

Justice and Jubilee: A CPJ Foundational Backgrounder on Poverty

A Working Document

CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE





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Our Vision

- CPJ is committed to seek human flourishing and the integrity of creation as our faithful response to God’s call for love, justice and stewardship.
- We envision a world in which individuals, communities, societal institutions and governments all contribute to and benefit from the common good.

Our Mission

- CPJ’s mission is to promote *public justice* in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God’s call for love, justice and stewardship.

Public Justice

- Public Justice is the *political* dimension of loving one’s neighbour, caring for creation and achieving the common good, and is particularly the responsibility of government and citizens.

CPJ addresses a range of public justice issues, from eliminating poverty to creating a climate of welcome for newcomers to fostering hopeful citizenship. CPJ’s professional staff actively engage in a number of activities to realize CPJ’s mission and keep public justice front and centre in policy debates.

Our members, who come from a wide variety of faith communities, are committed to public justice and its contributions to public dialogue. They participate in CPJ’s work through campaigns, dialogue and financial support. CPJ’s 13-member board of directors includes representation from across Canada and meets regularly three times per year.

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Executive Summary

Over the past twenty-five years, poverty rates in Canada have remained roughly steady, staying close to 15%. The depth of poverty experienced by poor Canadians has gotten worse over time, however. The serious nature of poverty in Canada is reflected in hunger and housing insecurity. In just one month of 2006, 753,458 Canadians needed to use a food bank. One in seven Canadian households spent 30% or more of their income on housing in 2004.

But poverty is more than low income. It is lack of access to a sustainable livelihood, lack of opportunity, social exclusion, and loss of well-being. Poverty impacts every part of a person's life. Poverty makes it difficult for people to live in dignity and to respond to God's calling in their lives. Poverty takes a heavy individual and social toll, has an impact on health and on the environment, and an economic cost. The causes of poverty are multiple and complex, including circumstances that are beyond control such as poor health or death of a spouse, and structural causes, such as poorly designed programs or laws and public practices based on exclusionary values.

Public policy both shapes and is shaped by Canadian attitudes on poverty. There are five major perspectives that Canadians take on poverty. The predominant approach is an economic understanding of poverty that relies on notions of productivity and monetary value to distinguish between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. This approach is challenged by a human rights perspective, notions of fairness and entitlement, and an understanding of poverty as a social determinant of health.

A Biblical perspective of poverty must begin with the recognition that all people are created in the image of God. That image bestows an inherent dignity upon each person; our love for God therefore requires that we respect the dignity of our neighbour and that we take responsibility for their well-being. The Bible also calls us to practice justice, protecting and uplifting the weakest members of society. In Biblical times, this was reflected in the public practices of allowing the poor to glean in the fields, as well as the Sabbath and Jubilee laws which called for periodic redistribution of the means of production and the opportunity for everyone to participate in the economy on an equal footing.

This Biblical perspective has implications for how Christians understand economics. The Biblical definition of economy, *oikonomia*, means "good care for the household." Translated to a larger scale, that means care for land and people, or an economy of care. This economy of care must embrace both an economics of abundance and an economics of enough, in which each has enough to meet his or her own needs, and is satisfied with enough.

CPJ's public justice framework recognizes that all people are created by God to live in dignity, with rights and responsibilities. From this perspective, poverty is a significant injustice because it undermines human dignity, limiting people's ability to live out God's calling and fully participate in their community. Public justice entails the responsibility of everyone to do something about poverty, including government. The government has a moral obligation to leadership, which must include enacting structural policies to eliminate poverty, promoting responsible behaviour from other social actors, and creating policies that ensure all people have the means to exercise a sustainable livelihood that provides a livable income.

Introduction

Poverty is a significant concern in Canada, one that has not diminished over the past few decades in good economic times and bad. In fact, the rate of poverty has remained consistent, while the poverty depth has increased. Poverty is a multi-faceted problem which encompasses many personal, spiritual and policy issues. Citizens for Public Justice has addressed the issue of poverty for many years, beginning with its work on economic structures and social rights and responsibilities, and moving to its work on child poverty a decade ago. In recent years, CPJ has focused on poverty reduction strategies, calling for a federal poverty reduction strategy, and the related issue of livable incomes, which led to CPJ's position on Guaranteed Livable Income. CPJ has also begun to work on the issues of housing and homelessness and child care.

While CPJ is a policy organization that seeks to offer insightful analysis of existing problems and constructive policy alternatives, our work is faith-based. We seek to take into account the values and principles that have led to structural or societal problems, and to critique those perspectives from a public justice perspective. Our public justice perspective emphasizes the responsibility of citizens and governments to work for justice and the common good. It is this belief that motivates our work on poverty and all of its related issues.

This paper is intended to be a resource for those who are wondering about the faith basis of CPJ's work on poverty, highlighting our understanding of the Biblical call to justice and a Christian vision of economics. It also explains our public justice perspective on poverty, and the moral obligation of governments to take leadership on poverty, as well as the responsibility of every person and every social institution to eradicate poverty.

CPJ works in many coalitions and with people of different faiths on the issues of poverty. We are willing to pursue common goals with those of different perspectives. Our emphasis on values and our unique perspective of public justice is something that we bring to these shared efforts. This paper offers insight into our values and perspective. It can also be a useful tool for small groups to explore the issue of poverty and to understand the values that perpetuate poverty, as well as the values and principles that call us to action on poverty.

The first section of this paper explores poverty in Canada, explaining the prevalence of poverty, its causes and effects. The second section of this paper seeks to understand the values by which Canadians understand poverty, including an economic understanding, a human rights perspective, notions of fairness and entitlement, and as a social determinant of health. The third section of this paper offers a Biblical look at poverty, including the call to justice and a Christian understanding of economics. The fourth section of this paper examines poverty from a public justice perspective.

1. The Context of Poverty

The Prevalence of Poverty

Over the past twenty-five years, poverty rates in Canadaⁱ have remained roughly steady, staying close to 15%.¹ In 2006, 14.5% of all Canadians – more than 4.7 million people – had before-tax incomesⁱⁱ below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) rate as measured by Statistics Canada.² The depth of poverty experienced by poor Canadians has gotten worse over time, however.³

A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development placed Canada 20th among the 30 OECD countries for its poverty rate. Using the measure of 50% of median income, Canada had a poverty rate of 12%, well above France's poverty rate of 7% and the United Kingdom's rate of 8%.⁴ Canada was also singled out as one of a few countries who have seen a significant rise in income inequality over the past decade.

The serious nature of the problem of poverty is reflected in hunger and housing insecurity. In just one month of 2007, 720,231 Canadians needed to use a food bank, and fully one-third of Canadian food banks had difficulty meeting demand.⁵ Food banks reported that while 50.7% of recipients received their primary income from social assistance, 13.5% of recipients have employment earnings as their primary source of income.

In 2001, there were 1.5 million Canadians in core housing need; that is, they fell below standards set for adequacy, suitability and affordability. Housing affordability problems increased in 2004, as one in seven Canadian households spent 30% or more of their income on housing.⁶ A recent calculation in January 2007 by the Canadian Council on Social Development showed that “almost one-quarter of Canadian households – more than 2,700,000 households – are paying too much of their income to keep a roof over their heads.”⁷ A nationwide affordability crisis is emerging as tenant incomes are falling and rents are rising faster than inflation.

Housing insecurity, coupled with income insecurity, has intensified the widespread and rapid growth of homelessness in Canada. For instance, Vancouver has seen significant growth in the number of homeless people region-wide, more than doubling from 1,121 persons in 2002 to 2,660 persons in the 2008 Homeless Count.⁸ Shelters face a major challenge as they are overused and under-supported. The Ottawa 2006 Report Card on Ending Homelessness showed that 9,010 people used the shelter system in 2006 in Ottawa compared to 8,853 a year earlier, an increase of 1.8%.⁹ The report also found that more children in families stayed in shelters, 1,163 compared to 1,035 in 2005, reflecting more families experiencing homelessness.¹⁰

The past decade was a period of strong economic growth. Canada's Gross Domestic Product increased by 27% in real terms between 1995 and 2005.¹¹ Employment rates were high during this period and the unemployment rate dropped to levels that had not been seen in thirty years. Yet poverty rates did not

ⁱ Canada has no official definition of poverty. Many analysts use Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) to classify individuals and families as poor. The LICO indicates the level at which “straitened circumstances” may result because a greater portion of income is spent on basics than for the average family of similar size. The LICO therefore varies according to family size and location. LICO is calculated both before and after-tax; both measures are used as unofficial poverty rates.

ⁱⁱ 10.5% of Canadians had after-tax incomes below the LICO – more than 3.3 million people.

decline at the same rate. Indeed, in 2005, child and family poverty rates remained higher than they were in 1989, when the House of Commons declared its unanimous support for eliminating child poverty in Canada. This suggests that neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s did not result in prosperity “trickling down” to those at the lower end of the income scale. The market economy by itself is insufficient to ensure that people are not forced to live in poverty.

The hard reality is that Canadians are working more; yet for most Canadians, this has not translated into higher incomes. Rather, the majority of Canadian households are working longer hours simply to maintain the standard of living that households had in the 1970s. On average, Canadian families with children are putting in 200 hours more each year at work. Only the top ten percent of households have seen a real increase in their incomes. The bottom forty percent are working longer but actually earning less than households earned a generation ago.¹²

The working poor thus make up a significant number of those Canadians living in poverty. For example, in 2004, 58% of two parent families living in poverty received their principal income from employment and received no social assistance or Employment Insurance (EI) payments. Not all jobs in Canada pay a living wage.

In periods of recession, the difficulties faced by poor Canadians increase. They are the first to lose their jobs, find it harder to get new work, and social assistance and EI are inadequate to prevent people from living into poverty. More Canadians will slide into poverty as a result of recessions.

Understanding Poverty

The most visible aspect of poverty is low income, but poverty is much more than that. It is lack of access to a sustainable livelihood. It includes being forced to make hard choices between basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, heat and other utilities. It is lack of opportunity and social exclusion. Poverty is also about well-being, including access to health and healthcare, pharmacare, dental care, education, safe and rewarding work, and the opportunity to engage in community life and activities that are good for the soul. Poverty is not only felt materially – it impacts every part of a person’s life. Poverty makes it difficult for people to live in dignity and to respond to God’s calling in their lives.

Poverty cuts across Canada’s social boundaries: anyone can be poor. Some people are poor for a short time in their lives, others find themselves caught in persistent poverty. Income insecurity and inequality touches even more Canadians: many worry that they are only a missed paycheque or two away from poverty themselves.

However, while poverty can strike anyone, it is not an equal opportunity offender. Certain demographics and groups are over-represented among those living in poverty. Immigrants and newcomers, aboriginals, and people with disabilities generally experience higher rates of poverty. Women are more likely to be poor than men, and in particular female single parents. Some groups which are already vulnerable to marginalization are therefore doubly at risk of social exclusion because of poverty.

The Causes of Poverty

Even for an individual, the cause of poverty is not always simple and straight-forward. At the national level, the causes of poverty are even more complex and hard to unravel. Factors that contribute to poverty range from the personal to the structural. This can make poverty a challenge to respond to: initiatives that target one type or one aspect of poverty may be highly successful in achieving a specific goal but with limited impact on poverty in general.

Some poverty arises from circumstances that are difficult to control, whether individual circumstances such as the loss of health, mental illness, death of a spouse or growing up in a poor family or national circumstances, such as a recession or a natural disaster. Individual behaviours and circumstances such as addictions or divorce can contribute. But poverty can also arise from structural problems, such as distribution of resources and opportunities, poorly designed programs or laws and public practices based on exclusionary values. Lack of affordable housing, insufficient wages, subsistence level disability supports and social assistance, and non-recognition of foreign credentials are all examples. Without government intervention, our capitalist economy naturally creates income inequality, leaving some behind. Societal issues like racism, sexism and ageism can also contribute to poverty, determining access to employment and income and the role that people can play.

Poverty also has a close relationship with environmental devastation. Environmental degradation can cause poverty, as people are unable to obtain resources or climate-related disasters threaten their homes and their lives. The poor also suffer disproportionately from the affects of climate change, while often unable to afford to take steps to combat it, such as retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient. Poverty can also contribute to environmental degradation, as people are unable to modify their carbon footprint, and often become increasingly dependent on natural resources without being able to think of sustainability.

The Impact of Poverty

Poverty takes an individual and social toll – people may become withdrawn, depressed, anxious, hopeless. They may feel marginalized and isolated, and robbed of the opportunity to contribute as meaningfully to society as they would like to. Poverty has been recognized as a social determinant of health, and there is some evidence that societies with significant inequalities experience more health problems, even among middle and high income individuals. All of this can put strain on families and on communities. Poverty can be time-consuming, preventing parents from spending quality time with their children, or preventing people from participating in their communities as fully as possible.

Poverty also has an economic cost. These costs include the impact on our health care system, loss of productivity and increased policing and judicial costs as social breakdown results in crime. Recent studies have demonstrated that when poverty, affordable housing, and income security are not dealt with, Canadian governments must spend significantly more in managing the symptoms. Meanwhile, the Nordic countries have proven that equality can generate economic vitality.

2. Core values and principles

Public policy both shapes and is shaped by Canadian attitudes on poverty. There are five major perspectives that Canadians take on the issue of poverty. The predominant approach is an economic understanding of poverty, but it is challenged by a human rights perspective, notions of entitlement and fairness and an understanding of poverty as a social determinant of health. While some of them are contradictory, many Canadians hold multiple perspectives on poverty and might therefore respond differently to the same situation depending on the argument that was made.

Economic Understanding of Poverty

Public policy in Canada is focused largely on economic development based on a monetary notion of productivity. This has influenced our predominant cultural values regarding work, social assistance, and the intrinsic worth of human beings. Just as we measure “growth” in Canada by total monetary

transactions (Gross Domestic Product), we often value “productive” work and “productive” people according to how much money they produce. This results in a distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. The deserving are those who are unable to work, the undeserving are those considered able to participate in paid work. Government programs and services – and even individual responses to poverty – are more generous towards those considered deserving.

In reality, it is not so easy to determine who is able to participate in the paid labour force. Many emotional, mental and physical disabilities are not easy for observers – especially distant government employees – to distinguish. And many people with disabilities have no desire to be completely excluded from the paid labour force, even if they cannot work 40 hours a week every week. The paid labour market is also structurally unfair – not everyone has the same opportunities to participate. There are not enough jobs for every Canadian who needs one. Unemployment has not gone below 6% in the past 15 years even though the economy was very strong. And certain demographics are over-represented among the unemployed, while jobs are not distributed evenly across the country. Not everyone has the same access to the paid labour force, and the labour market is not a rational arbiter of value, skills and experience.

This distinction also ignores the large number of working Canadians who are poor. The working poor are often overlooked because of an expectation that a full-time job should provide enough income to live on. This exists in contradiction with a market-based approach to wages, where “human resources” are one more input into production, and the value of labour is determined solely by demand. Paying a wage that is insufficient to meet basic material needs is thus justified. It also overlooks the many ways in which compensation is related to education, experience, and social status, such as gender, race and social connections.

The distinction also prioritizes paid work over unpaid work. Caring work that takes place outside of the paid labour force is not seen as valuable. Neither are cultural activities. Rather than emphasize the activities people are engaging in, the expectation is that people work for their money. The exception is investments. In fact, a recent study demonstrates that increased productivity over the last 30 years has benefited the profit share of the economy, rather than workers whose real wages have stagnated.ⁱⁱⁱ¹³ Meanwhile, low income earners do not have the assets to invest that might allow them to benefit from this increased profit share. This emphasis on working for income for low income earners increases the possibility of exploitation of people who must participate in the workforce at all costs.

In this context, social assistance is viewed as helping those who are not productive. Recipients are considered free-loaders, a burden upon people who are productive. In fact, a deliberate strategy of poor-bashing in the 1990s painted poor Canadians as cheaters who needed to be forced to take employment. Social assistance is also affected by individualist tendencies in Canadian culture. There is a discourse in Canadian public dialogue that values individual resourcefulness and suggests that those who are wealthy worked hard to earn it, while those who are poor have not worked hard and therefore deserve to be poor. This attitude contributes toward the policy of only allowing people to qualify for social assistance when they are destitute – if they have any asset whatsoever, they need to rely on themselves before they will be offered any help.

ⁱⁱⁱ The economic crisis has hit workers hard, as what investments they did have were put at risk by actions beyond their control, while those who have not lost their jobs may in some cases be forced to accept wage cuts.

This has implications for how morality and responsibility are viewed. Responsibility is seen solely as an individual imperative, not communal. For a working age adult to depend on others for income, regardless of circumstance, is considered immoral or wrong. Reasonably high levels of assistance or generous rules regarding access merely encourage dependency and lack of responsibility, from this point of view. It is expected that tougher rules will make people self-sufficient, because of their strong “work incentive.” As John Stapleton argues, the result is assumptions that people on welfare are “motivated differently than the rest of society.”¹⁴ Behaviours that could develop self-sufficiency are viewed negatively, as if every action by someone on welfare seeking to better their situation is really an attempt to defraud the system. Regardless of what activity they engage in, including school or child care, it is believed that they are lazy or lack the motivation to work. As a result, insofar as our society has a communal responsibility, it is understood to be discouraging irresponsible behaviour by instituting tough rules for social assistance.

A Human Rights Perspective on Poverty

An adequate standard of living is a human right recognized by international agreements to which Canada adheres. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself (sic) and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”¹⁵

Similarly, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Canada is a signatory, declares in Article 11 “The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself (sic) and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right...”¹⁶ The Covenant also recognizes the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

These rights are reaffirmed in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted in 1979, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989.

These human rights cannot simply be met through charity, they must be recognized by government policy that addresses both poverty prevention and poverty alleviation and promotes justice. The UN’s “Draft Guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction” suggest that “Once this concept is introduced into the context of policy-making, the rationale of poverty reduction no longer derives merely from the fact that the poor have needs but also from the fact that they have rights – entitlements that give rise to legal obligations on the part of others.”¹⁷

Furthermore, the Draft Guidelines highlight that “poverty signifies non-realization of human rights so that the adoption of a poverty reduction strategy is therefore not just desirable but obligatory on the part of States that have ratified international human rights instruments.”¹⁸

A human rights perspective also has implications for how responsibility is viewed, but unlike the economic perspective, the focus shifts from individuals to the community. The state and its citizens have an obligation to meet the rights of every citizen and resident. Responsibility is therefore communal, and individual responsibility extends to the responsibility to ensure everyone’s rights are respected, rather than focusing solely on the individual alone.

Entitlements of Citizenship

Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the "right to life, liberty and security of the person."¹⁹ Although security is hard to obtain when living in poverty, Canadian courts have been reluctant to extend this right to economic security. However, Canadians do enjoy certain rights that are viewed as entitlements of citizenship. Income security programs for seniors (Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement) and children (Canada Child Tax Benefit) are widely supported. Furthermore, the basic income thresholds demonstrate a recognition that a certain level of income is necessary to acquire the basic necessities of life that every Canadian senior and child should have. However, these programs are also for two age cohorts that do not have a work expectation.

Universal health care is recognized as an entitlement based on citizenship or residence in Canada for every age, regardless of work status. However, Canada has not expanded those programs to include dental care or pharmacare.

Fairness

Canadians also adhere to values of basic fairness. Many Canadians consider our country a place of opportunity, equality and prosperity. When some have much more than they need, and others don't have enough to meet basic needs, we consider this unfair, regardless of cause. Many Canadians expect government policy to provide at least a minimum effect of redistribution, allowing every Canadian access to the basic necessities of life. When the income gap between rich and poor increases, Canadians worry about the consequences of this fundamental unfairness: breakdown in social fabric, loss of community, greed and increased crime.²⁰

Social Determinants of Health

Poverty is addressed through the lens of social determinants of health, including by government agencies, and most notably the Public Health Agency of Canada. Income inequality, food and housing security, and social exclusion have all been identified as social determinants of health. The implication for public policy is that these factors must be addressed or health policy will suffer; government program costs arise in the health care field when these issues are not addressed.

Canadians' Core Beliefs

In 2006, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives commissioned a poll from Environics on the income gap between rich and poor. The poll revealed that the majority of Canadians believe the gap is growing, and that they are worried, both for their own financial security and for the future of Canadian society.²¹ 86% of Canadians believe that government action is required by this gap, while 85% believe that government action could significantly reduce poverty in Canada.²² Similarly, 97% of those who responded to a 2006 poll by the National Council of Welfare believed that governments should place a higher priority on fighting poverty in Canada.²³ This suggests that there is very strong public support for action on poverty in Canada.

However, a 2007 poll by Angus Reid suggested that 46% of Canadians believe that government programs that try to improve the conditions of poor people in Canada are not having an impact.²⁴ Meanwhile 37% of Canadians polled believe that individuals are primarily responsible for their own poverty.²⁵ It does not come as a surprise, then, that John Stapleton notes welfare is generally seen to be universally unpopular among Canadians, including welfare recipients.²⁶

It is interesting to note, in light of discourses of individual responsibility, that attitudes toward poverty and government action on poverty are related to income: the greater the household income, the more likely Canadians are to believe it is possible to go “from rags-to-riches” in Canada and the less likely they are to support government action on poverty.²⁷ Higher income Canadians are also less likely to support increased taxes on wealthy Canadians to address issues of poverty.²⁸

3. A Biblical Look at Poverty

It is hard to deny the significance of poverty in the Bible. Jim Wallis of Sojourners once examined the Bible for references to the poor. He found: “several thousand verses on the subject. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the second most prominent theme, idolatry being the first, and the two were often related. In the New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses had to do with wealth and poverty. In the first three Gospels, the subject is in one out of every ten verses; in the Gospel of Luke, it is in one out of seven verses.”²⁹

The central place of poverty in the Bible suggests its importance to Christians. But how do we understand the teaching of Scripture with regards to poverty in our own time? The Bible is neither an economics textbook nor a public policy guide. Instead, we can look to the principles the Bible offers in response to poverty to guide our own response.

Understanding the Biblical Narrative

At the beginning of time, God created human beings in God’s own image (Genesis 1:26-27). Loving our Creator God requires that we respect the image of God within every person, recognizing the inherent dignity bestowed upon each person by God’s image. Respect for our neighbour must involve concern for their well-being. Poverty undermines the dignity of human beings, thereby tarnishing the image of God. Our love for God therefore requires that we respond to that which negatively impacts the dignity of others, and prevents them from living fully as creatures made in the image of God.

Recognizing that dependence on God and our interdependence with others is part of our created nature, we must be careful not to define dependence and independence in strictly economic terms; where dependence is defined as receiving government income support and independence is defined as earning an income in the paid labour force or from investments.

Jesus echoes the primordial obligation of respect and responsibility for others when he summarizes the law and prophets in two commandments: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39). Love for our neighbours implies concern for their welfare and their dignity. This is one of the Bible’s fundamental commandments.

But humankind failed to live up to God’s commandments, resulting in brokenness for people and for all of creation. In the midst of this brokenness, God offers redemption through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I John 4:9). God invites us to participate in ushering in the kingdom of God, empowering us through the Holy Spirit to be agents of transformation (Ephesians 2:10). Two of the Bible’s key themes are exodus from oppression and being blessed to be a blessing. It is clear from these themes that our relationship with God is not for our benefit alone – God has called us, redeemed us, and transformed us to be involved in God’s work of redeeming and transforming the whole world. God’s chosen people are included in God’s work of liberating others from oppression. Indeed, it is their response of gratitude to God’s liberation.

Once again, this obligation is reaffirmed by Jesus, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Our response to God’s love and redemption must be to love one another *as God has loved us*.

Part of this calling of blessing others and liberating others from oppression is contained in God’s call to do justice. In fact, the Bible tells us God’s love reaches into daily lives through human actions, not as an abstraction (1 John 4:12). This love must be present in our daily relationships and interactions.

The Call to Justice

The call to do justice is reiterated constantly in the Biblical narrative, but it is stated most succinctly by the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Isaiah 58 and Amos 5 make it clear that justice is intimately tied to worship; we cannot truly worship God unless we are practicing justice in all aspects of our lives.

The Psalmist paints a picture of God’s justice as innately tied to protecting and uplifting the weakest members of society. “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow” (Psalm 146:5-9).

No wonder then, that throughout the Bible, God’s call to do justice is put into context by a call for specific actions on behalf of the weakest and most marginalized members of society. “Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9). The prophet Isaiah called God’s chosen people to “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with
the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor
into your house?*

Isaiah 58:6-7

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your
in your solemn assemblies.*

*Even 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.

*Take away from me the noise of
your songs;*

*I will not listen to the melody of
your harps.*

*But let justice roll down like
waters, and righteousness like
an everflowing stream.*

Amos 5:21-24

Our response to God’s call for justice must take the form of concrete actions. 1 John 3:17-18 asks, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother and sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Similarly, James writes “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go

in peace: keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:14-18).

In the Old Testament, God gave Israel laws to allow for gleaning – the practice of gathering the remnants of wheat or grain from the field for those who could not grow their own, namely the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21). The story of Ruth highlights the importance of this practice, given that Ruth, as a foreigner and a woman, could not own her own land. Until her marriage to Boaz, who redeemed the land of Naomi’s family, Ruth and her mother-in-law were entirely dependent on what Ruth could gather in the field.

The Israelites were also called to set aside a special tithe for the poor, to be paid every three years (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13). This tithe was set aside within the towns, so that “the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill” (Deuteronomy 14:29).

However, while it is clear that the responsibility for justice and the call to love one’s neighbour has an element of personal responsibility, it is also a communal responsibility. In ancient Israel, God’s laws mandated periodic redistribution of wealth to the poor and needy, ensuring that no one was permanently left behind, just as no one was allowed to accumulate wealth without interruption. These laws also required redistribution of the means of production – land, grain and livestock – so that everyone had the opportunity to participate in the economy. Every seventh year, all debts were forgiven and slaves were released with generous gifts (Deuteronomy 15:1-18). The seventh year was also a period of rest for all people, including slaves, as well as for animals and the land. Every fiftieth year was the year of Jubilee, when land which had been sold was to be freely returned to the seller (Leviticus 25:8-55), as it had been equally divided up when the Israelites first entered the Promised Land. These laws demonstrate the need for public practices that provide justice for the poor.

Early Christian communities also redistributed wealth in order to promote equality. When Paul collected money for the poor, he did not do it merely to “supply their want” but “that there may be equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14).³⁰ James notes that a righteous person will not only acknowledge the rights of the poor but actively try to secure these rights (James 2:4-17). What a poor person receives, then, is not charity, but justice.

God’s Jubilee Vision for Society

God’s vision is for a society that has no poverty. That is part of what the Kingdom of God, that Jesus proclaimed, looks like. So when we pray the words of the Lord’s Prayer – “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” – we must be fully aware that God’s will is that there should be no poverty in our society. And we are all called to help make that vision a reality.

Jesus’ words “For the poor you always have with you,” are sometimes used by Christians to argue that Christians must view poverty as inevitable. But the Bible offers no justification for complacency when it comes to poverty. Jesus is quoting from a passage in Deuteronomy, a text that lays out the Jubilee and Sabbath laws. Deuteronomy 15:4-5 states “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.” In other words, poverty exists when God’s people are not following God’s vision of Sabbath and Jubilee!

Deuteronomy 15 calls for generosity towards the poor, engaging our whole being – how we act, think, and feel toward the poor, as well as how we view them.³¹ In fact, not only do the Sabbath laws call for forgiveness of debt and the freeing of slaves, they called for generous provisions for the newly free people. “Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you” (Deuteronomy 15:14). The goal is not merely freedom, but a fresh start, equipped with the resources necessary to participate in the community.

This vision was enacted by the new Christian community, described in Acts. Because they responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). But this vision needs to be enacted over and over again. God’s vision for a community of love, inclusiveness and generosity is not limited to Biblical times.

Jesus’ message of good news to the poor

In his earliest public ministry, Jesus echoed Isaiah, saying “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19).

It is clear from his many parables and stories that those suffering from poverty were very important to Jesus. In his story of the sheep and the goats – the last judgment, the king explains that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those in prison, saying “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). Jesus teaches his disciples “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:20-21).”

But Jesus’ teachings also warn about the dangers of wealth, inequality and ignoring the poor. His message of blessing for the poor continues, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep” (Luke 6:24-25). In stories such as the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-13) and the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), Jesus reveals the need for justice in matters of money and debts, the dangers of ownership and wealth, and the importance of repentance.

Christian economics

God’s vision of Jubilee and the Biblical call to justice both have implications for how Christians understand economics. For Christians, economics must begin with stewardship – the recognition that everything belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). In Leviticus, God reminded Israel “the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Leviticus 25:23). God created a world plentiful in resources, in which there is no need for poverty. Poverty is the result of human behaviour, that fails to remember God’s ownership of land and resources, and therefore fails to practice the generosity called for throughout the Bible.

Jesus says this generosity must be extended to everyone: “If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6:34). Rather than hoarding, stewardship

of the resources God has blessed us with requires us to share them without judgment or expectation of our own benefit. The economics of godly love call for compassion, empathy and generosity.

Jesus also tells us to be on our guard against greed, “for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). In fact, Jesus warns that love of money and accumulation of wealth can be a distraction from God. “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Luke 16:13). Paul’s letter to Timothy suggests that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (I Timothy 6:10).

Unlike our 21st century understanding of economy, the Biblical definition of economy does not centre on money or profit. Instead, care was the primary feature. *Oikonomia* means “good care for the household,”³² suggesting all the elements and people that make up a household. Translated to a larger scale, *oikonomia* implies care for the needs of all people and a caring relationship with the land. How such an economy of care can work in practice is seen in the Sabbath and Jubilee laws.

Another way of explaining this is that our economy is meant to be a *covenant economy*. A covenant is not a two-way contract, but a binding commitment to meet an obligation, in this case, care for people and the land. Once again, the Sabbath and Jubilee laws are a perfect example of how this can work. No one was allowed uninterrupted accumulation, and no one was allowed to fall too far behind. Every family had an equal title to the land. Love of neighbor was integrated into all the rules and customs governing the economy, as well as religious feasts and practices.

The Bible also suggests that Christians must have an appreciation for the *economics of abundance*, as well as the *economics of enough*. In Matthew, Jesus teaches about the reign of God by using a parable about vineyard workers. In that parable, the owner of the vineyard goes to the market to hire laborers, returning several times to hire all the workers who have not found work. At the end of the day, when it comes time to pay the workers, the owner orders that the last who are hired be paid first and gives them a full day’s pay. When the workers who were hired at the beginning of the day grumble at getting the same pay, the owner responds “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:13-15).

Most people today, even many Christians, sympathize with the workers in the story who were hired at the beginning of the day. It reflects how thoroughly we are instilled with the values of the present age, where it is presumed that one’s worth is measured by the amount or type of work one does. Yet, the story must be seen in its context. The owner pays the wages at the end of the day just as the law in Deuteronomy stipulates: “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them” (Deuteronomy 24:14-15).

This is an economics of abundance – providing everyone enough to meet their needs. The owner hires all the workers to ensure that they will have employment that day. He pays the full day’s wage even to those who only worked a short time because they are poor and need the money to meet their needs and carry out their responsibilities towards those who depend on them. But it is also an economics of enough. Those who worked a full day are not paid more than what they need. Generosity exists hand in hand with equity, as no one receives more than what they need.

The emphasis of Christian economics shifts from well-being as an individual goal to a collective goal. The well-being of everyone within the community is to be sought. Prosperity is not an individual goal to be pursued, but an outcome of living according to God's laws (Deuteronomy 15:4). Rather than accumulation of material possessions, *prosperity* is portrayed as a situation in which every person has enough to meet his or her needs.

A covenant economy must also take into account care for the earth, and the relationship between the environment and poverty. God's covenant with Noah was an "everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Genesis 9:16). God's covenant of care extended to all life on earth. Similarly, our economy must provide care for the earth, recognizing all creation as God's handiwork, and the close relationship of God's people with the earth. Without care for the earth, there can be no care for people, as we are all dependent on our natural environment for our well-being.

4. Public Justice and Poverty

CPJ's public justice framework³³ states that all people are created by God to live in dignity as God's image bearers with rights and responsibilities within a social context in which justice and compassion are the foundation for peace and joy in social relationships. The role of government is to promote just relations and foster conditions that enhance the common good by adopting fair laws, legally recognizing rights and responsibilities, identifying and resolving injustices and ensuring access to services and infrastructure that benefit all. This means that public policy must make human well-being its priority, rather than economic growth, individual profit, or international competitiveness.

Based on our Biblical understanding of our creation, brokenness, redemption and transformation, we believe that God gifts every person with both rights and responsibilities:

- a rightful claim to live in dignity, be respected by others and have access to resources needed to live out God's calling; and
- a duty to act justly, care for creation and work for peaceful and just relations within society at all levels.

From this perspective, poverty is a significant injustice because it undermines human dignity, limiting the extent to which people are able to experience themselves as created in the image of God. Poverty is also the lack of access to resources needed to live out God's calling. It excludes people from full participation in the life of their community. It also represents an inequitable distribution of resources that were created by God for all of God's people.

Public justice entails the responsibility of everyone to do something about the injustice of poverty. This includes charity, as people who are hungry or homeless now must be given food and shelter. But it must also include justice – a transformation of the structures, policies and behaviours that make people poor and keep people poor. Responsibility lies with individuals, businesses, unions, faith communities, charities and non-governmental organizations, community groups and all levels of government: local, provincial, federal and First Nations.

The government's role is important. Government is the collective expression of society's intention, and government alone has the power to enact structural changes. Structural changes are necessary if social policy is to focus on root causes, rather than bandaid solutions. But government also has a leadership role to play. Government should pursue social policy that promotes and facilitates responsible social action by other actors. This means the government has a role to play in promoting responsible behavior

from corporations, whether by encouragement, setting a good example, or legislative coercion. The government's obligation to leadership is a moral obligation. Regardless of jurisdictional disputes or ideological and partisan agendas, the government needs to name poverty as a priority and engage in responsible action on poverty.

The government also has a role to play in promoting responsible behavior from individuals, through the voluntary sector or in community development. The government's responsibility does not negate corporate or personal responsibility.

In practice, this means that governments need to create policies that ensure people have the means to exercise a sustainable livelihood that provides a livable income. Everyone should have access to an adequate income and the resources necessary for well-being, even when they are not able to secure all they need through paid work. Resources need to be shared equitably, while exercising care in the use of natural resources to respect the world which we are a part of. Everyone should also have the opportunity for meaningful participation in the life of their community, including collective decision making.

Public policy focused on economic development expressed in productivity and monetary value robs people of dignity and justice within social relationships. Public policy needs to be people-centered. Economic development is not a bad thing, but it should always be pursued and understood in human terms and environmental terms, rather than as an ultimate goal. We need to find cultural ways of expressing value that do not rely on money, but that can take into account impact on people, and intangibles like emotion, spirituality and experience. We need an economy of care in Canada.

The social responsibility of government – and other actors – must extend to well-being. While government can't assure well-being, it can take action on those elements which impede it. Poverty negatively impacts the health, well-being and function of individuals and communities. It also erodes the values of our national project. Everyone suffers when some of our neighbours experience marginalization, insecurity and social exclusion. Seeking the common good must involve action on poverty, which harms all of society.

Businesses and corporations also have a responsibility to promote human dignity and well-being. Work should not be exploitative, and wages need to be fair and sufficient for a sustainable livelihood. While seeking profit is not bad, profit loses all meaning when it comes at the expense of people. Businesses have a moral and ethical responsibility to be ethical social actors.

Finally, economic stewardship and the wise use of the resources Canada have been blessed with require action on poverty. Canada is paying for the costs of poverty whether we deal with the symptoms or the causes. In many cases, addressing the symptoms is actually more expensive. Investing in people and poverty prevention is a better approach to stewardship than constantly putting money towards poverty alleviation.

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