily something required of all Christians. Being able to make money can be useful for the Christian church's aid to needy people, if combined with a heart full of compassion like God's heart.

*Universal application.* A Christian ethics of poverty and riches will claim that it applies universally to all communities, societies, countries, continents, and the world as a whole. God's claim to be Creator of everything, humans included, results in the further claim to His rule over all human beings. Not only poverty within micro-communities, such as an isolated rural farm, but poverty on our planet as a whole falls within the scope of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. No rich person can ultimately deny responsibility for poor people anywhere in the world, as no poor person can interpret their situation without acknowledging the role of rich people from all countries.

*A society can change.* A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must take criticism seriously that people will never change to live according to Christian values and that poverty will persist or grow worse. Against such criticism a Christian ethics will insist that God can change people's moral and religious values. Through such changes a society can be shaped into a new form and its normative values be given new contents so that the society grows closer to the ideals embodied in Christian values (cf. Philpott 1993).

However, exactly how such change can occur and how it can be facilitated must be demonstrated. A Christian ethics can point to the role of individuals taking the initiative to change situations by appealing to shared moral values, by slightly extending or modifying their scope, and insisting on and campaigning for their implementation.

More comprehensive moral transformation ending in a changed society also occur. A Christian ethics could try to develop a theory of moral change in dialogue with various sciences. A secularised version of the moral change
depicted in Deuteronomy might run as follows. Fundamental to a just transformation is agreement on foundational values for guiding the transformation. New values must be taught to adults and children. Everyone must understand the rationale of those values and be able to justify the values to themselves and successive generations. Every person must be made continually aware of the new values. Strong calls for obedience to the values from leaders further reinforces new values. People must have incentives for obeying the new set of values through rewards or punishments. Strong commitments to make a moral transformation work lies in strong ties urged between believers and God. Enforcement strengthens adherence to the new values.

7. Christian Ethics and Public Philosophy

Most Christians today are living in multi-cultural societies rich in all kinds of human diversity. Differences of language, culture, morality, and religion abound. Religious differences can amount to societies having various Christian groups, believers in other religions, and many people embracing different forms and degrees of atheism. Practically nowhere can Christians alone determine public policies. Strong emphasis on liberty, fairness, and equality in liberal-democratic societies has sensitised governments and citizens to accommodate all voices in their societies and not to allow dominant groups to exclude or marginalise minority groups. If Christians want to contribute to public policy in this context, they must make arguments defending their positions to their fellow citizens in the public sphere. Only through convincing fellow citizens of the merit of their views can Christians hope to have any impact on public philosophy and policy.

There are strong voices calling for religious views to be seen as private matters that ought to be excluded from public debates about political matters. A happy compromise between the Enlightenment and religions, Richard
Rorty believes, is that religion has been privatised so that it now seems bad
taste to use religion in public discussions of political matters (quoted in
Quinn 1995: 35). Robert Audi argues that virtuous (religious) citizens ought
to advocate new laws and policies not by using religious reasons, but only
when they can provide reasons that any rational adult citizen can endorse as
sufficient for the purpose (Audi in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 17).

There are similarly strong voices arguing that the Christian Church must be
allowed to attempt to influence public opinion as part of its social mission.
This must be done while respecting the rights of non-believers and without
imposing views on people who think differently (Hollenbach 1988: 3, 9).
What is a wise option for Christians in contemporary circumstances?

A wise option seems to distinguish between two different kinds of political
issues. One issue is what John Rawls (1993: 214) calls constitutional es-
sentials and issues of basic justice. They involve fundamental matters that
provide the constitutional framework within which ordinary politics, such as
elections, the making of laws, the development of policy, and the exercise of
power occur. The crucial, determining role of the framework calls for debates
that justify or modify aspects thereof on the basis of reasons that all citizens
can accept as "reasonable and rational" (Rawls 1993: 217).

All other political issues can be argued for by using any kind of reason,
though such reasons will not necessarily be accepted by their target audi-
ence as convincing. This more inclusive view shows an openness to plural-
ism, allowing citizens to use whatever reasons they find appropriate to sup-
port their political positions (Wolterstorff in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 112).
No input control is necessary for public debates on these kinds of political
issues, as the process of dialogue and deliberation will sort out which of
these reasons are judged acceptable. If citizens have the civility to listen to
one another with attitudes of mutual respect, willingness to learn and conse-
quently modify their positions, then critical scrutiny and public assessment of justificatory reasons show which reasons succeed in rationally persuading opponents through non-coercive means (cf. Thiemann 1996: 121).

Christians in contemporary constitutional democracies thus can participate in most public debates on political issues. What are the prerequisites for them to make a positive impact on public opinion? The apostle Paul's example of becoming like the Jews (Greeks, etc.) to explain the gospel to them is a useful starting point. As was the case in interdisciplinary dialogue with other sciences in Chapter Two, Christians would have to be fully conversant with all relevant knowledge and information, as well as competent in the reasoning style employed in the domain of politics. To present views informed by the human sciences, supported by rational argumentation, and presented with rhetorical force and communicative skill, seems basic. Christians must be willing to translate their important ethical values from their biblical context into principles applicable to modern constitutional democracies and loosely coherent, or in meaningful debate, with current conceptions of justice (cf. Thiemann 1996: 158). Such new packaging for Christian values must be complemented by finding additional reasons for political views other than those reasons internal to Christian ethics, if non-believers are to be convinced (Wolterstorff in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 112). Engaging in public reasoning in this style, implies acceptance of a fallibilist attitude. This attitude acknowledges that Christians make errors of judgement in identifying and interpreting moral obligations contained in their fundamental texts (Audi in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 14). Fallibilism leads to willingness to re-examine religious views in various ways in the light of critique or conflict with other values.

The pluralistic values of modern constitutional democracies provide further opportunities for growth in Christians. Those Christians who embrace pluralism see deep and strong commitment to their religion as compatible with
respect for other religions and a willingness to learn from them (Thiemann 1996: 161). They expect their moral insight to deepen through dialogue with people who have different moral values and other ways of life. Jeremy Waldron (quoted in Quinn 1995: 49) neatly articulates how this openness to moral pluralism works:

"I mean to draw attention to an experience we all have had at one time or another, of having argued with someone whose world view was quite at odds with our own, and of having come away thinking, 'I'm sure he's wrong, and I can't follow much of it, but, still, it makes you think....' The prospect of losing that sort of effect in public discourse is, frankly, frightening – terrifying, even, if we are to imagine it being replaced by a form of 'deliberation' that, in the name of 'fairness' or 'reasonableness' (or worse still, 'balance') consists of bland appeals to harmless nostrums that are accepted without question on all sides."

If fallibilism and openness to pluralism occur reciprocally within an atmosphere of mutual respect for persons holding serious moral views other than your own, processes of dialogue can create mutual understanding, establish deep social bonds, and result in communal solidarity based on shared political values. Within this context and with such attitudes, non-Christians will at least listen attentively to Christians and take their political views seriously.

Another factor inhibits the acceptance of Christian views in the public sphere. The strength and appeal of liberal-democratic values, accompanied by their embodiment in human rights, are clear from their embodiment in many countries during waves of democratisation in the twentieth century. Liberal-democratic values form the core of the public philosophy guiding modern states in many countries of the world. Although many interpretations of these values are possible, their general thrust tends toward support for substantial aid programs for the poor. Whether liberal-democratic values are
a result of the pervasive influence of Christianity in the Western world until the nineteenth century or not does not really matter here. What matters is that a Christian ethics on poverty and riches hardly present something radically new to the world at the start of the 21st century.

Many Christians believe that a Christian ethics on poverty and wealth does still have something worthwhile and meaningful to say to people in contemporary multi-cultural, modern, constitutional democracies. Does this message have unique contents? As indicated earlier, the uniqueness of a Christian ethics lies in its various strengths. These strengths were indicated as the following.

1. A Christian ethics on poverty and riches provides a strong and wide-ranging set of moral values for dealing with poverty and riches. This set of values on poverty and riches is made even stronger through their link with a comprehensive network of moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life.

2. Christians must treat other people lovingly as defined by God’s love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross. This implies that poor people must be loved as fellow humans created in God’s image and helped to realise their God-given potentialities.

3. Adherence to a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is strengthened by incentives and sanctions. The incentives are to gather metaphoric riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like no heavenly riches and life after death in hell.

4. The powerful commitment to God underlying and supporting Christian values is the most important reason accounting for their strength and endurance. A deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of His followers to passionately embrace His values and exert themselves to ensure
the implementation of those values.

5. Christians are under obligation to implement God’s commands to safeguard the credibility of their faith. Furthermore, Christians are under a strong command to communicate their faith to non-believers. A strong and convincing way of doing that is to manifest God’s love towards others concretely in their lives. Loving the poor by treating them as God commands ought to be a strong incentive that demonstrates God’s love to others through practical witness.

How should Christians communicate their unique message concerning poverty and riches to their fellow citizens? I want to look at this issue from two perspectives. One perspective is to view Christians in their public role as citizens of their country and the other perspective is to view citizens in their public role in civil society and their private roles in interpersonal relationships.

The first perspective views Christians in their public role as citizens of their country – a role that they share with all other members of their society, regardless of religious beliefs or moral convictions. This role is defined by the moral values of liberal-democratic political philosophy, expressed in human rights, and embodied in a constitution. These values define the rules of politics for a society. Within the spaces for political activity created by a liberal-democratic political system, Christians can engage in dialogue, use rhetoric, lobby, mobilise followers for collective action, utilise the media, and publish pamphlets and books to publicise their views and try to convince their diverse audiences of worthwhile proposals for public policy.

Should Christian groups go it alone or work together in alliances? Isolationist political strategies might not always be most attractive or prove to be most persuasive. Temporary alliances on specific issues of public policy with other Christian groups, members of different religions, and political organi-
sations of roughly similar conviction might prove more productive (cf. De Villiers and Smit 1995: 50). Nevertheless, whatever political strategy followed, Christians can at most hope to achieve what John Rawls calls an overlapping consensus. This means that their political views on an issue like poverty and riches might converge with those of other political groups, although not necessarily be the same. Their reasons for supporting a particular policy might differ from those offered by other groups. Nevertheless, this might be the only way for Christians to make a public impact in a society characterised by moral and religious diversity.

Sometimes Christians have the option of supporting secular views on justice that were not formulated with the aim to be in agreement with a Christian ethics, but that nevertheless have many overlaps in letter and spirit with an imaginative application of a Christian ethics to contemporary situations. Two theories of justice are good examples to illustrate the point. The famous theory of justice by John Rawls (1971) has as contents liberal-democratic political rights, fair equality of opportunity, and a principle of distributive justice close in spirit to a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. This Rawlsian principle runs as follows: “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are ...reasonably expected to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.” The emphasis that Rawls places on distributive inequalities that should be to the benefit of the poor people in society seems to be one way in which a Christian ethics of poverty and riches might be specified for use in modern liberal-democratic societies. Christians ought to be able to strongly support such a view, although Rawls does not present or justify it in a Christian way. Obviously many other elements of a Christian view of poverty and ethics can be added to a Rawlsian view on distributive justice, as a Christian ethics on poverty and riches goes far beyond distributive issues of justice.

The differentiated and context-sensitive view on justice presented by
Michael Walzer (1983) is a similar example of a theory of justice that could easily be supported by Christians. The strength of Walzer’s theory of justice lies in his sensitivity to the societal context in which questions of justice are asked. Walzer distinguishes different spheres in society where the issues of justice differ and different principles of justice are thus called for. What is just in the sphere of politics is not necessarily just in the sphere of education. The contents of Walzer’s theory is a sophisticated articulation of liberal-democratic values that need not concern us here. What is of concern is to note how close Walzer comes to a Christian ethics of riches and poverty. He distinguishes between emergency poverty relief and aid to help poor people get rid of poverty. In the case of emergency poverty relief the only criterion is to relieve hunger, for example, no other criteria are to be met by those in desperate need of food. Aid must be given in proportion to the need of poor people. However, Walzer also emphasises that poor people must eventually be led to independence, they must be set up on their own again, able to care for themselves. He rejects aid that breeds dependence or passivity, as he also rejects aid that violates the human dignity of poor people. The aim of both kinds of poverty relief is to restore poor people to fully participating, equal members of society again.

Walzer’s theory of justice comes very close to the moral values of a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth, although the strong motivational aspects associated with religious spirituality are absent. This kind of secular theory of justice provides interesting opportunities for Christians. The considerable overlaps between Walzer’s theory of justice and a Christian ethics of poverty and riches enable Christians to adopt Walzer’s theory of justice as appropriate for contemporary liberal-democratic constitutional states. There is no reason to adopt Walzer’s theory uncritically. The theory can be adapted to fit more comfortably with a Christian ethics of poverty and riches, or other aspects of Christian ethics. Through intellectual fermentation sophisticated secular theories of justice can be intermingled and fused with Christian eth-
ics, so that a coherent theory of justice appropriate to current contexts and circumstances can be woven together. Such a theory would be provisional and subject to revision. Hopefully such theories will proliferate, showing active intellectual involvement of Christians to change their society for the better through working constructively with fellow citizens.

Christians in modern constitutional democracies have other identities besides their public identity as citizens. The second perspective looks at Christians as believers or God’s followers. This perspective notes two roles. One is their public role as members of groups and institutions, such as churches and organisations. In this public role they form part of civil society. The other role is their interpersonal role in many family, friendship, work, and casual relationships. Both these roles ought to be meaningfully co-defined by a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. The contents of a Christian life-style consists of the interdependence of worship and ethics, determined by love towards God and fellow humans, and guided by God’s commandments. Such a lifestyle must include a substantial section defined by a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. What does this requirement imply for Christians in their roles in civil society and interpersonal relationships?

As God’s followers they have an identity as believers or Christians who play public roles as members of non-governmental organisations (churches, Christian groups and organisations) in civil society. Citizens organised into non-governmental associations form the organs of civil society, such as interest groups, sport clubs, and service organisations. Membership is voluntary and organisations are largely self-supporting and independent from the state. They are nevertheless public, constrained by all the societal rules, rights, and regulations that apply elsewhere. In the organs of civil society, people get opportunities to articulate their interests, formulate mutual goals and strategies for implementing them, and opportunities for commenting on, and sometimes demanding, governmental action.
In their public roles as members of civil society Christians in churches, smaller groups, and organisations must show a strong concern for poor people. Through collective action to address poverty Christians must authenticate their faith in the eyes of anyone concerned. Projects to assist poor people and eradicate poverty must be launched at local, regional, national levels. Such projects can be done by members of a specific religious group, but the role of ecumenical alliances of Christian religious groups can strengthen the witness of Christians as a strong force for positive social change. The possibility of Christians co-operating in interfaith alliances of religious groups or even with inter-organisational alliances of aid organisations can also be explored. In the context of civil society Christians need to demonstrate how a living faith transforms people to become caring like God cares for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised. This transformation of people ought to enable Christians to become like God for their society, making a sharp impact through the improvement of needy people’s lives. Converting faith into deeds is a particularly effective witness to the truth of Christian faith and an important complement to other forms of mission and evangelism.

At interpersonal level Christians have perhaps more limited opportunities to aid poor people, because the complexities of poverty often necessitate forms of aid that are better done collectively or by specialists. Nevertheless, there are numerous ways for individual Christians to become involved at least in the life of one poor person they know, perhaps even in the lives of more. Emergency poverty relief through giving food, clothes, or shelter to poor people are obvious examples. Helping poor people to help themselves is another possibility through skills training projects. Sometimes aid can simply be to direct poor people to already existing agencies that can give appropriate help for the poor person’s needs. Generously donating money to aid organisations or getting involved in the organisation through expert, lay, or administrative work are others ways in which Christians can involve
themselves as individuals to make God’s care for the poor manifest in their lives. Through such involvement Christians demonstrate the truth and life of their faith.

The advantage for Christians – as individuals or groups in civil society – of continuous involvement in programs to alleviate and eradicate poverty are threefold. Through service to others in need, Christians are kept at the main focus of Christianity: God’s love for people in need must become visible in the way His followers focus on the urgent needs of other people. A second advantage is how God’s love becomes practical. This love of God has strong spiritual dimensions, but service to others in need demonstrates the practical aspects thereof: how God’s love changes the everyday life of people in need of basic necessities. A third advantage for Christians brought about by caring for the poor is the experience of changed, improved relationships that lead to a more humane society.

8. Disrupting Postscript

Does it make sense to systematise the scriptural material about poverty and riches into a theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches? One might argue that this kind of theorising deprives the biblical message of some of its most powerful aspects. The vividness and fascination of narratives, the embeddedness of commandments in a wider narrative context, the excitement and passion of prophetic critique, the poetic beauty of the Psalms, and the directness of Jesus’ teachings are lost through systematising. The power of persuasion found in the rhetorical effectiveness of the biblical text is broken. Is it worth it?

Systematising biblical texts into an ethics of poverty and riches is only worthwhile as a guideline or broad framework for identifying main themes on this topic. These main themes can be used in educating Christians about
their moral responsibilities concerning poverty and riches, but not without the vividness and rhetorical power of the Biblical texts themselves. The main themes can guide Christians to a comprehensive reading of the Biblical texts to develop their own view on poverty and riches. In this way theological ethics can guide Christians not to make selective use of texts to suit their interests.

A theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches can show Christians a style of thinking about moral issues that takes into account many kinds of background information from a diversity of sources. This would drive home the point that being a Christian does not give any person special skills to suddenly be an expert on issues they previously knew nothing about (cf. Hollenbach 1988: 185). Competent ethical judgements require sufficient background knowledge of the issue involved. A theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches can demonstrate to Christians how such knowledge can enable them to understand the complexities of ethical issues in sufficient depth.

Theological ethicists ought to remind themselves of the diversity of moral discourses available to Christianity. Such reminder will keep them aware of the limited value of their ethical theories in the broader scheme of things. Christian ethics has four kinds of moral discourse available (cf. the appropriation of Gustafson by De Villiers and Smit 1994). These four complement one another as they are inadequate to function on their own. So-called ethical discourse is much like the rest of this thesis. Philosophical modes of analysis, argumentation, and assessment are employed to provide a coherent, systematic exposition of Christian values. Appropriate argumentation in support of values and principles are tied together in a theory of Christian ethics.

The ethical discourse needs to be complemented by the others for different
functions. Policy discourse is close to ethical discourse, but not used by observers or consultants, like theological ethicists often are. Rather, decision-makers, managers, or leaders driving human action in everyday life use policy discourse to figure out the best options implementable within limited space and time, through insufficient means, and by using constrained opportunities.

Prophetic discourse uses strong emotional language, narratives, and practical demonstrations to deliver moral judgments against moral evil and religious apostasy. People addressed this way are called upon to change their ways fundamentally and embrace a vision of God's better future. This kind of discourse is effective in touching people's emotions and moving them to change their behavior.

Narrative discourse is particularly important, as the ancient sacred texts of the Bible are dominated by narratives. The texts dealing with ethical issues are either narratives themselves, or embodied in narratives. For this reason, the nature and functions of narratives need serious consideration.

Narratives are particularly suitable to describe and interpret human lives (cf. MacIntyre 1998: 216). Narratives accommodate unpredictability as well as stability. Human lives show unpredictability, as we do not always know what is going to happen next - the future is full of good and bad surprises. However, human lives also manifest stability, as people's lives often have constant features which are found through many aspects and large parts of their lives. Narratives can deal with both of these factors. The suitability of narratives for dealing with the nature of human lives lies also in the constraints that any narrative place on how the story-line can develop, while within those constraints there are almost infinite possibilities of further developments. A final aspect of the suitability of narratives is that the subjects of narratives can be held accountable for their choices and actions that combine to form a

When engaging with God’s Word in this way, Christians can have a theory of narratives can have three functions (cf. Allen 1990: 33–34). Some narratives serve a poetic or aesthetic function to express beauty. Other narratives pur- port to convey information or explanation through their dialectical or epistemic function. Narratives are also used to convince people of other views through a rhetorical function. These functions often interact in one narrative (cf. Lyotard 1979: 20), providing strong stories with deep impact on people’s hearts, minds, and souls that often move them to action and change their lives (Bausch 1984: 27). Narratives challenge listeners to express their opinions, give their evaluations, and imagine themselves as part of the story (Bausch 1984: 21, 27). Growing curiosity about new developments and ea- ger anticipation of outcomes engender emotional and intellectual involve- ment. Imaginative involvement leads to creative participation where people’s own narratives are brought into dialogue and confrontation with the story being told. Who can tell stories? A particularly attractive feature of narratives is that current listeners become competent to retell a story simply through listening. Often the only claim of narrators for being competent to tell a story is that they themselves were listeners once (Lyotard 1979: 20).

The fundamental issue for theological ethicists must be to encourage Chris- tians to read, interpret, and appropriate the narratives of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible for themselves. Only through reading texts with their own Vorverständnisse (pre-understandings) at work, their knowledge of their own lives and circumstances brought into play, and their own application of those texts to their lives can God’s Word effectively speak to them. They must be willing to relate their stories to God’s stories and re-story their lives if neces- sary. If they are serious about their moral responsibility concerning poverty and riches, prepared to read all relevant texts on these matters, and open to being challenged by the radical demands of God’s word, then God can change their lives to deal with poverty properly.
When dealing with God's Word in this way, Christians can use a theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches as a checklist for their views. They must engage a systematised Christian ethics through critical dialogue to challenge both their own views and the systematised view in the light of the biblical texts. These texts have the last say, and are the final arbiters for any interpretation aiming to appropriate their meanings for people living today.