

Always ... Therefore: The Church's Challenge of Global Poverty

Students Guide



Four online adult Sunday school lessons

Acacia Resources, a division of Baptist Center for Ethics
P.O. Box 150506
Nashville, Tennessee 37215-0506
(615) 627-7766
www.acaciaresources.com

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Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics.

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A DVD and a Leaders Guide for *Always . . . Therefore: The Church's Challenge of Global Poverty* are also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

We Christians too often read the Bible selectively about the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed, the foreigner and the weak. Consequently, we have at best a short-term commitment to their well-being. We sometimes respond to their immediate needs. We tend to neglect their long-term empowerment.

The global community needs for American Christians to read the Bible without skipping over the uncomfortable parts that call for a commitment beyond the horizon. The Bible speaks about an enduring commitment.

Years ago a Sunday school lesson left me with an unforgettable message about the selective way in which we read the Bible.

In June 1982, I taught a Sunday school class to Baylor University students at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco. The curriculum series was from the Adult Bible Study, produced by the Baptist Sunday School Board, now LifeWay Christian Resources. The lesson's title was "Provision for the Poor." The focal texts were Deuteronomy 15:1-5a, 7-11a and 23:24-25. It was generally a good lesson.

One of the problems with the lesson was that it severed a critical text in half, leaving out the divine kick.

The eviscerated verse was Deuteronomy 15:11. The lesson focused on verse 11a: "For the poor will never cease out of the land" (RSV).

Indeed that portion of the verse validates social reality—poverty is an entrenched problem. The verse represents an example of biblical realism.

But the punch of the passage appears in the second part of the verse, the part about what God expects from us. The text doesn't stop with an acknowledgment about the human condition. The text turns directly to the divine expectation of the moral community.

Deuteronomy 11b says, "Therefore I [God] command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land" (RSV).

God commands his chosen people to let go of their tight-fisted possession for the sake of the empty-handed.

The larger passage suggests that an open hand gives freely, ungrudgingly, equipping the poor to become self-sufficient as a way to pursue a just society, one in which debts are forgiven and indentured servants are set free.

The text recognizes the crippling nature of the human situation and communicates the empowering nature of the divine expectation.

So why would the lesson avoid what God commanded? Why would a lesson cut in two a profound moral message? Why focus on the enduring problem and skip the solution?

I don't know why the text was cut in half. I don't know why what God commands was bypassed. I do know that if Sunday school classes read only the first part of the verse, then they might be tempted to think that the entrenched reality of poverty meant that we couldn't make a difference for and with the poor. Students might think that they didn't have an ongoing responsibility to address the needs of the impoverished.

Regrettably, too many American Christians have myopia about the malnourished and their moral obligations.

How often have we seen a flourish of giving to famine relief efforts and natural disasters followed by a sharp decline in giving? Donor fatigue is the term for disengagement from global crises such as what happened in the Sahel, Ethiopia, and Southeast Asia after the tsunami.

How often have we heard Christians say "the poor you have with you always," as a proof-text, a justification, for why rich Christians don't need to care about the hungry?

How often have we heard church members talk in negative terms about the laziness of the poor, their faulty moral choices related to out-of-wedlock children and their substance abuse? Or church members who criticize the hungry in nations where their religious beliefs place restrictions on beef consumption, for example?

Have we heard only the first part of the passage from Deuteronomy 15:11?

What if folk memorized the second part of the passage, the part about God commanding us to open wide our hand to the impoverished?

Imagine what we could do if we memorized the whole verse. Perhaps we would begin to rethink our worldview, reorient our priorities and reengage our global society. Perhaps our new approach would be "Always ... Therefore."

"Always ... Therefore" is the theme of this educational resource that has a twofold goal:

(1) Explore the biblical mandate to feed the hungry. Baptists are people of the book. The book is our moral compass.

(2) Raise the level of awareness about and deepen the commitment to what good will Baptists are doing through Baptist World Aid and its partners to be faithful to the biblical mandate.

With a sound biblical foundation and a compelling overview of what Baptists are doing, we hope that church members will make a long-term commitment to feeding the hungry through relief efforts, development projects and justice initiatives.

This study guide and the accompanying DVD are underwritten by the Baptist General Association of Virginia, Baptist General Convention of Missouri, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Baptist World Aid, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma.

Several churches have also joined in providing support to produce this resource: Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky; First Baptist Church, Griffin, Georgia; First Baptist Church, San Angelo, Texas; First Baptist Church, Wilmington, North Carolina and St. Matthews Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky. Additional support came from First Baptist Church Endowment Fund, Richmond, Virginia, and several foundations.

You can use this resource in two ways: watch the DVD and discuss it in a single session, or view the DVD over a four-week period, using the accompanying four-session study guide.

Realism and Responsibility

Theme: The biblical witness recognizes the reality of entrenched poverty and calls for redemptive actions.

Introduction

A man came to our home outside of Jos, Nigeria, almost 50 years ago. He said one of his children had died and that another one was gravely ill. He requested help. My Baptist missionary parents asked him to bring his wife and their child to our home. He did. The infant was a severely malnourished child. A missionary physician did not know if the child's life could be saved.

My father purchased feeding bottles, powdered milk and liquid vitamins. My mother taught his mother how to prepare formula and to feed her child, hoping that weight gain would improve his chances for survival.

As we watched this drama, the children in the family decided that we would name the baby. We discussed options ranging from Roy Rogers to Tom Sawyer. We settled on Sweet Pea.

Sweet Pea did gain weight and left our home as a healthy child. He was, to the best of my memory, my first real encounter with hunger.

Two years ago, I traveled with Paul Montacute, director of Baptist World Aid, to Sri Lanka and India some months after the tsunami caused vast devastation—taking count-

less lives, destroying homes, wiping out the means of self-sufficiency and leaving scores of people in ill health.

We visited an orphanage for severely handicapped children located on a lagoon in the slums of Colombo, Sri Lanka's largest city, where Baptists had committed funds to repair the damaged buildings.

We saw members of the Moratuwa Baptist Church distribute dry rations of rice, sugar, powdered milk, lentils, a tin of fish and toothpaste to those who had extended family members affected by the tsunami living with them.

We went to Peraliya, the village that came to world attention as the place where the tsunami washed a train off its tracks. There Montacute discussed with Sri Lankan pastor Freddy de Alwis the funding of temporary houses.

The destruction was so total in Peraliya and other places that I wondered if the victims would ever really recover.

The trip was a painful reminder of the biblical truth that "the poor will never cease out of the land."

The Biblical Witness

The struggle for food stretches back to the earliest biblical accounts. Struggle against poverty, ill health and exploitation appear in the biblical witness with stunning redundancy. The biblical reports and injunctions never shy away from the entrenched nature of hunger and poverty.

Cast out of the Garden of Eden, Adam learned about the future of the human struggle for food (Gen 3:19). Abram went to Egypt to escape a harsh famine (Gen 12:10). Abram's grandson, Jacob, in the midst of a severe famine,

sent his sons to Egypt which had grain reserves. Jacob told them, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live, and not die (Gen 42:2 RSV). When the Israelites left Egypt, they carried memories of food aplenty, albeit in bondage, and complained about the food they had, to which God promised "to rain bread from heaven" (Ex 16:24) and did.

On their freedom march from Egypt to the Promised Land, the Israelites learned about the nature of God. God was defined as the One "who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing" (Deut 10:18), suggesting that injustice, hunger and the lack of provision were widespread problems.

The Hebrew prophets called for justice for the poor (Isa 10:1-4). Jesus made caring for the weak, the battered and the imprisoned a signal mark of faithful discipleship (Matt 25). Knowing of Jesus' teachings and actions, the early church met hunger needs in community (Acts 4:32-27). The biblical witness recorded the reality of hunger and poverty with the accounts about human suffering and calls to alleviate such suffering.

Deuteronomy 15:7b-8, 11

^{7b}Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ... ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

The word *Deuteronomy* means the "second law." It contains Moses' instructions about what God wanted for his covenant people and how God expected them to live

together and with others. Chapter 15 has extensive directions about treatment of the poor. One of the stunning acknowledgments here is the recognition that the poor and needy will always be among us.

“[T]he poor will never cease out of the land” (RSV), says Deuteronomy 15:11.

Such incisive truth was accompanied with a divine command: “Therefore, I” (RSV). Because of hunger, God wanted a constructive response from his people. God gave them a command to be generous and a concrete program to alleviate poverty. The program was ground in an attitude, a worldview, of open handedness.

“Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor,” God instructed. “You should rather open your hand, willingly ... to meet the need, whatever it may be” (vv 7-8).

Deuteronomy 15:1-10, 12-15

¹Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. ... ¹²If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. ... ^{13b}You shall not send him out empty-handed. ^{14a}Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press.

Action traveled with attitude. God set forth a concrete program to address chronic poverty and its many cousins of ill health, hunger, enslavement and exploitation.

First, Moses said God wanted the institutionalization of the sabbatical year. At an end of a cycle of seven years, debts

were cancelled. “Every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor” (v 2).

Not only were creditors to cancel debts—debts which no doubt suppressed the poor and enriched a few—but creditors were warned against pressing the collection of the debt (v 2).

God promised that the land would be blessed if the people followed the law (v 4).

Second, Moses said God wanted the freeing of slaves (vv 12-13). Economic failure was one of the ways that people fell into slavery. As with debt, the sabbatical year was intended to prevent slavery forever, from generation to generation.

Third, Moses said God wanted freed slaves supplied with the things that would empower them for self-reliance. Slaveholders were admonished against letting slaves go empty-handed. Instead, slaveholders were to provide freed slaves livestock, grain and wine, illustrative of what people needed to start anew.

The biblical witness tells us that a constructive attitude and concrete actions are continuously needed to meet chronic hunger. If the poor are with us always, we must always seek to meet their needs and give them a hand up to self-reliance.

Therefore Take Action

Reared as a child in Nigeria from the first year of life through the middle of my junior year of high school, I saw firsthand chronic hunger, debilitating disease and draining poverty. I saw it virtually every day—young children with

extended bellies, a sign of malnutrition not obesity, grown men with withered limbs and old women with blindness. I saw what some Baptist missionaries did to meet human needs—hospitals, training centers for health-care workers, feeding programs, farming projects and irrigation efforts. I saw these things as intrinsic to the nature of Christian faith.

I later learned that the biblical mandate to feed the hungry was not really on the message board of many Baptist churches. I even learned that some Baptist leaders saw hunger relief and rehabilitation projects as secondary concerns to evangelism. They had created a division between the body and the soul, instead of holding the biblical viewpoint that values both.

One Baptist woman rejects such a dichotomy. Her name is Leena Lavanya Garnepudi, the head of Serve Trust, an organization in India with a holistic vision.

Soon after the December 26, 2004 tsunami struck, she borrowed money from her father to buy food and was the first person to reach four Indian villages with rice and lentils.

The family loan was not from rainy-day funds that could be repaid over time. Rather, it was money set aside for her sister's dowry. According to custom, her sister's wedding could not have gone forward without the money, part of a formal agreement between the bride's and groom's parents in order for the bride to be taken in marriage.

"I believe that God will provide all my needs," she told me in an interview in Chennai.

Proving her point, she described how an offering for tsunami relief collected across three Sundays at Leesburg Baptist Church, in Leesburg, Va., gave her enough not only to repay her father, but also to do further relief work.

Paul Montacute, director of Baptist World Aid, called her "one of our most innovative relief and development workers."

"She's the closest thing we [Baptists] have to Mother Teresa," Montacute said.

Leena is a fourth-generation Baptist, whose great grandfather became a Christian through the preaching of an American Baptist missionary. But she said she got her inspiration for service "from my grandparents who raised me."

She recalled watching her grandfather, B. R. Moses, a former Baptist World Alliance vice president, care for lepers.

Today, Leena has a home for 15 lepers in South India. "There are many [more], but I don't have money to feed them," she said.

She also runs another mission project with AIDS/HIV patients. "Lepers are afraid of HIV people," she shared, while "HIV people think they will get leprosy from touching lepers."

With a dry smile, she added, "Common people are afraid of these two types of people."

Each month some 110 AIDS/HIV patients come to Leena for food and medicine. The only medicines generally available are multi-vitamins, although sometimes she has symptomatic drugs for fever and diarrhea.

In addition to meeting immediate needs, she also addresses the source of problems.

Many of the HIV patients contracted their disease through prostitution. “The main reason for becoming prostitutes is poverty,” she said.

In cases where husbands are day-laborers who lack the income to sustain a family, even married women can be forced into prostitution.

Leena’s strategy for extracting women from prostitution is to help them start small businesses.

In 1983, Leena, who holds a B.S. degree and has worked as a biology teacher, started a school for their children, “who were rag-pickers and ate food from the garbage.”

Serve Trust elementary school now has 83 children and two teachers. The school supplies the children with two school uniforms, provides breakfast and lunch and covers their medical bills.

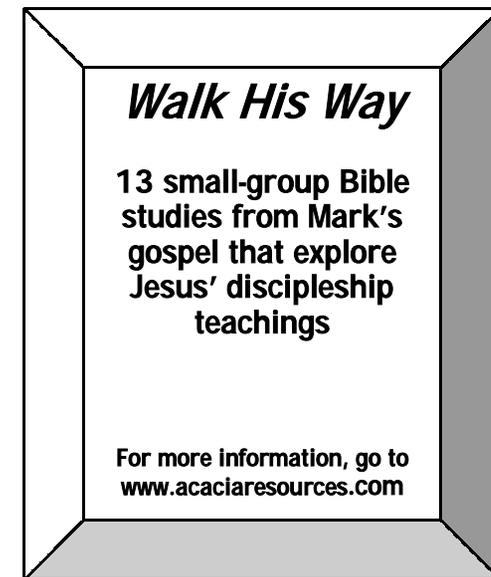
Pointing to one Muslim prostitute in a predominantly Hindu nation, Leena said that the woman had the “image of God,” and that she has an obligation to “show Christian love through deeds” to her.

“I’m not a theologian,” she said, “but I preach” at a church that “I planted in a Hindu area.” Because she is not a pastor, she said, she had to ask her uncle last year to baptize 16 converts.

Leena Lavanya is a shining representative of the good will Baptists who engage in collaborative efforts to feed the hungry, bind up the wounds of the ill and pursue efforts to readdress the causes of poverty.

These Baptists know that hunger is more than an annual observance in a church service or a yearly offering. They

recognize world hunger requires different responses based on different needs. The following lessons explore emergency relief efforts, rehabilitation or development initiatives and the pursuit of justice.



Relief

Theme: The biblical witness underscores the importance of relief aid.

Introduction

The international police agency Interpol dug up a mass grave in Peraliya, Sri Lanka, looking for Europeans killed when the December 26, 2004 tsunami washed a train off its tracks. They found two, among 2,000 bodies bulldozed into a huge hole, identifying them by their larger skeletons and dental fillings. The action upset local villagers.

Sixteen more bodies were found in that coastal village a few days before my arrival, some two months after the natural disaster washed over much of Asia. Every day, bodies or parts of bodies were found in the disaster area that runs inland some three miles from the beach on the tear-shaped island off the southeast coast of India.

Peraliya was flattened. The homes were completely demolished. One had an interior wall held together with plumbing fixtures and blue tiles. Few buildings survived intact, and those that did were damaged. Tents and temporary houses were scattered about.

When the tsunami struck, Peraliya needed emergency relief aid immediately.

Hungarian Baptist Aid (HBA) sent a seven-person medical team two days later, starting work in the capital and moving south.

“When I got to Galle, it was unbelievable,” Ferenc Tisch, international program director for the national partner of the Baptist World Alliance’s relief-and-development agency Baptist World Aid, recalled of his first glimpse of the city in southwest Sri Lanka. “I couldn’t imagine how it happened.”

Tisch described “being present” as one of HBA’s most important contributions. “It’s so important to be with people who have lost everything,” he said.

In addition to providing medical relief to tsunami victims, HBA played a coordinating role with Baptist volunteers, who cleaned wells, cleared yards and distributed blankets, undergarments and sanitary items.

Through Baptist World Aid and its partners, Baptists played a constructive role in providing emergency aid in places where a natural disaster took 230,000 lives, orphaned thousands of children and destroyed almost a half-million homes.

The year that began when an undersea earthquake created a gigantic wave drew to a close with another earthquake that split a mountain.

In 2005, a 7.6 Richter scale earthquake in Pakistan killed tens of thousands of people and left 2 million homeless, according to authorities.

The earthquake “was so strong that it tore the mountain in two parts,” said Laszlo Pavelcze, HBA’s team leader.

HBA rushed 10 rescue specialists and dogs to Pakistan. Other good will Baptists provided emergency aid.

When natural disasters strike, relief is the first line of response.

The Biblical Witness

The biblical witness contains many accounts of people of faith meeting hunger needs and providing care. These reports underscore the existence of human suffering and the many ways in which the faith community sought to alleviate it.

Acts 11:27-30

²⁷At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. ²⁹The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to learn about the emerging community of believers. Seeing the growth, Barnabas enlisted Saul to work with him. Together they taught “a great many people” (11:26) about the nature of faith in Jesus Christ.

In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians (v 26).

Although Barnabas and Saul had only taught in Antioch for a year, the disciples there had learned and integrated a core Christian commitment—meeting human need.

Perhaps they knew the stories about Jesus’ parables and encounters. Jesus had certainly taught his disciples about the priority of addressing the needs of the poor and weak. He gave a parable about a Samaritan who had pity on a brutalized and abandoned man on the Jericho road. The

Samaritan cared for the man, took him to a safe place and provided the means for his recovery (Lk 10:25-37).

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he underscored the scarcity and primacy of food. “Give us each day our daily bread,” he prayed, recognizing that for his followers, nutrition was an essential part of human life. He also highlighted the forgiveness of debt, something that wealthy Christians today tend to spiritualize.

Two encounters with wealthy men contrasted their approaches to the poor. Responding to a rich ruler, who claimed he had kept all the commandments, Jesus said, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor” (Lk 18:22). When Zacchaeus did an about face due to his encounter with Jesus, he said, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor ...” (Lk 19:8). Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house” (v 9).

Hearing about a famine, the Christians in Antioch “determined” to respond (Acts 11:29). They knew of an emergency need and made a deliberate decision. They each decided that they would give “according to their ability.” Moreover, they gave through an existing system. They sent their hunger offering “to the elders [church leaders in Jerusalem] by Barnabas and Saul” (v 30).

Acts 6:1-7

¹Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among

yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task”

Hunger existed in the earliest Christian community. Some widows had food—those indigenous to Palestine. Other widows—those with experience in the Greek world—were neglected with the daily food distribution. Food aid was a basic need for both groups. Widows generally had no one to care for them in a male-dominated society. Their lack of a protector, a provider, meant that they were vulnerable to hunger and poverty. Their community of Christian believers was critical to their very survival.

The conflict was resolved when the church leaders prioritized food distribution by assigning the task to a specific group. The selection of the seven was based on the qualities of their character. They were men in good standing, with spiritual maturity and common sense. The task of relief aid deserved leaders with deep faith and practical discernment.

Acts 2:43-47

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

After Pentecost, the early church created a community of sharing. If any had needs, an unmistakable reference to poverty, their needs were met. The community functioned as an economic community. Everyone “ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (v 46). Moreover, “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34).

According to Our Ability

The biblical witness offers numerous accounts of how people of faith met human needs. For example, the Jerusalem model (Acts 2:43-47 and Acts 6:1-7) illustrates intra-church aid, while the Antioch model (Acts 11:27-30) shows us inter-church aid. Both emphasize that believers gave according to their abilities and had a distribution system.

Good will Baptists also have a collection system for hunger funds. Baptist World Aid, Baptist General Association of Virginia, Baptist General Convention of Missouri, Baptist General Convention of Texas and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are some of the bodies to whom hunger gifts may be sent for distribution.

Some of these bodies actually have a special fund-raising effort. Baptist World Aid observes a world hunger month in October, while the Baptist General Convention of Texas observes world hunger day on the second Sunday in October. Both collect an offering for global hunger that is distributed through a variety of initiatives.

Texas Baptist men sent a water purification relief team to Sri Lanka after the tsunami. Within several months, they had cleaned more than 400 wells.

Through CBF, the First Baptist Church of Rome, Georgia, initially gave \$50,000 from its previous year’s budget surplus to purchase five water purification systems for small villages and refugee camps in Indonesia. The church subsequently contributed another \$76,000.

Reading about Rome’s action, the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina, decided to take \$50,000 from its reserve fund for tsunami relief through CBF, even though the church did not make its 2004 budget.

Some American churches have developed relationships with indigenous churches and schools, providing financial support directly to them. One example of this is the First Baptist Church of Frankfort, Kentucky. The church provides funding to the Rick's Institute, a K-12 school owned by the Liberian Baptist Convention, for a feeding program for students.

Yet the major way that churches and individuals respond to global hunger needs is through larger organizations.

When, in May 2006, a 6.3 Richter scale earthquake in Indonesia left 5,000 dead, 20,000 injured and 200,000 homeless, Baptist World Aid Australia responded swiftly with \$50,000 in funding for shelter, a public kitchen and a medical team. BWA-Australia worked through several partners, including Indonesian Baptist Aid and Hungarian Baptist Aid.

One of Baptist World Aid's most effective emergency relief partners is Hungarian Baptist Aid. Founded in the mid-1990s during the Balkan War, HBA sometimes goes by the name Aid24 or Rescue 24.

Over the years it has emerged as one of the "first responders" within the worldwide Baptist community, working through a network of indigenous churches. The group has been involved in relief efforts in North Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Kosovo and the Ukraine.

HBA established a presence in Iran after the December 2003 earthquake in the ancient city of Bam killed an estimated 30,000 people. One staff member spent six months working alone in Iran, because he was the only member with a visa that allowed him to stay in the country.

Bela Szilagyi, HBA's executive director, joined the staff in 2000, bringing contacts from his year and a half of work at a law firm that facilitated the presence of TV networks in Hungary like CNN, BBC, National Geographic and Animal Planet.

"I saw that my calling was for Hungarian Baptist Aid," he said, explaining why he left his law firm.

His faith was nurtured in the home of Baptist parents who were persecuted for their beliefs when communists ruled Hungary, he said.

"My mother was denied graduation from high school because she was a believer," he said. "My father was fired from a job because he wouldn't join the Communist Party. After a year of unemployment, he got a job paying half of his other job."

A hard-line communist teacher told Szilagyi that he would never be admitted to high school because of his faith. But when communism fell, he was able to advance through the country's education system, eventually obtaining a law degree.

Today, Bela Szilagyi is one of the high-profile Baptists involved in relief efforts.

Rehabilitation and Development

Theme: The biblical witness recognizes the necessity of efforts that provide a hand up to self-reliance.

Introduction

An Australian Baptist minister who leads a key aid group believes something like the Marshall Plan used to rebuild post-World War II Europe is needed in the aftermath of Southeast Asia's 2004 tsunami disaster.

Tim Costello, chief executive of World Vision Australia, said current relief efforts were not enough to sustain recovery.

Costello, former pastor of Collins Street Baptist Church in Melbourne, told the French news service that the equivalent of \$100 billion would be needed to rebuild Asia.

"I can only compare it to Europe after the Second World War," he said, adding "it's going to take a generation" to rebuild.

Costello recognized the need for aid that went beyond emergency relief to rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation helps victims of natural disasters rebuild their lives. Rehabilitation aid is a cousin of development aid—aid that equips, enables, empowers the poor to improve their well-being. Rehabilitation and development aid provide a hand up to self-reliance.

Regrettably, Costello's expansive challenge is a far cry from being met. According to the most current United Nations figures, an estimated \$13.05 billion has been pledged. Almost half comes from government commitments. Individuals have given some 38 percent.

Nevertheless, efforts are underway to help tsunami victims reconstruct their lives and communities.

Baptist World Alliance and its partners are among those organizations invested in rehabilitation and development efforts in the tsunami area.

Working with the Sri Lanka Baptist Union, BWA is building 72 houses and planning a five-year, community-based development program.

In India, where thousands of fishing boats were destroyed, the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) is working with the India Baptist Convention to help Indians restore their livelihoods.

BGAV has provided some 75 fishing families with new, fiberglass boats. Each boat has been named Virginia Baptist with a number. Requiring five-man crews, the boats enable families once again to make a living in south India.

Rehabilitation and development initiatives for Christians are grounded in the biblical witness.

The Biblical Witness

The biblical witness provides accounts about structuring a moral society designed to help the poor help themselves.

Exodus 23:10-11a

¹⁰For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; ¹¹but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat.

The sabbatical year benefited the poor. It was designed largely for their welfare, a time to begin again on solid ground without crushing debt and servitude to the wealthy. It was a time when debts were forgiven (Deut 15:1) and slaves were freed (Deut 15:12).

The removal of debt afforded self-reliance. Accompanying the freedom from economic bondage was the requirement that the slaveholder equip the slave for a life of self-sufficiency (Deut 15:13-14).

God instructed, “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (15:7-11).

Failing to keep the sabbatical law led the powerful into poverty and worse (Jer 34:13-22):

“I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, ‘Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you ... you must set them free from your service.’ But your ancestors did not listen to me ... You yourselves recently repented and did

what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another ... but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves ... Therefore ... I am going to grant a release to you, says the Lord—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.”

God’s economic agenda prioritized for the Hebrews the care for the poor—not only a hand out but equally important a hand up to self-reliance. The failure to pursue the divine directive results in dire consequences.

Leviticus 19:9-10

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

The law of gleaning restricted how much farmers could take out of their fields. Reapers were instructed to leave behind produce for the poor who followed behind them, picking what was left over. The leftovers belonged to the poor.

Like the passage in Leviticus, Deuteronomy 24:19 recorded: “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings.”

The law of gleaning found expression in the story of Ruth. When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they faced hunger. Ruth went into the fields at harvest time to gather leftover grain. She approached the farm foreman: “Please,

let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers” (Ruth 2:7).

According to the story, “When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, ‘Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.’ So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, ‘Where did you glean today? And where have you worked?’” (Ruth 2:15-19).

The law of gleaning was one way that society was structured that helped the poor feed themselves.

Giving a Hand Up

The Bible doesn’t offer an economic blueprint for our global society. The Bible does point us in the right direction. From the sabbatical year and the law of gleaning we gain a strong sense of direction for how we ought to care for the poor with initiatives that improve their lives and help them experience self-reliance.

Handouts are critical in crisis times—droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars. Handouts are essential for the most vulnerable victims, especially children.

Hand ups are vital for the poor and dispossessed to gain self-reliance, to be able to meet many of their basic needs, to make a living for their families.

The often cited Chinese proverb captures the concept of development: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Good will Baptists support a host of projects that teach people to fish and provide them with the needed fishing gear!

The Baptist General Convention of Texas, through its annual hunger offering, is helping purchase farming supplies and equipment for the Ghana Baptist Convention that has acquired 170 acres of land for families to generate agricultural income.

In South Africa, Texas Baptists work with the Baptist Union of South Africa on a poultry production and management project. Farm gains help farmers develop small business opportunities.

In Indonesia, Texas hunger funds help establish demonstration plots for farmers to learn ways to hedge rows to halt soil erosion, build up organic fertilizer levels and grow better crops.

Baptist World Aid supports a community-based rural development project with the Soroti Women’s Association in a region of Uganda, Africa, with widespread poverty that has experienced famine and insurgency conflict. To improve agricultural productivity, BWA supplied 38 bulls and 20 ox-ploughs, enabling families to till the land more quickly and to obtain a better harvest.

BWA also provided 60 women with goats—goat rearing is an easier income-generating project for elderly women. Two hundred women received hand hoes for farming. Other project supplies included improved agricultural seeds.

A few women received HIV/AIDS training to care for the sick and to improve sanitation in their homes.

One effort that advances the good health needed for economic productivity is His Nets, an initiative that provides repellent-treated mosquito nets to fight malaria through national affiliates of the Baptist World Alliance.

Malaria is a major cause of death, especially premature death in Africa, and is considered a preventable disease. An estimated 1 million people die annually from malaria.

The mosquito nets cost only \$5-\$6 wholesale and can protect a family for four or five years, a modest amount to most Americans but an expensive amount to sub-Saharan Africans who live on less than \$1 a day.

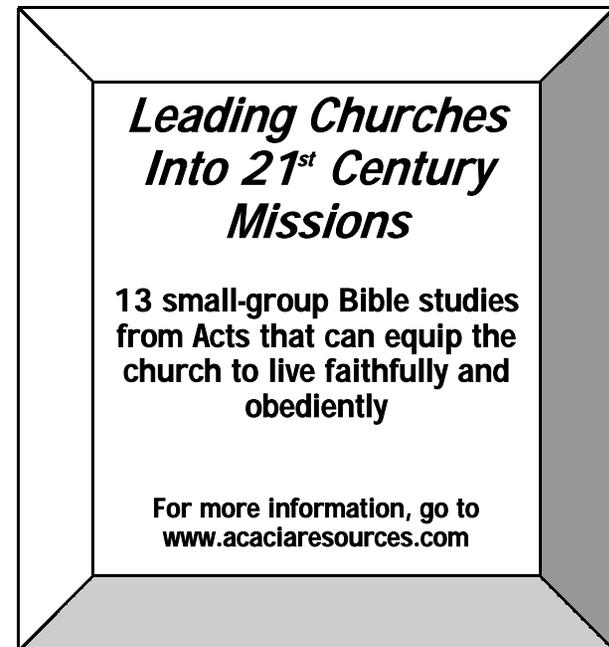
One of the founders, T Thomas, director of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma, noted that for about the cost of a fast-food meal or a movie ticket, a life could be saved. "Five or six dollars can mean the difference between life and death," he said.

His Nets delivered 1,000 nets before the rains arrived in the North Eastern Province of Kenya, when the threat of mosquitoes increases, to Sam Harrell, a missionary with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Harrell's organization, Africa Exchange, includes a focus on appropriate technology that transforms communities, such as providing clear water, using drip irrigation for crop growth, utilizing low-cost building techniques and supplying environmentally friendly fuel.

These kinds of initiatives equip and enable those at risk of hunger to feed themselves.

While rehabilitation projects help victims of natural disasters rebuild their lives, development projects enable those in chronic poverty to build a better life. Both are expressions of the call of the biblical witness to provide a hand up.



Renewing Justice

Theme: The biblical witness calls us to do justice for the poor and hungry.

Introduction

British and Australian Baptists are among the leaders spearheading a global initiative, the Micah Challenge, to mobilize the Christian community toward the goal of eradicating extreme poverty by 2015.

The movement takes its moral vision from Micah 6:8, a biblical passage describing God's desire for justice, mercy and humility.

Micah Challenge's goals include providing universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, combating AIDS/HIV and ensuring environmental sustainability. These and other goals are part of the Millennium Development Goals, which all 191 members of the United Nations support.

Doug Balfour, a member of London's Ashford Baptist Church and a movement founder, said the Micah Challenge has two objectives. First is "deepening our Christian commitment to the poor." Second is "for churches to hold governments accountable for the millennium goals."

"We are the first generation in the world who could eradicate poverty, if we have the political will," Balfour said. "I believe it is doable. I'm not pretending this is easy."

Balfour said small-mindedness about national interests, shortsightedness about the impact of poverty, mean-spiritedness and a lack of vision hinder the political will of evangelical Christians.

"Something as big as the abolition of slavery ... is doable for our generation," Balfour said. "God is looking to our generation of Christians to lead this [the abolition of poverty]."

Another Brit, Stephen Rand, a member of Teddington Baptist Church, said, "Christians hold the key to doing justice in a complex world. They have resources of hope because of their faith in God. They have resources of insight through the Holy Spirit. They have resources of global reach because of the fellowship of the church—the church is the first exponent of globalization."

"If Baptists are Bible people," Rand continued, "then they can lead the way in encouraging Christians to behave biblically and bring good news to the poor—materially and spiritually."

A number of other Baptists also lead the Micah Challenge. Michael Smitheram is the international coordinator and a member of Canberra Baptist Church in Melbourne, Australia. David Coffey, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and president of the Baptist World Alliance, is committed to making poverty history.

At a July 2005 rally at the G8 Summit, the meeting of the world's leading Western industrial nations, some British Baptists marched under a huge white banner that read, "Baptist Churches in UK Support Make Poverty History."

In stating his support for Make Poverty History, Alistair Brown, general director of BMS World Mission (formerly

the Baptist Missionary Society), said that “poverty is a stench in the nostrils of God,” and that the true shame is that it is unnecessary.

An Indonesian Baptist pastor at the rally said, “We need to go back to our theology and realize that relief is not a matter of charity, it’s a matter of justice.”

With such passion for halving poverty by 2015, rooted in faith, what does the biblical witness say about justice?

The Biblical Witness

The call to do justice is at the heart of the Bible, even though many American Christians are hard of hearing.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The prophet Micah asked a rhetorical question and gave a simple answer. God wanted justice.

Micah saw a society of injustice in which the powerful abused the powerless. “They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance” (2:2), Micah said.

“Should you not know justice?” he asked the rulers, “who hate the good and love evil” (3:1-2). He accused them of perverting “all equity (v 9), building with the blood of the people (v 10) and giving in to bribes (v 11).

God did not want such a society. He wanted an end to injustice that crushed the poor and a society in which good was done for the weakest members.

Interestingly, the Hebrew verb for *require* means continuous, uninterrupted action. In a similar way, the prophet Amos saw justice as a continuous movement, an unending pursuit. He said, “Let justice roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24).

Amos 5:21-24

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Speaking for God, Amos blistered the false worship of the people. He said God rejected their generous offerings and melodious music. God found no delight in acts of worship. Instead, God wanted continuous justice—justice was an authentic, ongoing worship of God. “Let justice roll down like waters” (5:24), irrigating the land with the rightness and goodness that benefited everyone.

Amos connected injustice with hunger and poverty. He saw it in the marketplace where the wealthy “trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land” (8:4). He rejected their schemes “to make the ephah small and the shekel great” (v 5), a reference to the practice of cheating customers with baskets that were smaller than they seemed and weights that were heavier than they should

have been. Amos said merchants were practicing “deceit with false balances” (v 5).

Rather than bribery, false scales and walking over the powerless, Amos urged the people, “Seek good and not evil, that you may live ... Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate” (5:14-15).

Isaiah 30:18

For the Lord is a God of justice.

The prophet Isaiah defined God’s nature with the agenda of justice. “For the Lord is a God of justice,” he wrote. In another passage, Isaiah wrote, “For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing” (61:8).

Like Isaiah, other biblical writers connected God’s cause with justice. “[T]he Lord sits enthroned forever ... He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity... [T]he needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever” (Ps 9:7-8, 18). The Psalmist tied justice to God’s character:

- “He loves righteousness and justice” (Ps. 33:5).
- “For the LORD loves justice (Ps 37:28).
- “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne” (Ps 89:14).
- “[W]hen the Lord comes to rule the earth. He will rule the peoples of the world with justice and fairness” (Ps 96:13, *Good News* translation).
- “I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor” (Ps 140:12).

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

¹⁸You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people.

¹⁹You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. ²⁰Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Moses freed the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and formed a society centered on the one true God with justice as its goal. The Psalmists and the prophets followed Moses’ trajectory.

For Moses, justice was about faithfulness to the law. Law-givers were warned about twisting justice, showing partiality, accepting bribes and undermining rightness. Justice was a foundational priority for how the people would form a new nation.

Do Justice

God wants justice to cascade across the land. That is a crystal-clear moral objective. If we accept this biblical truth, then we must take the next step to work out the irrigation system.

Indeed, how do we do justice in a world where hunger, ill-health, crippling poverty and denied human potential are so widespread?

One way forward is with support of the Micah Challenge.

Baptist representatives from some 30 nations energetically endorsed this ambitious initiative to cut global poverty by half within the next decade at the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Seoul, Korea, in 2004.

Their resolution said, “Christians everywhere must be agents of hope for and with the poor, and to work with others to hold our national and global leaders accountable in securing a more just and merciful world.”

The resolution called on nations “to take seriously the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations in the desire to halve current levels of world poverty by 2015 and upon the richest nations to take urgent action to ensure that at least 0.7 percent of the national GNP is used to this end.”

The first goal is to halve the number of people living on less than \$1 per day and who suffer from hunger.

Since 1990, 270 million people, mostly women and children, have died from hunger, roughly the population of the United States. Every year, almost 11 million children die before their 5th birthday. Some 800 million people go to bed hungry.

Another goal is to halt and start to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS; and to stop and reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

In the African nation of Zambia, 12% of the children have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. On a daily basis across Africa, 1,400 babies contract the HIV virus during childbirth or by breast feeding.

More than 300 million people worldwide suffer from malaria, a disease that causes one million deaths annually.

A third goal is to reverse the loss of environmental resources and to cut in half the number of people without clean drinking water by 2015.

An estimated 1.2 billion people need access to better sources of drinking water and 2.5 billion people suffer from the lack of decent sanitation.

These numbers are numbing. The problems seem overwhelming. The goals of the millennium campaign are ambitious.

Yet the biblical call is unmistakable: Do justice. The Micah Challenge is one way to answer the call.

The call of the Christian faith is not a commitment for the comfortable but a challenge for the committed. Part of that challenge is for those of us with power and influence to seek justice for others.

“I think the responsibility of those of us who have so much is to take sides with those who have so little, to be a voice for the voiceless, to act for the powerless,” said Alistair Brown, of BMS World Mission.

He said, “Those who suffer the most deprivation—the victims of unfair trading conditions for example—don’t have a powerful voice. But we do have a powerful voice, and we can at least challenge some practices and hopefully see things change.”

“There is evidence that this sort of campaigning really does change policies,” Brown said. “It makes a real difference to people who probably don’t even know we’re speaking for them. But we must do it. It is part of bringing God’s love to bear on those situations.”

We can halve global poverty by 2015, if American Christians will tell their congressman and senators that they expect the American government to keep its word. Our government pledged to support the goal of halving global poverty. Keeping that promise depends on people of faith speaking up and often to their elected leaders.

What does the Lord require of us at the beginning of the 21st century? Surely part of the answer, a major part, is to do justice through the Micah Challenge.

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