

# Recent Christian Interpretations of Material Poverty and Inequality in the Developed World

*Clive Beed*

*Retired, Department of Economics  
University of Melbourne*

*Cara Beed*

*Retired, Department of Social Science  
Australian Catholic University*

Assisting the poor is an important requirement of Christian belief and action. To do so, the poor need to be identified, a task that is probably easier in developing nations than in developed ones. Malnutrition, starvation, and proneness to disease are obvious signs of poverty in the developing world, but these qualities are less prevalent and are manifested less in the developed world. Disagreement has recently arisen among Christians about who the poor are in developed nations. Some Christians argue that material poverty and inequality are no longer problems because of the high degree of affluence in the West. Biblical notions of material poverty are taken to be inapplicable to the developed world. This article contests these views, arguing that a biblical understanding of material poverty and extreme inequality and how to grapple with them are relevant to the developed world, that poverty still exists in these countries, and that mitigating extreme inequality is a biblical proposition producing beneficial outcomes.

## Introduction

There are three objectives in his article. The first is to review recent Christian interpretations of material poverty and inequality in the developed world. The second is to show that disagreements exist among Christians on these matters. The third is to argue that biblical interpretations of material poverty and extreme inequality are still relevant in developed countries. These objectives are important because “the biblical tradition as a whole does not regard poverty as a ‘normal’ part of life, but as an evil exception to the divine plan.”<sup>1</sup> There is no question that “the body of Christ has an indisputable responsibility toward the poor.”<sup>2</sup>

Grappling with the questions that surround poverty involves judgment and interpretation. This includes assessing how Christians have responded to biblical understanding and how they have related these to modern secular definitions of material poverty and inequality. In the introduction, we discuss how material poverty might be identified. Section 2 canvasses the relevance of biblical criteria for identifying poverty in modern developed society. Section 3 looks at the relationship between *material poverty* and *inequality* because the two terms are often conflated. The word *poverty* used in this article means “material poverty,” unless otherwise specified.

No uniform agreement exists about what constitutes poverty. This hiatus arises because poverty is not naturally, but rather socially, constructed. Like everyone else, Christians may differ about what makes up poverty. One Christian view is that since poverty is no longer a problem in developed countries, neither are issues of inequality. An alternative Christian perspective is that extreme inequality is likely to place those at the lowest end of the distributional spectrum at risk of poverty. Gross inequality is seen also to imply social and economic disadvantages separate from material poverty itself.

Contemporary secular analysis usually measures material poverty on a relative or absolute basis or some combination of both. One Christian claims that relative measures are designed to assess “how badly the poor are faring compared to the general population.”<sup>3</sup> “Badly” need not capture the material situation of people so identified. Suppose the poor were identified as families who earn 50 percent or less of the average income within a nation (as occurs commonly today in Europe). On the one hand, perhaps living standards in the nation were so high that families could get by comfortably on 50 percent or less. On the other hand, in countries with a low-average income, 50 percent or less might well constitute destitution. Other relative measures can be used, but as Slaper notes, “there are no criteria for selecting one measure over another other than personal preference.” Further, “many of these approaches have been criticized on the grounds of uncertain relations between money income, social income and social well-being.” The alternative approach is to measure poverty on an absolute basis. Poverty is identified as not having sufficient income to purchase a given basket of goods and services. Disagreement arises as to what is an appropriate basket, leaving absolute measures plagued by problems analogous to relative measures. Subjective judgments are required to determine the appropriate basket. Because of problems inherent to both construals of poverty, Slaper concludes that “the standard set of measures of poverty” is inadequate.<sup>4</sup>

Both absolute and relative approaches to measuring poverty depend on what it means to live adequately in the society in question. This problem is stark be-

cause to live adequately today means something quite different in a developing country from what it does in a developed one. A poor family in the United States has an income vastly greater than one in Sierra Leone. If “to live adequately” were to be defined by standards in Sierra Leone, nobody in the United States is poor. On this basis, one Christian view is that poverty is no longer a problem in Western societies. Schneider argues that twenty-five modern capitalist nations have eliminated “real material poverty as a significant problem in their societies.” He quotes D’Souza approvingly, “if poverty is understood in its normal sense—as the absence of food, clothing and shelter—it is no longer a significant problem in America.”<sup>5</sup>

Real poverty was demonstrated more starkly in former epochs in presently developed countries, such as in France where four-fifths of families in the 1780s “devoted 90 percent of their incomes simply to buying bread—only bread—to stay alive.”<sup>6</sup> Compared to these times, few today in the developed world are constantly hungry, life expectancy has increased enormously, and the health of the vast majority of people has improved dramatically. In the United States, 50 percent of the officially defined *poor* (15 percent of the population) have air conditioning, a range of other electronic gadgetry, and motor cars.<sup>7</sup> Because affluence has reached such high levels compared with previous history, even those classified as poor today are rich compared with earlier times as well as with people in countries that are less developed today. Schneider goes so far to assert that this development calls for a reappraisal of biblical notions of poverty.<sup>8</sup>

## **Biblical Poverty and the Modern Developed Society**

The suggestion in this section is that material poverty in the Bible is identified in absolute terms but relative to the society in which it occurred. It might be described as an absolute/relative criterion. The absolute component implied a minimum basket of goods constituting a criterion for identifying poverty. The relative component was that the basket was identified in terms of the society of the day.<sup>9</sup> This is to use *relative* in a different sense from contemporary relative definitions of poverty. Relative today is usually taken to refer to existing distributions of income, as Slaper described above. That the biblical notion of relativity differs from its contemporary usage in identifying the poor is just as well, for modern-day relative measures of poverty possess specific weaknesses. This is true so much so that some Christians, such as E. Calvin Beisner, reject the relative approach to defining poverty. He rightly points out that the relative definition is arbitrary: Why identify the poor as those who earn 50 percent or

less of average income? He observes that it can lead to self-contradictory results, so that “a ‘poor’ American could have 116 times the income of his non-poor Bangladeshi neighbor.” Further, defining poverty in the modern relative sense means that poverty will never be eliminated short of attaining absolute equality in income. Because this is probably impossible, as well as undesirable, poverty will always exist, a situation not cohering well with Christian hopes of at least reducing poverty. Finally, measurements of national income are extraordinarily unreliable, and transfers (such as food stamps in the US) undermine the usefulness of national income measures.<sup>10</sup>

A relative approach to defining poverty is used in some European countries today, while the United States might be regarded as defining poverty by way of a combination of both absolute and relative terms. Because of the relative component, Beisner believes that “billions of dollars” are poured into “poverty relief” to non-poor Americans, making that assistance unavailable to our truly poor neighbors in the less-developed world who are literally a hundred times worse off than the recipients of our generosity here.” The conclusion Beisner draws is that assistance for the poor should be directed to those most destitute in the world. The poor American should not be assisted at the expense of her grossly worse off Bangladeshi neighbor.<sup>11</sup>

To pursue an agenda addressing global poverty like this, nation-states might have to be ranked by their gross domestic product (GDP) per head (or some such standard measure) and help only those at the lowest end. This raises problematic issues. The direction of poverty assistance proposed in the Bible was always in the context of a given nation-state or society, elastic as that notion was.<sup>12</sup> Premonarchical Israel and Roman Palestine might be regarded as two examples of nation-states disparate in socioeconomic conditions. Yet, in neither era did God, whether through the Law or through the Gospel, propose helping the worse-off poor in geographic areas outside those named—even if that had been feasible. The poor were to be helped in ancient Israel and in Jesus’ Palestine. Lack of communication with, and knowledge of, more distant societies does not seem to have been a reason for restricting assistance to the poor to the proximate society.

Theologians from Pilgrim (1981), to Stegemann (1984), Hoppe (2004), Witherington III (2010), and Longenecker (2010) have discussed poverty in the Bible.<sup>13</sup> According to Longenecker, “care for the poor was integral to Jesus’ proclamation, and presumably to his own activities and those of his entourage.” His message was cast in an environment characterized by “general hardship for the majority,” one “enmeshed in structural poverty.”<sup>14</sup> As the theologians above interpret the biblical material, wherever God talks about the poor, they see them mainly as lacking sufficient material necessities, in terms of the societies in

which they lived, insufficient to be able to participate fully in that society. This does not mean these poor were starving, constantly hungry, or suffered from “the absence of food”; they just did not have enough to be involved fully in their society. According to Stegemann, the most common New Testament term for the poor identified them as “wretched creatures who are fighting desperately for their survival.” These New Testament poor are “destitute, always close to starvation, often identified along with the disabled and the severely ill, poorly clothed, and dependent on the help of strangers.”<sup>15</sup> On this basis, they could not participate well in the life of their society. At the same time, these materially poor were likely to have been spiritually and culturally poor as well.

In the Bible, the poor are not only lacking material sufficiency. Poverty can also be thought of in nonmaterial terms. Bolt provides helpful insights into the nature of nonmaterial poverty.<sup>16</sup> It can range from the poverty of not knowing God—the poverty of the human spirit—to “the poor in spirit” specified by Jesus (Matt. 5:3). Exegetes interpret the latter as both materially poor and those resisting the attraction of wealth and feeling crushed as a result, “the wretched of the earth.” They “have reached the bottom *spiritually, emotionally, and psychically*,” and “cannot live without God’s supernatural help.” Their poverty is revealed in their total submission to God.<sup>17</sup> Nonmaterial dimensions of poverty have further aspects. Insufficient participation in the society of which people are part can be manifested by more than lack of income and wealth. This deficiency could be due to not having a job or only a poorly paid one or not possessing educational skills (human capital disadvantage), which could produce effects such as not being able to afford adequate medical treatment. These nonmaterial dimensions of poverty interact with each other and play an important role in determining material poverty. Nonmaterial poverty can be manifest in people in these situations suffering from poor nutrition, experiencing poor health, and living in inadequate housing in poorly serviced neighborhoods with high crime rates. Those not having a job and so on might be classified as “poor” in the sense that they lack “opportunity to fulfill God’s callings.”<sup>18</sup> The gambit of nonmaterial poverty could be extended even further. People suffering from the conditions above may suffer low self-esteem and experience insecurity in their housing and jobs. They may believe they are treated with disrespect and lack of dignity and/or feel isolated and alienated. They may see themselves as suffering from lack of participation in decision making, unable to be heard, and socially excluded.

The questions of who is materially poor and to be helped still have to be resolved. Beisner rightly maintains that a biblical definition of poverty is required for the modern world. He starts from literal secular dictionary interpretations and moves into theological ones. In his understanding of these sources, poor means

“lacking material possessions,” and “indigence, lack of means of subsistence.” He notes that in the New Testament, reference is made to three economic classes, broadly speaking “the rich,” “the working class,” and the “destitute.”<sup>19</sup> What Beisner does not acknowledge is that all these definitions are based on subjective evaluations of their constituents. Thus, “lacking” can be assessed only in relation to what is sufficient to avoid being judged as lacking. We do know what the minimum breadbasket that one needed in biblical times was in order to avoid being identified as lacking, as well as what it is now. Even those who work for their living may lack material possessions, as Beisner concedes. “Destitute” means without resources, that is not the same thing as indigent circumstances. The relativity is obvious from one dictionary that defines poor as “having little or no means to support oneself.” Little means something different from nothing.

Beisner also makes the argument that calling the officially defined poor American poor is wrong because these people are “by historical and world standards, abundantly fed, clothed, housed, educated, medicated, and entertained.”<sup>20</sup> This is a contention that does not cohere well with biblical criteria for seeing somebody as poor. Assessing someone as “abundantly” housed or educated requires a subjective or relative value judgment about her condition. Is completing some years of high school or beyond but not having a college degree evidence of abundant education? When does a “nonabundant” level set in? Our argument is that the Bible calls someone poor if he is unable to live adequately in terms of the standards of the time, for which they would probably lack full-time employment. Earlier history or the experience of other countries is not factored in to describe this condition.

With the exceptions noted above, biblical interpretations of poverty by recent theologians are not of great help for identifying the poor in contemporary developed societies. They seem more relevant to those that are developing. In David Baker’s otherwise fine book (2009), subtitled *Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law*, little discussion occurs of standards by which poverty might be identified in the Law. Certainly, there are sections on “marginal people” and “vulnerable groups,” and ways are discussed by which they were to be protected. However, no criteria other than their being resident aliens, orphans, widows, slaves, and semi-slaves are propounded. It is unclear to what degree these groups suffered material destitution. This lack of robust criteria by which the poor might be identified means that principles underlying concepts of poor in this biblical material do not emerge and therefore cannot be transposed to the present day. As Mason notes in his review of Baker, it is unclear as to what “the hermeneutical status of the biblical stipulations for societies today” are.<sup>21</sup> A similar judgment could also be made about Domeris’ careful exploration of

poverty relief in ancient Israel. Trying to identify the poor nowadays by focusing on resident aliens, orphans, and widows is likely to capture only partial accounts of poverty. Whereas a high degree of poverty occurred among peasants in biblical times, especially women and children, and probably still does in developing countries, this specification provides little guidance for identifying poverty in contemporary developed economies.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, widows, orphans and resident aliens today are not directly produced by socioeconomic structures, as say, are the unemployed and underemployed.

More guidance for relating biblical concepts of poverty to today can be derived from some of the theologians cited previously. Pilgrim argued that the poor in Jesus' time belonged to two groups. Day laborers were the most common, excluding slaves who were not numerically large in relation to other nations of the time. In modern parlance, day laborers might be casual and contract workers, including those periodically unemployed. In this group were also small landowning peasants and tenants of large landowners who were often overburdened with debt. In modern terms, these might be workers owning precarious small businesses, including those in the underground or black-market economy. Pilgrim's second of group was beggars, including "the sick, blind, lame, lepers and the destitute." These can be transposed directly to today, including the homeless, among whom there is a high degree of mental illness. Another expression is that the poor in Jesus' time as well as now consist of "the hungry, the sick and the afflicted, the captives and the oppressed, the outcasts and the sinners," those who are "socially and economically dispossessed."<sup>23</sup>

There is also a useful degree of concordance between Old Testament and New Testament concepts of poverty with relevance today. Hanks points to a "basic continuity between OT and NT perspectives on poverty and oppression."<sup>24</sup> For Pleins, "poverty in the Hebrew Bible denotes (1) lack of economic resources and material goods; and (2) political and legal powerlessness and oppression." This article is concerned only with the first group. Pleins includes in the first group: "small farmers, day laborers, construction workers, beggars, debt slaves, village dwellers." The lazy poor are also highlighted, mainly in the wisdom literature. As Pleins explains, the various traditions concerning the poor in the Hebrew Bible bring us "face-to-face with the harsh living conditions of the poor: hunger and thirst, homelessness, economic exploitation, legal injustices, lack of sufficient farmland," conditions that still prevailed in the New Testament.<sup>25</sup>

A reasonable inference from the interpreters above is that the chief criterion by which God<sup>26</sup> identifies poverty is by way of a minimum breadbasket necessary to live adequately at the time. The contention here is that both the biblical and the modern approach to identifying the materially poor is to see them as people

without sufficient sustenance to live adequately according to these standards. Clearly, latitude is involved in assessing poverty on this basis. These poor suffer some form of material deprivation so that they are not able to live properly. As above, their deprivation in today's terms need not necessarily consist of constant hunger. It might involve not having a full-time job to attain the sufficiency they require. The age-old difficulty of clarifying poverty on an adequacy basis remains.

The contents of the breadbasket would not remain static over time. As living standards rose throughout history, so would the contents of the basket. In all probability, GDP per head was higher in Jesus' time than in ancient premonarchical Israel. However this does not stop God's talking about the poor in the earlier period nor does it stop Jesus in the later time. Although a range of terms is employed to identify the poor, a similar inclusiveness of conditions affecting the poor is also employed. In both the Old and New Testaments, the poor were to be assisted and quite generously. To be poor meant warranting help in both eras, perhaps 1,500 years apart. In Old Testament Mosaic Law, the poor specifically included widows, children, and aliens, whereas Jesus used no such categories. Nevertheless, God commanded the well-off to help the poor whoever they were and for whatever reasons they were poor, which could include bad personal choices. The poor in the later time were assessed in the context of their society, just as they were in the earlier time. This biblical concept of poverty accords with how at least one contemporary Christian identifies modern poverty in the developed world. Sproul Jr. specifies the poor as "a relative term that assumes some standard of wealth." This standard has to be "adjusted from culture to culture, from generation to generation, even from year to year."<sup>27</sup> The problem of relativity remains.

God might appear to use an elastic meaning of poverty because the breadbasket is not specified precisely. They do not identify exactly who the poor are. As above, there is no certainty that poor then applied only to those who were hungry all the time or to those who did not have enough clothing or housing. An elastic construal of the poor does not mean a vacuous identification, however. It was probably perfectly obvious, in the context of the times, those who could not meet or those who could only meet provision for existence with difficulty. This criterion still seems relevant today. As Schneider expresses it, we define poverty "in pretty much the same way as people did in ancient times. For poverty, in essence, is simply not having enough material means to afford the food, clothing, and shelter required to sustain physical life over time"<sup>28</sup> "Not having enough" still has to be established for the society in question.

One way of conceptualizing not having enough today is to look at indicators of material hardship. The problem of defining poverty on a relative basis



remains because value judgments determine what specific measures of material hardship on which to focus as well as the extent of the hardship. Rector et al. and Short suggested a mix of hardship indicators. For example, Rector et al. proposed that to determine one's being in poverty or hardship consideration be given to a person or family who cannot obtain sufficient food; lives in a severely overcrowded, dilapidated dwelling; or has significant health problems for which the person or family cannot afford medical care. Rector et al. concluded that 14 percent of officially defined US poor households reported suffering recurrent "moderate" or "severe" hunger and 13 percent experienced substantial physical problems in their living conditions. Twenty-seven percent were unable to afford medical and/or dental care when needed and 60 percent were unable to meet essential expenses throughout the year. Overall, "the hardship population was 26 percent of the size of the official poverty population in 1992."<sup>29</sup> This is not far from Meyer and Sullivan's estimate cited above. These hardship indicators give a better indication of human suffering today than any described above because "there is a low correspondence between the income-based poverty measures and non-income measures of hardship."<sup>30</sup>

The conclusion is that an acceptable Christian view is to see somebody as poor in the West today if they live without the income necessary to purchase a set basket of goods and services, the absence of which generates certain hardships. Poverty is defined in the context of the particular society. This is the conventional Christian view of poverty currently, as used by Claar and Klay, Sider, Tiemstra, and Stapleford.<sup>31</sup> Being poor includes a diverse range of people: the unemployed, employed but earning subsistence incomes, single nonworking mothers, the disabled, and the elderly (who experience poverty for quite different reasons). They may have a job or not, may live in substandard housing, may or may not be able to afford adequate medical or dental care, and/or may be unable to afford private medical insurance. They may be poor because of their own bad personal choices, say, having a child outside of a stable relationship (preferably marriage) and/or because circumstances have been against them, such as losing their well-paid manufacturing job and having to resort to a low-paid service job. This view of poverty seems closer to the biblical one than any examined earlier. For example, Hoppe puts it that "when the New Testament speaks of 'the poor,' it speaks both of the 'working poor' and the genuinely destitute."<sup>32</sup> Destitute means lacking a means of subsistence—not their complete absence—which applies both in biblical times and now.

## Biblical Poverty and Inequality

Conjoining poverty and inequality commonly occurs in secular literature and is often discussed in the same book.<sup>33</sup> Partly, this is because the relative approach to identifying poverty today is a measure of inequality. If less than 50 percent of average income defines one as being poor, inequality below this criterion also identifies one as being poor. Thus, another way of looking at poverty in the Bible is in how it relates to material inequality. Yet, as with poverty, inequality cannot be defined absolutely. Further, there is no certainty that any particular measure of inequality can be equated with poverty, however defined. If biblical poverty is defined as absolute disadvantage, or lack of material subsistence, these poor may be at the lowest end of the distributional spectrum of material possessions (but probably not the lowest 50 percent). For a given country, suppose personal preference suggested the lowest 5 to 10 percent were poor. They would need to be identified to see what types of material deprivation they suffered, but this type of survey does not appear to have been done (in the US or the UK at least). Material hardship indicators of deprivation are usually not assessed in relation to the lowest 5 to 10 percent on the income/wealth spectrum. Instead, they survey people who have experienced particular types of hardship as noted above.

Additional qualities of human existence, beyond material sustenance, could be factored into a distributional matrix, such as housing quality, educational attainment, health quality, gender and ethnic relations, and so forth. Some of these specify nonmaterial states, but it would be possible to factor these into material situations. In this way, material subsistence could be extended by a wide range of additional qualities. A long list of potential attributes could be envisaged, for each of which a distributional schema could be constructed. It might even be possible to build a composite index or distributional matrix for the collection as a whole. This procedure is not normally workable, so that distributional measures are usually confined to income or wealth. Even so, comparing relative income or wealth shares between countries is not a useful way of contrasting poverty among them because incomes vary enormously among the countries concerned. Distributional patterns within a country have more relevance when it comes to identifying deprivation or poverty inside the country.

For example, examine intranational wealth distribution in the world today, admitting that data is not reliable. By and large, commentators usually describe these distributions as highly unequal, the word *highly* being charged with subjective, relative connotations. A typical distribution in the developing world is that the richest 20 percent of households “probably owns and controls well over 90 percent of the productive and financial resources, especially physical capital and

land but also financial capital (stocks and bonds) and human capital in the form of better education and health.” The United States is one example. These data are subject to qualification: older people are likely to be wealthier than younger people because they have had a lifetime to accumulate assets.<sup>34</sup>

Only inferences about poverty can be drawn from these figures, but there is a fair chance that some significant percentage of households at the low end of the wealth/poverty distribution are suffering material deprivation, even if an exact figure cannot be put on the number. This is because wealth is an indicator of well-being independently of the income it provides; for example, wealth can be a source of consumption. That 28 percent of Americans had zero or negative nonhome wealth in 2004, up from 25.7 percent in 1983, implies growing nonmortgage debt. These people had little ability to call on capital for whatever reason, from buying white goods to investing in self-owned jobs. Their material condition had become more parlous between 1983 and 2004 because the “poorest 40 percent [of households] lost 59 percent [of net worth]. By 2004, their average wealth had fallen to \$2,200” in real terms.<sup>35</sup> It is a fair guess that some of the 28 percent were in the quagmire of debt-induced poverty. That some of this might have been their own fault does not feature in God’s admonitions to help the poor out of their condition.

Assume that Sproul Jr., cited above, is correct in saying that poor is “a relative term that assumes some standard of wealth,” having to be “adjusted from culture to culture, from generation to generation, even from year to year.” How these poor fare in relation to a wealth standard leads into notions of inequality. Those lowest on any scale of inequality probably stand a risk of being in poverty. Because of the difficulties in relating poverty to inequality, argument persists among Christians about whether the Bible normally favors a reduction in material inequality. One group asserts that the Bible *is* concerned with reducing extreme inequality in material distribution but not with creating some sort of absolute equality, however defined. Instead, excessive inequalities are to be mitigated. Pilgrim, asserting such an egalitarian ethos in Jesus’ teaching, concludes that “the primary burden of responsibility for more equal distribution of economic resources rests with the possessors.” Other like-minded theologians are Blomberg, “Jesus is concerned to moderate extremes,” as well as Forrester. Mott and Sider approach a similar position that biblical “justice involves rectifying the gross social inequities of the disadvantaged.” A reasonable summary of the view of these theologians is that Jesus normally advocates a reduction in disparate material inequality.<sup>36</sup>

Other Christians, however, maintain that the Bible does *not* promote greater equality, usually understood as absolute equality. Hill and Rae argue that there is

nothing “fundamentally wrong with inequality.” However, they do not base this judgment on biblical sources, and it is unclear to what types of material inequality they refer. When they say that God hates “injustice and oppression, which both produce and exacerbate inequality,” if God does get rid of injustice and oppression, he is producing a more-equal result.<sup>37</sup> Schneider again approvingly quotes D’Souza who says that while “relative inequality” remains, “the question becomes, does that continue to matter.” Indeed, Schneider sees “nothing clearly immoral at all in the extreme wealth and enjoyment of the one person over and against the relative affluence of the other.”<sup>38</sup> Other Christians, Hill included, admit that “most egalitarians do not want *complete* equality.” Indeed, no Christian favoring a reduction in extreme inequality advocates evenness, uniformity, or absolute equality. Mott and Sider agree with Hill that “equality of economic results is not compatible with human freedom and responsibility.”<sup>39</sup> Both sides would probably reject aspirations of absolute equality because, as Ballor notes, “God, in his infinite wisdom, has deigned to create a universe characterized by a diversity of beings, with a diversity of gifts, dispositions, talents, abilities, and strengths, not only between but among different species.”<sup>40</sup>

The more typical enemy is unstated absolute *equality*, defined as “likeness, evenness, and uniformity.” Some Christians hold the Bible to advocate *equity* made up of “justice, impartiality, and fairness” instead of equality, understood as uniform equality.<sup>41</sup> Other Christians would probably respond that they, too, advocate these qualities, but, in their view, justice, impartiality, and fairness are best administered where distributional differences are not exorbitant.

Grudem approaches the question of inequality by stressing that in heaven different rewards will be made (Luke 19:17, 19). Inequality in heaven is mandated by God. This still leaves open the question as to what degree of inequality on earth is unacceptable to God. As Grudem admits, “there are some extreme kinds of inequalities in possessions and opportunities that are wrong in themselves.” He does not discuss how this might relate to the present age, except to note that those at the lowest end of the distribution spectrum are to be regarded as poor, to be assisted materially. Grudem’s later work on economics does not have a biblical analysis of inequality, except in relation to inheritance and to the role of government in dealing with it. In similar ways, Witherington does not address how poverty in the Bible might relate to the contemporary world, nor does he discuss inequality.<sup>42</sup>

Thus the relative question of “what is too great?” continues to rear its head. Probably, where the richest 20 percent owns 90 percent of the wealth, as occurs in many countries of the world, this would be regarded by some Christians as too great a divide. Blomberg holds the Bible to teach that “there are certain extremes

of wealth and poverty which are in and of themselves intolerable,” but that “these extremes cannot be quantified.” Pope Benedict XVI maintains that “the scandal of glaring inequalities’ continues,” that while the world’s wealth is growing in absolute terms, “inequalities are on the increase”<sup>43</sup> also. A secular literature is developing on why extreme inequality is a bad thing, although Christians have not much entered this debate. Wilkinson and Pickett, for example, report higher levels of social and economic dysfunction in more unequally developed countries and the United States.<sup>44</sup> If extreme inequality was dampened, disparities in the indicators between countries may reduce. These claims in no way depend on regarding the accumulation of wealth as a zero-sum game.

One element of the analyses of those theologians and Christian social scientists who maintain that the Bible advocates a reduction in disparate inequality is to appeal to the aims of the Mosaic Law. Lunn has come to the conclusion that the Mosaic Law in premonarchical Israel had the intention of creating “a relatively egalitarian society” but that this “was transformed into one where the rich and powerful exploited the poor and weak.”<sup>45</sup> This position has been supported in various expressions by those such as de Vaux, Gottwald, Mott, Mason, Niedercorn, Hay, Kraybill, Birch, Yoder, Albertz, Sider, Mott and Sider, Pleins, Forrester, Bauckham, Wright, Domeris, Berman, Hughes, and Baker.<sup>46</sup> To take one instance, Hughes maintains that “there would be a large measure of equality in enjoying God’s provision if these laws were observed,” which they were not. Most of the aforesaid sources go further in claiming that the Hebrew Bible provides “the fundamental guiding principles required for the solution of contemporary poverty.”<sup>47</sup>

Jesus is usually regarded as upholding the principles of the Mosaic Law (see Matt. 5:17–19; Luke 16:17), but not its detailed minutia. Assume that the sources above are correct in determining that the Mosaic Law was oriented to reducing high inequality and that this was one of its central principles. *Prima facie*, it would be accepted that Jesus would advocate a reduction in extreme inequality wherever he saw it. Jesus’ admonitions toward charity and philanthropy were directed to the poor, again, never defined. To the extent that the rich followed his advice, assets were redistributed from the rich to the poor that could only generate greater equality than existed without such practice.<sup>48</sup> All this was to counter “the extremes of wealth and poverty” that existed in Jesus’ time, “with the poor by far the majority.” Pilgrim goes even further in highlighting Jesus’ stress on reducing inequality, arguing that the “whole tenor of the gospel portrait is disposed most favorably toward the poor and against the rich.” Indeed, so concerned was Jesus about extreme inequality that at the second coming, the “poor are promised a radical social reversal of their lot in the coming age.”<sup>49</sup> Such a reversal could only

overturn present levels of high material inequality. Because the poor were and are the more numerous in all ages, reversing the situations of rich and poor would make things more equal. The preceding arguments throw doubt on the argument that God was not concerned to mitigate excessive inequality, only poverty. In all probability, materially aiding the poor would reduce disproportionate inequality, and the positions of rich and poor would be reversed at the second coming.

These arguments do not satisfy some Christians. They continue to hold the Bible to be concerned not with inequality but only with poverty. Beisner maintains that God rejected equality by “promising to bless the obedient with prosperity and to curse the disobedient with poverty.”<sup>50</sup> This assumes that God sanctions disparities between prosperity and poverty. These disparities imply inequality, although it is unclear how much inequality is necessary to generate poverty. At the least, poverty could coexist with prosperity in this view, which is also a way of describing inequality. Yet, this is not what God wants. Beisner’s statement can be interpreted that God *is* concerned to reduce inequalities—he wants everybody to be obedient—in which case no one would be in need (Deut. 15:4). If everybody were prosperous and no one were poor, there would be a more equal outcome than with some being prosperous and some being poor.

Other contemporary Christians criticize the idea that the Holy Trinity as expressed in the Law and the Gospel wants to reduce gross inequality. They see the only way of achieving this today to be by way of central government-mediated income redistribution.<sup>51</sup> Any greater involvement by government in economic affairs is unwelcome and counterproductive. A variant of this argument is Hill and Lunn’s that “the complex relationships and interactions of markets make it difficult to impose” a standard of “a deliberately chosen pattern of income distribution.”<sup>52</sup> It is doubtful if anybody does call for the latter, instead proposing voluntary initiatives that would work in the direction of high inequality reduction.

A case can be constructed that government-mediated income redistribution is not the most effective direction for poverty or inequality reduction; private and public job creation is. The poor “need to have property of their own, property for which they can be responsible and productive stewards.”<sup>53</sup> Localized endeavors to generate jobs on Christian criteria stand a better chance of success to mitigate poverty and inequality than trying to extend the power of government. In the sort of jobs that churches and parachurch ministries could help create (e.g., self-employment), wage structures are usually flatter than in existing businesses. Indeed, this could be deliberately sought to maintain a commitment to mitigating extreme inequality. Greater equality in remuneration is consistent with efficiency, to which the experience of the two Christian-based UK Daily Bread coops testifies. This stands in stark contrast to existing companies where extremely unequal

remuneration structures exist, ranging up to 400:1 in large corporations. If “decentralized groups,” as Hill calls them (families, churches, businesses),<sup>54</sup> got into the business of job creation, agreeing voluntarily that workers in jobs so created be paid without large disparities between them, a step could be made to reduce high material inequality. If this mode of job creation took off, government need not have a major role to play in rectifying material inequality.

Hill also suggests that a focus on reducing inequality is to “legitimate envy.” Those at the lower end of the distributional spectrum “envy what others possess.”<sup>55</sup> Envy by the poor in their parlous material condition is nowhere reported in the Bible. Indeed, as noted above, the poor in the Bible have reached the bottom spiritually, emotionally, and psychically and cannot live without God’s supernatural help. This is to what they look, not bearing resentment at, or envying the lifestyles of the rich. Indeed, they may disparage their lifestyles, a phenomenon possibly occurring today. Envy may stem from inequality but this does not mean that inequality necessarily generates envy. The lives of the richest 10 percent may be so far removed from the poorest 20 percent (including locationally) that they have no way of observing them, except by way of television. More likely is that the poorest 20 percent want a lifestyle approaching some average norm in their society, including having a permanent job paying a living wage, and an owner-occupied house. From a Christian perspective, these seem reasonable demands. If envy does occur in these situations, it is a spiritual problem requiring a spiritual solution.<sup>56</sup>

Whether the poor envy high wealth or not, God always encourages those who have created wealth to share their wealth with those who have not so created it. Nor is there any normative direction in the Bible for wealth creators to hang onto their wealth for themselves. Even if “differences in abilities and willingness to work are sufficient to generate the income differences seen in the United States and other Western countries,” the triune God wants those with more ability to share with those of less. The “diversity of humankind,” or people’s desire to purchase different goods, is not intended to counter God’s intentions.<sup>57</sup> People are not “equally industrious, equally productive, equally prudent, and equally in need,” and it does not take away from God triune’s preference to reduce high inequalities where they exist.<sup>58</sup> To claim that greater material equality “usually mean[s] imposing inequality before the law” flies in the face of reality.<sup>59</sup> Extreme material inequality invariably goes with unequal access to the law. The rich can afford superior access to the law compared with the poor.

The arguments between Christians who maintain that the Bible normatively favors reduction in great inequality, and those who hold opposite views show no signs of resolution. Turning to theologians to resolve the problem does not help

because most do not discuss inequality. As examples, neither the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992) nor *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (2006) has entries on equality/inequality, but both do on poor/poverty. An entry does occur for justice, but this is understood more as righteousness. Again, Douglas Hicks' fine treatment of inequality and Christian ethics does not touch on the Bible, but focuses on earlier theologians. Only a few theologians in the last fifteen years have pursued equality in the Bible, of whom Forrester is one.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

This article assessed how a range of Christians view poverty and inequality in the contemporary developed world. As far as poverty is concerned, their conclusions tally with biblical analyses that material poverty is a lack of goods and services sufficient to enable families to participate adequately in the life of their communities. Subjective or relative evaluations cannot be excised from this depiction. For example, what it means to "participate adequately" can be the subject of disagreement. In addition, participating adequately is best identified in relation to the society of the time. This subjectivity in identifying poverty extends as far back as the Bible. As in that time, no hard and fast definitions of poverty present themselves. Poverty is related to, but not identical with, extreme economic inequality, for which inviolate definitions do not exist either. Less agreement occurs among Christians about whether reduction in extreme inequalities is a normative biblical proposition. Nevertheless, the case has been that, for Christians, biblical interpretations of material poverty and extreme inequality provide the base for assessing the relevance of these conditions to today's developed world.

To mitigate poverty, and perhaps extreme inequality, job creation for the poor, and thereby wealth creation (together with encouraging stable marriages and families), are valuable initiatives churches and other Christian organizations could take. This form of wealth creation also dampens extreme material inequalities, but need not hinder the pursuit of wealth creation *per se*. Indeed, it enhances wealth creation. Every job created for a poor person helps them out of poverty, increases wealth creation, and reduces inequality in the distribution of income and wealth.



## Notes

1. Leslie Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 147.
2. John Bolt, "Christian Obligations: 'The Poor You Will Always Have with You,'" *Journal of Markets & Morality* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 467.
3. Timothy Slaper, "Redefining Progress: Economic Indicators and the Shalom of God," in *Toward a Just and Caring Society*, ed. D. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 209.
4. Slaper, "Redefining Progress," 210, 224.
5. John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 19, 22.
6. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 16.
7. Dinesh D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 75. Differing from official estimates of US poverty, a consumption-based measure yields only 5 percent of the US population in poverty, as per Bruce Meyer and James Sullivan, "Winning the War: Poverty from the Great Society to the Great Recession," *Working Paper 18718* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2013), 54.
8. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 2.
9. As per Bolt, "Christian Obligations," 469; and Andrew Schein, "The Vision of Deuteronomy 15 with Regard to Poverty, Socialism, and Capitalism," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 254.
10. Calvin Beisner, "Poverty: A Problem in Need of Definition" (adapted from a paper presented to the Church and Welfare Conference, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, October 23–24, 1992, 10).
11. Beisner, "Poverty: A Problem in Need of Definition," 13.
12. The issue of possible definitions for society is discussed in Brian Strow and Claudia Strow, "Social Choice: The Neighborhood Effect," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 59–70.
13. Jesus' conceptualizations of the poor are discussed more fully in Clive Beed and Cara Beed, "Biblical Warnings to the Rich and the Challenge of Contemporary Affluence," *Journal of Markets & Morality*, 15 no. 2 (2012): 361–88. The secondary commentators are Walter Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981); Walter Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You*; Ben Witherington

- III, *Jesus and Money* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010); and Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
14. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 115, 116.
  15. Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor*, 14, 18.
  16. Bolt, "Christian Obligations," 469–70.
  17. Frederick Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 160, original emphasis. Comparable interpretations occur in Grant Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 166; David Turner, *Matthew: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 149–50; Michael Wilkins, *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 205–6; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 169; Donald Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1–13* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 91–92. Other commentators express a similar orientation.
  18. John Tiemstra, "Poverty, Government, and the Meaning of Economics," *Faith and Economics* 44 (2004): 70.
  19. Beisner, "Poverty: A Problem in Need of Definition," 14–15.
  20. Beisner, "Poverty: A Problem in Need of Definition," 21.
  21. David Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands: Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009); John Mason, review of *Tight Fists or Open Hands*, *Faith and Economics* 57 (2011): 56–59.
  22. William Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God: The Social Construction of Poverty among Biblical Peasants* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 177.
  23. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 43, 44, 83, 166.
  24. Thomas Hanks, "Poor, Poverty. New Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. D. Freeman, G. Herion, D. Graf, J. Pleins (Sydney: Doubleday, 1992), 422.
  25. J. David Pleins, "Poor, Poverty. Old Testament," 402, 413.
  26. The word *God* in this article encompasses the three members of the Holy Trinity: God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—the triune God.
  27. R. C. Sproul Jr., *Dollar Signs of the Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 99.
  28. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 76.
  29. Robert Rector, Kirk Johnson, and Sarah Youssef, "The Extent of Material Hardship and Poverty in the United States," *Review of Social Economy* 57, no. 3 (1999): 10, 14,

- 17, 20. Reprinted as Web Memo No. 187, The Heritage Foundation, to which the page numbers here refer. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1999/09/the-extent-of-material-hardship-and-poverty-in-the-united-states>.
30. Kathleen Short, "Material and Financial Hardship and Income-based Poverty Measures in the USA," *Journal of Social Policy* 34, no. 1 (2005): 31.
  31. Victor Claar and Robin Klay, *Economics in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007); Ronald Sider, *Just Generosity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007); Tiemstra, "Poverty, Government, and the Meaning of Economics," 70; John Stapleford, *Bulls, Bears and Golden Calves: Applying Christian Ethics in Economics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
  32. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor among You*, 163.
  33. Such as in the widely used and well-known texts: Bradley Schiller, *The Economics of Poverty and Discrimination*, 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2008); and Edward Wolff, *Poverty and Income Distribution*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
  34. Michael Todaro and Stephen Smith, *Economic Development*, 9th ed. (Boston: Pearson/Addison Wesley, 2006), 235; Edward Wolff, "Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze," *Working Paper No. 502* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Levy Economics Institute, 2007), 11, 27–29.
  35. Wolff, "Recent Trends in Household Wealth," 8, 14.
  36. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 169, 170; Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1999), 145; Duncan Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 93–99; Stephen Mott and Ronald Sider, "Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm," in *Toward a Just and Caring Society*, ed. D. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 27.
  37. Austin Hill and Scott Rae, *The Virtues of Capitalism* (Chicago, Northfield Publishing, 2010), 68.
  38. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 22, 34.
  39. Peter Hill, "Creating and Distributing Wealth: Whose Responsibility?" in *Wealth, Poverty and Human Destiny*, ed. D. Bandow and D. Schindler (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), 7, original emphasis; Mott and Sider, "Economic Justice," 33.
  40. Jordan J. Ballor, "The Moral Challenges of Economic Equality and Diversity," *Philosophia Reformata* 78 (2013): 198.
  41. Sproul Jr., *Dollar Signs*, 115.

42. Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 57; Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Witherington III, *Jesus and Money*.
43. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 245; Blomberg maintains this position in “Neither Capitalism nor Socialism: A Biblical Theology of Economics,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 215; Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 22.
44. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London, Allen Lane, 2009).
45. John Lunn, “On Riches in the Bible and the West Today,” *Faith and Economics* 39 (2002): 15.
46. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 88, 173; Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (London: SCM, 1979), 389, 692; Stephen Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 68–69; John Mason, “Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor,” *Transformation* 4 (1987): 7; John Neidercorn, “Two Biblical Conceptions of an Equitable and Efficient Economy,” *Review of Social Economy* 43, no. 2 (1985): 191; Donald Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1989), 34; Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 91–99; Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 179–82; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994), 69–70; Ranier Albertz, *A Brief History of Israelite Religion*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1994), 72–76; Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 4th ed. (Dallas: Word, 1997), 67–72; Mott and Sider, “Economic Justice,” 35–40; J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 70 (qualified); Forrester, *On Human Worth*, 88; Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 118–21; Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 207; Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God*, 177; Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 87, 169; Dewi Hughes, *Power and Poverty: Divine and Human Rule in a World of Need* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 70; Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands*, 95.
47. Hughes, *Power and Poverty*, 70; Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God*, 3.
48. Bruce Malina, “Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World,” *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (1987): 366.
49. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 44, 51, 83.

## Recent Christian Interpretations

50. E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1988), 240.
51. Such as Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty*; Hill, “Creating and Distributing Wealth.”
52. Peter Hill and John Lunn, “Markets and Morality: Things Ethicists Should Consider When Evaluating Market Exchange,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007): 638.
53. Clive Beed and Cara Beed, “Assisting the Poor to Work: A Biblical Interpretation,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 40, no. 1 (2010): 13–37; Bolt, “Christian Obligations,” 477.
54. Hill, “Creating and Distributing Wealth,” 8.
55. Hill, “Creating and Distributing Wealth,” 4.
56. See Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 53: “As a spiritual problem, envy requires a spiritual solution.” See also Jordan J. Ballor and Victor V. Claar, “Envy in the Market Economy: Sin, Fairness, and Spontaneous (Dis)Order,” *Faith and Economics* 61–62 (Spring/Fall 2013): 33-53.
57. Hill, “Creating and Distributing Wealth,” 5, 7, 9.
58. Sproul Jr., *Dollar Signs*, 117.
59. Hill and Lunn, “Markets and Morality,” 638.
60. Douglas Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Forrester, *On Human Worth*.