

**BIBLICAL CONCEPTS OF THE POOR AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A  
PARADIGM FOR LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN NIGERIA**

**Dr. Gerald Ugochukwu Nwabuisi**

**Abstract**

The biblical concept of ‘the poor’ as evidently generic in interpretation has attracted no small deliberations among Christian theologians. However, what is unmistakable is that whenever and wherever the concept is employed, it is uniquely presented with little or no explanations, thus, making the reader presumably able to discriminate. Similarly, the concept of ‘poverty alleviation,’ which is traditionally and exclusively directed towards those perceived to be economically deficient, is broad in application. Hence, ‘the poor’ as a universal concept is not only technical in its usage but also in its application. With exegetical method, the paper seeks to highlight, interpret and apply the various understandings of the concept to practical issues as they affect humanity. It is discovered that most conventional ‘poverty alleviation’ programs are lopsided and often dehumanizing, leading only to the enrichment of the implementers, hence the need for reconstruction. The paper reveals that every human being fits into one or two connotations of ‘the poor’, and as such needs some particular measures of ‘poverty alleviation’. The paper demystifies the concept of ‘the poor’ in line with the biblical perspectives and recommends some plausible yardsticks for assessing how ‘poor’ each individual really is for appropriate ‘poverty alleviation’ measures.

**Key Words:** The Poor, Biblical Concept, Poverty Alleviation, Liberation Theology

***Introduction:***

Generally, poverty as a concept is defined from different relative perspectives and as such has made the seeming familiar concept a clumsy one. Alokwu holds the view that poverty is complex and contextual in nature and could be described as deprivation of capabilities. Obviously, in a bid to diagnose the nature, causes and effects of poverty, the concept has attracted the attention of scholars from different fields of learning – philosophy, Agriculture, sociology, medical sciences, economics, religion, psychology, etc. Furthermore, theologically, poverty as a concept is evidently generic in interpretation. Alokwu (2013) corroborated John Stott’s categorization of poverty in a theological sense as: indigence, powerlessness, and humility/weakness. Different Christian theologians have not ceased to indicate a significant level of concern in poverty related discourses, whose approaches further reveal that the biblical concept of poverty is also multifarious in nature.

On the other hand, the concept of ‘poverty alleviation,’ is traditionally and exclusively directed towards those perceived to be economically deficient. The obvious is that most

conventional ‘poverty alleviation’ programs often lead to dehumanization of the recipients and in most cases to the enrichment of the implementers of same. Dehumanization comes when the recipients are made to be mere objects of philanthropy or charity case with no attempt to translate them from their naïve and magical consciousness to critical consciousness as held by Paulo Freire. Nonetheless, enrichment of the implementers comes when the recipients are mainly used as a means to achieve the selfish ambitions of the executors of the poverty alleviation programs. Moreover, a deeper biblical examination reveals that poverty alleviation is broad in application to suit the categorizations of ‘the poor’. The writer uses exegetical method to highlight the various understandings of the concepts of the poor and poverty alleviation. The paper, in line with biblical truth underscores the need for demystification and reconstruction of the two concepts - ‘the poor’ and ‘poverty alleviation’, and further reveals that every human being fits into one or two biblical categorizations of ‘the poor’, and as such needs some particular measures of ‘poverty alleviation’.

#### ***The Conceptualization of Poverty:***

Poverty is a global phenomenon that often comes as a result of certain imbalances in social structural processes, but the intensity and scale vary from one society to another. Poverty itself is as old as human civilization. According to Alfa, Otaida, and Enojo (2014), “Poverty is a global phenomenon which affects continents, nations, and people differently. It afflicts people in various depth and levels at different times and phases of existence. There is no nation that is absolutely free from poverty. The main difference is the intensity and prevalence of this malaise.” It is interesting that what is conceived as poverty in a developed nation may be regarded as affluence in a developing nation. For instance, “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” Meyer & Sullivan (2013). What an irony when compared to the conditions of the poor in a developing country such as Nigeria! Dotter and Klasen (2014) amplified the above assertion thus:

Measurement of poverty strongly differs across countries: While absolute poverty lines are typical for poverty measurement in developing countries, the concept of relative poverty is popular especially in richer countries. Relative income poverty lines are prevalent across Europe and the concept of relative poverty is generally accepted as more appropriate for advanced economies.”

Although the conventional use of the word ‘poverty’ answers to a condition of insufficient income for securing basic goods and services, yet a succinct and generally accepted definition of poverty is hard to get hold of. The above assertion is largely because poverty as a concept affects many aspects of the human conditions: physical, moral and psychological, and diverse criteria have, therefore, been used for its conceptualization and configuration. Most scholars classify poverty along five dimensions of deprivation, vis-à-vis: personal and physical, economic, social, cultural and political deprivations.

In any case, what seems universal in these efforts is the recognition of the structural (chronic) and transient (temporary) configurations of poverty; where the structural configuration is a persistent or permanent socioeconomic deprivation and the transient configuration is transitory, temporary or transitional and policy-induced. On the other hand, poverty is said to be absolute when it affects the physiological needs of man, and relative when one compares one’s wealth with another. Absolute poverty can also be called ‘extreme poverty’ or ‘abject poverty’. The UN declaration at World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 describes absolute poverty as “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information”(UN, 1995). Nevertheless, poverty depends not only on income but also on access to services. According to the World Bank, poverty can commonly be viewed as “not only the lack of income, but also low literacy, nutritional status and life expectancy and the access that people have to choices that they are able to make” (World Bank, 2012). Moreover, the Central Bank of Nigeria (1999) views poverty as:

A state where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his or her basic NEEDS of foods, clothing and shelter; is unable to meet social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self-esteem; and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as education, health, portable water, sanitation and consequently has limited chance of advancing his or her welfare to the limit of his or her capabilities.

In summary, Olowa (2012) has this to say: “broadly, poverty can be conceptualized in four ways; these are lack of access to basic needs/goods; a result of lack of or impaired access to productive resources; outcome of inefficient use of common resources; and result of

“exclusive mechanisms.” Bourguignon and Chakravarty (2003) suggest that “an alternative way to take into account the multi-dimensionality of poverty is to specify a poverty line for each dimension of poverty and to consider that a person is poor if he/she falls below at least one of these various lines.”

***The Conceptualization of Poverty Alleviation:***

Conventionally, the coinage - Poverty alleviation is used to describe any intervention measure designed to cushion the effects of economic deprivation in the affairs of an individual or a society. It is also viewed to involve the strategic use of tools such as education, economic development, health, and income redistribution to improve the livelihoods of the world’s poorest by governments and internationally approved organizations. Most scholars agree that every poverty alleviation program has to be economically viable, socially acceptable, environmentally friendly and psychologically proactive. The crux of poverty alleviation is empowerment. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. It embraces the total transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless.

Nevertheless, the question has always been: ‘to what extent can poverty be eradicated or alleviated in human development’? The high incidence of poverty in Nigeria as a country has made poverty alleviation strategies important policy options over the years with varying results. Various approaches are adopted in poverty alleviation programs such as Economic Growth Approach, Basic Needs Approach, Rural Development Approach, and Target Approach. A proper assessment of these poverty alleviation efforts together with their accompanying approaches gives us a better understanding of our efforts so far.

***Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: A Historical Synopsis:***

Recent researches have proven that several complex factors are responsible for economic related poverty especially in Nigeria. These factors among others include: unemployment, inflation, inappropriate macroeconomic policies, capital development, regional disparity, corruption, and a lag in human resource development. Other factors which have contributed to a decline in living standards and are structural causes or determinants of poverty include increase in crime and violence, environmental degradation, retrenchment of workers, a fall in

the real value of safety nets, and changes in family structures. These factors have brought untold sufferings to the Nigerian populace overtime.

However, in a bid to alleviating the sufferings of the masses in Nigerian, varied successive attempts have been made by the government (military and civilian) to introduce different forms of poverty alleviation programs. The intention was to reduce the level of poverty in the nation and create wealth. In each of the efforts, strategies, policies and plans were intelligently articulated with the formulations of programs and projects. *Aibieyi and Dirisu (2010)* examined the strategies that have been adopted by the various governments to alleviate poverty in Nigeria, including Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Better Life for Rural Women, Family Economic Advancement Program, revealing among others that, all the poverty alleviation programs have not been successful due to inadequate funding, lack of proper coordination and commitments, poor design and evaluation of programs etc.

Furthermore, at independence in 1960, poverty eradication efforts in Nigeria centered on education, while Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution, War Against Indiscipline (WAI), People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Community Banks, Directorate of Food Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DIFFRI), Nigerian Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA), Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP), Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Program (FSP) and National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) were put in place during the period under review. Although these programs thrived within the initiated period, yet they fizzled into the thin air like a vapour. Most of the actors ended up enriching themselves to the detriment of the intended recipients. Pathetically, at the technical expiration of the programs, poverty seemed to have increased instead of reducing.

Apart from the above instances, poverty alleviation programs had been in the nation prior to the independence. In 1972, Gen. Yakub Gowon's National Accelerated Food Production program and the Nigeria's Agricultural and Co-operative Bank, were entirely devoted to funding agriculture. Unfortunately, the NAFPP turned to be a monumental waste and a rolling stone that did not gather moss. Next was the much celebrated Operation Feed the Nation in 1976 by the then military head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo, which expended much money and effort. The results of this program are better imagined than discussed. According to Iwuchukwu and Igbokwe (2012), "despite all the policies and laudable programmes with challenging themes, Nigeria is yet to achieve food security."

What's more, in 1979, Shehu Shagari's introduced Green Revolution program, which had the twin objectives of curtailing food importation while boosting crop and fiber production. The overall objective was mechanized farming. When the program ended in 1983, it was disappointedly revealed that tax payers' money was wasted. Similarly, Buhari's government introduced the Go Back to Land Program with variations, but like others, it fizzled out.

In 1986, Gen. Babangida established the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), for rural development. This was meant to provide feeder roads, electricity and potable water and toilet facilities for rural dwellers. The National Directorate for Employment was set up by Decree number 24 of October 19, 1986, which commenced operations in January, 1987. Although the NDE has achieved a lot since inception, yet, they are not left without enormous challenges. In 1993, president Abacha and his wife set up the Family Support Program and the Family Economic Advancement Program. The product of this supposedly timely intervention program was the gulping of tax payers' money and at the same time, the retrenchment of ill fated civil servants nationwide.

Moreover, as revealed by Nwagwu (2014) and the National Bureau of Statistics in 2005, the Central Bank of Nigeria's report in 1999 revealed that the overall poverty rate in Nigeria as at 1997 was 69%. What followed was the estimation that 70% of Nigerians lived in poverty in 1999, which made the government of Obasanjo to propose a budget of N470 billion for year 2000 to relieve poverty. According to Ogwumike (2001), "before the National Assembly even passed the 2000 Budget the government got an approval to commit N10 billion to poverty alleviation programs." The resultant effects of this move were the following Poverty alleviation programs, which were seen as means through which the government could reconstruct the economy and rebuild self esteem in majority of Nigerians: Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programs, the Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP) and the National Poverty Eradication Programs (NAPEP). In fairness, these programs made significant impacts in the nation. For instance, the UBE program affected the educational sector structurally and otherwise while one of the greatest achievements of both PAP and NAPEP was the success of the programs in providing jobs to a number of youth across the country. These programs have also been variously criticized from different quarters for varied factors touching implementation, coverage and approaches.

Nevertheless, most economic and social analysts hold the view that the failure of all these agricultural and poverty reduction programs was no doubt linked to wrong philosophy. The evaluation of Nigeria's past national agricultural programs for the transformation agenda made Agber, Iortima, and Imbur (2013), to conclude that "numerous national agricultural programs have come and gone and yet more are on the way. There is, however, very little tangible practically useful result that has emerged from the implementation of the past programs." Ejumudo and Ejuvwekpoko (2013) mentioned that the "dysfunctionality and inefficacy of poverty reduction and eradication policies, programs and activities are the manipulation of the political structure and process for the corrupt enrichment and fraudulent empowerment of the Nigerian elite." According to Arogundade, Adebisi, and Ogunro (2011):

Nonetheless, most of these poverty alleviation programs suffered the same fate as a recent government assessment showed. It found that they all failed due largely to the fact that: They were mostly not designed to alleviate poverty. They lacked a clearly defined policy framework with proper guidelines for poverty alleviation. They suffered from polity instability, political interference, policy and macroeconomic dislocations. They also lacked continuity. They are in most cases poorly implemented. They are characterized by corruption on the part of government officials and public servants.

Furthermore, the church is not left out in poverty alleviation efforts. In fact, Jesus Christ instituted the Church for the primary purpose of caring for the total well being of her members. This tradition was upheld by the early church and church fathers until things fell apart. Most scholars attribute this decline to the intrusion of liberal thoughts in Christian theology. According to *Walter Kaiser (2013)*:

Historically, the Church stood at the forefront of giving freely to the poor, caring for widows, taking in destitute orphans, visiting the sick, and caring for the dying. Despite this long and often-appreciated legacy of support for the poor and the needy, the evangelical Church ceased or slowed to provide such ministry in the years that followed 1925. This was probably due to the emphasis on the "social gospel" in liberal theology, which many evangelicals began to view with deep suspicion.

In Nigerian, some Christian organizations and church denominations have made several concerted efforts to alleviate poverty in the nation. For instance, Antyo (2012) revealed that the Catholic Church in Benue State, established massive orchards and also taught basic

agricultural practices like how to graft different species of mango and orange trees. Today, many rural folks are proud owners of large orchards and they make a living from these. The Church also set up a famous trade centre in Makurdi, St Joseph's Trade Centre, where students are taught a variety of trades. NKST, since its establishment in 1956, has helped to develop local crafts among her members. Even lepers who came for treatment at the popular hospital in Mkar were taught how to weave baskets, make sweaters, and other forms of crafts. A prominent market was established where crafts such as cane chairs, mats, hoes, etc. made by such patients are sold. ECWA set up many rural farms that are known nationwide for the production of eggs, chickens, and animal feed. These farming centres are generally pilot projects and model farms that use improved seeds and also create avenues for people to learn improved farming methods. All over Nigeria, Churches have brought about tremendous educational and health development in Nigeria. Unfortunately, some of her educational and health institutions are not easily accessible to the poor due to the economic interests of the proprietors of these institutions, which obviously contradict the early missionary approach in church history. Assessing the efforts of church organizations in Nigeria, Omojuwa (2013) has this to say:

Contrary to some opinions, the Nigerian church has indeed done a lot! Many have had their lives transformed by choosing to apply some of the principles they picked up in church... The Nigerian church is doing a lot but the church is not doing anything near enough. Compared to its potentials, the church could start a revolution in this nation... I expect the church to start a revolution of wealth creation and the development of education... What if each religious organization – in this sense I mean specific churches and mosques – have institutionalized systems of giving to the society? What if we had a fund for small businesses to grow bigger after training the owners of these businesses? What if each religious organization reduced poverty in its midst to say less than 10% of its membership? What if we sold the private jets? Would the monies be useful to educate more children? To help more mothers? To make the society a better place? The church has the powers to raise men, women and resources to help lift more Nigerians out of poverty than any system in Nigeria apart from may be the Nigerian government.

Pathetically, most Christian organizations and Church denominations in Nigeria are into some forms of cosmetic poverty alleviation activities. They embark on conventional poverty alleviation strategy where they periodically give clothes and food items to the poor, especially during festive periods like Christmas, Esther, mothering Sunday, etc. The truth is that as long as the poor remain in a position where the church has to give them the same thing

periodically, little or nothing is being achieved. The church needs to design a more comprehensive poverty alleviation package that will make those who receive from her not to be perpetually dependent on her for existence. This comprehensive poverty alleviation package has to touch the psychological, emotional, spiritual, physical needs of the poor. The Church can equally collaborate with the government for effective implementation of her numerous poverty alleviation initiatives, as opined by Antyo (2012) thus:

I believe that there is a lot that churches can do if there are collaborative efforts between them and government. I see the churches in Nigeria specifically as a vital instrument for reaching out to people at grassroots level. By the avowed commitment and allegiance of members to the leadership and authority of their churches, involving them in poverty eradication programmes has a greater chance of success if they are adequately mobilised to function as stakeholder in these programmes.

#### ***The Bible and ‘the Poor’:***

According to Beed and Beed (2012), “theologians from Pilgrim (1981), to Stegemann (1984), Hoppe (2004), Witherington III (2010), and Longenecker (2010) have discussed poverty in the Bible.” This suggests that the biblical concept of ‘the poor’ has attracted significant level of concern from the theologians. These theologians no doubt adopted varied approaches, which exposes the multifarious nature of the concept and as such requiring appropriate interpretation in order to develop proactive strategies to helping the poor. To understand the Bible’s numerous references to poverty, we need to be clear: poverty involves more than just economic resources or social status, among other things.

According to Til (2004), there are two Greek words for the word “poor” in the New Testament - *Ptochos* and *Penas*. The word, *Ptochos*, means more than just being “poor” as illustrated in the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-25. Lazarus was so poor and diseased that he was looking for crumbs to fall from the rich man’s table to the floor. The second word, *Penas* refers to a person who at least has something but still lacks some necessary things of life. A *Penas* person would have a place to live, a home, but *ptochos* implies one who is probably living on the streets. The Greek word *Penes* represents the working poor who own little or no property. People in this category have little in the way of material goods, but they earn what they have through their daily labor. A form of this word, *penechros*, describes a poor widow who may be receiving a small subsistence from a

relative or social agency. *Penēs* is used only once in the entire New Testament (CF. 2 Corinthians 9:9), and its cognate, *penēchros*, is used only to indicate the poor widow of Luke 21:2. These two meanings are only explained etymologically but they are progressively applied to physical as well as spiritual conditions and attitudes in the Bible. Hence, the concept of 'the poor' in the Bible is multiple in nature and interpretation.

Meanwhile, Dickson (1995) hints that when combined with the different Hebrew words for 'the poor' in the Old Testament. (The Beggarly Poor: *ʿebyôn*, The Poor Peasant Farmer: *dal*, *dallâ*, The Lazy Poor: *maḥsôṛ*, Poverty is Better: *miskēn*, *miskēnût*, Political and Economic Inferiority: *rāš*, The Injustice of Oppression: *āni*, A Political Movement of the Pious Poor: *ānāwim*), the words all together conjure up a large number of English words aside deprivation, which appear in situations signifying oppression, humility, being defenseless, afflicted, feeble, slender, laziness, low, dependent, and socially inferior.

Whichever way it is examined, the pictures that poverty displays depict lack or deficiency, the origin of which has been repeatedly traced to the consequences of the fall of man as recorded in the book of Genesis:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.' To Adam he said, '...You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground... Genesis 3:16-17, 19 (NIV).

The above text is said to have a negative spillover effect on all humanity but was remedied by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and accessible through faith in the same salvific work of Christ. However, against this backdrop, Yee examined the historical creation of poverty in Israel, its complex links among gender, ethnicity, class, colonial status, and environment, and how they inform our current situation. Yee's finding was that poverty is created historically and can be ended historically. Here is Part of Yee's (2014) impetus:

In the 1980s, Gerda Lerner argued that patriarchy, male dominance over women, was not a "natural" or "biological" phenomenon, but rather one that was created historically. If she is correct, patriarchy can be ended historically. Therefore, my first impetus is that it is not true that the poor

will always be with us. Poverty, like patriarchy, is created historically and can, therefore, be ended historically.

However, a thorough survey reveals about four different usages and connotations of ‘the poor’ distinguished in the Bible. These include: Spiritual wretchedness, Economic Bankruptcy/deprivation, Social/political vulnerability, and Spiritual Hunger/ unassuming attitude.

### ***1. Spiritual Wretchedness:***

The Bible presents ‘the poor’ as those who though may be economically rich, politically influential and socially elevated, yet are spiritually impoverished. The distinctive characteristic of this type of poverty is that ‘the poor’ in this context most often does not know or admit that he/she is poor, hence ignorance or the feeling of self sufficiency and attainment in life. A typical example is found in Revelation 3:14-18:

And to the angel of the church in La-odice’a write: ... For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. (Revelation 3:14-18).

The Laodicea Church was Self-sufficient, probably because of their material possessions, which dangerously led them to self-praise in self-acquired riches, and made them self-confident but unfortunately spiritually deluded and ignorant. They were really poor but ignorantly claimed that they were rich. Lack of spiritual sensitivity made them not to see their miserable condition and the impending doom. Even though they wore costly garments and fed sumptuously, they never had garment of salvation and they never ate the nourishing spiritual food that only God could give. In God’s eyes, what they considered as costly apparels were only pieces of rags that made them dirty and naked before Him. Their lives were full of sin and shame. Hence they were counseled to exchange their self-sufficiency with Christ’s sufficiency.

Evidently, the poor in this category needs salvation through the preaching of the gospel message. In Romans 1:16, the apostle Paul described the gospel as “...the power of God that

brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” (NIV). The gospel is the only tool that has the power to transform a wretched heart, mind, and soul. Messianic or Nazareth manifesto in Luke 4:18 revealed that Jesus’ salvific work was specifically channeled to this category of people. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” (NIV). Although some liberation theologians interpret the above text from economic, social and political perspectives, yet, the spiritual connotation of ‘the poor’ as implied here needs not to be overemphasized. This was corroborated in Matthew 11:5 thus: “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. (Cf. Luke 4:18; 7:22). The poor here represents those who are spiritually wretched.

The sense of the above passage is that Jesus makes impact in the lives of those who are not self-sufficient, unlike the elite in our society: the rich, the famous, or the intellectual, just as a healthy person does not have need of a physician. The reason is because these folks usually do not have any desire for God. They are not interested. The message of this passage is that Jesus came for those who are spiritually poor – sick and impoverished. No one can receive the spiritual healing contained in God’s salvation package without acknowledging and confessing how poor – wretched, miserable, sick, impoverished etc he or she is. Spiritual healing comes when a sinner considers him/herself as a spiritual beggar - hopelessly and miserably out in the streets and spiritually having nothing. When we honestly believe that we are spiritually poor, we will come to God for help – for even His crumbs. He will receive us and grant us His forgiveness for our sins.

## **2. *Spiritual Hunger/ Unassuming Attitude:***

Til (2004) agreed that “the poverty of Jesus is to be found first in his faith. He refused to finally possess anything but the will of his Father.” In our modern society, we so marginalize and scorn poverty that we probably miss much of the meaning embedded in the phrase ‘*poor in spirit*’ as a **desirable** trait. Surprisingly, a number of biblical texts seem to point to poverty as a state in which God can be known more fully. In the Beatitudes, Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). At first, one may be tempted to associate this type of poverty with spiritual impoverishment or bankruptcy, but a

closer look reveals the fact that while Spiritual impoverishment is used to describe the miserable condition of sinners or the unrighteous who have not yet come to terms with the saving grace of Jesus, spiritual hunger describes the attitude of growth required of those who already follow Christ. The former answers more to a condition while the later answers more to an attitude. The former describes the entry point: how we start with God and the later describes the attitude we must have in our ongoing relationship with God. The apostle Paul, in Galatians 4:9, reprimanded the Galatians Church for relapsing to spiritual wretchedness after their salvation experience. “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and *beggarly* elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” Jesus emphasized the blessedness in spiritual unassuming attitude as the experience of heaven, an interpretation that does not suit spiritual impoverishment.

However, the above interpretation of ‘poor in the spirit’ is a slight departure from the views of some exegetes who see the phrase 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” (Bruner, 2004). However, as a matter of fact, the Greek word used in the beatitude in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God” is translated from *ptochos*, which literally means “to stoop or recoil as one helpless.” It signifies the beggar, the pauper, one in abject poverty, totally dependent on others for help and destitute of even the necessities of life.

Consequently, Jesus’ idea is that happiness means dependence on God for everything in our life. For Osborn (1999), the emphasis here is on self-emptiness and humility. Spiritual appetite makes us willing and ready to submit ourselves to God for spiritual strength, direction and guidance. Jesus described those who are poor in this line as ‘fortunate.’ The equivalent clause in the beatitude is, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6). To be poor in spirit is to desire intimacy with God desperately. The psalmist said, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God??” (Psalm 42:1-2). Our daily encounter with God demands that we realize and acknowledge our spiritual emptiness and our need for the sufficiency that comes

from God. We must not serve or worship God with pride in our hearts. James opined that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). The “poor in spirit” are those who cast themselves on God’s grace; those who acknowledge their spiritual dependence on God with honest confession that they don’t have the spiritual resources in themselves to put Jesus’ teachings into practice. True humility is emphasized here. The kingdom of heaven is for those who are sensible of their spiritual poverty, of their ignorance and frailty, accompanied by a corresponding passion for intimacy with God for spiritual rejuvenation. These are happy, because their humility renders them teachable, submissive, patient and amenable. Whatever position such people attain spiritually, is humbly acknowledged by them as having been allotted to them by the grace of God and not by merit.

### **3. *Economic Bankruptcy:***

Economic factors seem to be the conventionally recognized yardstick for measuring poverty. This is a situation of lack in terms of physiological needs. The poor in this category finds it difficult to feed, access basic amenities and take care of the family; they practically live from hands to mouths. The images of the poor are the destitute on the street, the homeless, the hungered, the financially deprived etc. The society lives with very many of these images every day. Discussing material poverty from biblical perspectives, Beed and Beed (2013) opined:

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.. 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.

Furthermore, malnutrition, starvation, and proneness to disease are obvious signs of poverty. More than any other book, Proverbs gives visibility to the causes of poverty. Because of the book's didactic nature the emphasis is upon controllable circumstances but other reasons are included. Poverty is as a result of: laziness (6:10-11; 10:4; 20:13; 24:33-34), lack of discipline (13:18), idleness (14:23; 28:19), haste (21:5), excess (21:17; 23:20-21), and

injustice (13:23). The wide gap between the rich and the poor was emphasized by Pope Benedict XVI (2012) who maintained that “‘the scandal of glaring inequalities’ continues,” that while the world’s wealth is growing in absolute terms, “inequalities are on the increase” Biblical texts consider oppression or neglect of the poor to be a grievous sin, worthy of divine wrath or even the destruction of God’s people (Isaiah 3:14, 15; 10:2, 30; Jeremiah 22:16; Amos 2:6-16).

#### **4. Social /Political Vulnerability:**

The poor in this category represents anybody who is defenseless, downtrodden, oppressed, dehumanized, marginalized or unjustly treated due to his/her social or political status. The ‘Osu Caste’ system in Igbo land is a typical example here. Those labeled ‘Osu’ by the society are ostracized and denied of certain cultural, political and social privileges. Other good examples of those who are socially or politically vulnerable are the orphans, widows, women, physically challenged persons, etc. The humiliation and embarrassment of social rejection are better imagined than described. It is pertinent to note that what makes one socially or politically vulnerable has little or nothing to do with one’s economic background; most of these victims are not living from hand to mouth, but due to racial, tribal, gender or religious backgrounds, they are hated and oppressed by those who are presumably more advantaged than them. Most scholars regard the above scenario as social exclusion.

Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. Levitas, Fahmy, Gordon, Lloyd & Patsios (2007).

It is crystal clear that God never for once gave credence to the oppression of ‘the poor’ – those who are socially or politically vulnerable. Amos is quite graphic in his portrayal of the oppression of the poor. The poor are bought and sold, trampled upon, crushed, oppressed, forced, and denied justice by those who are in a position to do otherwise. Amos said, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samar’ia, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ (Amos 4:1). The psalmist has this to say, “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the

afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” (Psalm 82:3-4 NIV). Proverbs enjoins us to “speak up for those who cannot speak 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). We are also advised not to oppress the poor; “do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case and will exact life for life. (Proverbs 22:22-23). The Psalmist reiterates God’s concern for the helpless; “Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise,” says the Lord. “I will protect them from those who malign them.” (Psalm 12:5). Again, the prophet Isaiah admonished us to, “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:17). The prophet also heaps woes on those who oppress the poor in this category. “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

***Implications of Biblical Concepts of the Poor and Poverty Alleviation:***

The biblical view of poverty is essentially geared towards making the church fulfill her responsibilities to the poor. Assisting the poor is an important requirement of Christian belief and action. There is a symbiotic relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The church is specifically called to establish this symbiotic relationship. To do so, the poor needs to be identified in line with the yardsticks provided herein. This is to say that our configuration of poverty determines our responds to it. Pay attention to this:

There has also, however, been much debate, and disagreement, about exactly what poverty is and how we should seek to define and measure it; and this is linked to its role as a policy driver. The different ways in which we define and measure poverty, and the differing extent of the problem that we therefore reveal, will lead to different demands for policy action, and different forms of policy response. The definition and measurement of poverty is bound up with the policy response to it (Alcock, 2012).

Meanwhile, Jesus prophetically asserts, “The poor you will always have with you...” (Matt. 26:11, NIV), a statement which not only suggests that no amount of poverty alleviation program will completely eradicate poverty in human civilization, but more especially

impresses upon scrupulous minds the fact that poor people are not far-fetched in every generation and the need to always take into cognizance the poor people in the society and meticulously make plans for them. This assertion is not limited to material poverty but also to all other biblical implications of poverty.

Furthermore, what seems pertinent is that when poverty concerns the economy, there is no justification for abject poverty and affluence to cohabit side by side in the same geographical setting. The rich ought not to be richer while the poor becomes poorer. If the gap is covered, then poverty would be reduced significantly. Similarly, there is no justification for spiritual impoverishment since Christ has come to save the lost, and has given to the church the ministry of reconciliation. The apostle Paul has this to say:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

Again, there is no validation for social exclusion, since the wall of partition has been broken, making all of us equal before God. "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." (Eph. 2:14). The only type of poverty that is justified and encouraged in the Bible is spiritual hunger/unassuming attitude, which drives the Christian to God for spiritual refreshment and growth. Hence, the Church has the biblical mandate to make things easy for the poor by providing a platform that quickens and sustains inclusive poverty alleviation. At the core of poverty alleviation is igniting God-given dignity into the hearts of the poor by empowering them to be who God created them to be. Our efforts can't just be monetary or material. Poverty alleviation is all about relationships. Jesus *loved* and cared for the poor, and He calls us to model His example. Spirituality without a demonstration of love for the poor is mere religion. The prophet Isaiah expressed that fasting unaccompanied by love is counterproductive. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when

you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Isaiah 58:6-7). The blessings accruing from this type of fasting is also highlighted by the prophet thus:

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58:8-11)

### ***Categorized Biblical Poverty Alleviation Mandates/Strategies:***

#### **1. Spiritual Wretchedness:**

It is not difficult to identify those who are spiritually wretched. The apostle Paul observed that the works of the flesh are discernible:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envying, murders, drunkenness, reveling, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5:19-21).

The primary responsibility of the church is to preach the good news to the poor – those who are spiritually wretched. The church cannot shy away from this essential responsibility as she is the only hope of the world. The apostle Paul said, “For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope.” (Romans 8:19-20). Jesus revealed that His followers are both ‘salt of the earth’ and ‘light of the world’ (Matthew 5:13-16). This responsibility must be carried out with every sense of urgency and seriousness. The sinful ‘wounds’ in the lives of the spiritually wretched poor must not be treated lightly. Appropriate spiritual medications must be administered with

tender care and without any iota of compromise. Jesus came to seek the spiritually wretched; a mission the church is expected to plunge into.

## **2. Spiritual Hunger/Unassuming Attitude:**

The church can easily identify her members who are spiritually hungry in order to lead them to the pasture where they can receive nourishment, revival and empowerment. God had a deal with Moses at the instance of Moses' hunger for God – “When the LORD saw that he (Moses) turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” (Exodus 3:4). The Church needs to pray for God to work with great wisdom to expose our weaknesses, our spiritual poverty to us in accordance with Deuteronomy 8:2-3. It took God forty years to expose the weaknesses of the children of Israel so that they would begin to cry out to Him to fill the vacuum in their lives. What God does He does to break pride's power over us and destroy our continual focus on ourselves, allowing us to compare ourselves with His true standard. Jesus said in Matthew 11:29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” This is how to cultivate this God-honoring attitude.

## **3. Social Vulnerability:**

Part of our responsibilities is to take care of those in this category, making sure they have a sense of brotherliness and communion in Christ. The church should be the custodian of justice and love. Where these are lacking in the church, much are left to be desired. Jesus indicted the Pharisees on account of this abnormality. “But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Luke 11:42). The church is expected to be the mouthpiece of those who have been subjected to silent culture. Proverbs amplified it thus: “Open thy mouth for the dumb, in the cause of all such as are left desolate.” (Proverbs 31:8).

## **4. Economic Bankruptcy:**

Material poverty is not to be pronounced in the church such that poor members are ridiculed in the community. God gave the Israelites astonishing instructions concerning the harvesting

of their crops from their farmlands just for the sake of the poor. He said, “Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10 - NIV). God practically puts Himself in the shoes of the poor, hence whatever kind gestures extended to the poor is indirectly given to God. In the same vein, “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” (Proverbs 14:31). Surely, “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.” (Proverbs 22:9). Proverbs said, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done. (Proverbs 19:17). This was confirmed by Jesus this way,

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world .For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:34-40)

Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you...” (Matt. 26:11, NIV). What theological, philosophical, historical and global relevance does this statement have in human civilization? According to Yee (2015), “The biblical text has been used throughout history to legitimate dominant structures that have enriched the haves and impoverished the have-nots. Jesus’ statement that “The poor you will always have with you,” has been wrongly interpreted to justify poverty rather than to challenge us to do something about it.”

***Recommendations:***

1. The government needs to collaborate with the Church for a more comprehensive poverty alleviation programs.

2. Poverty alleviation strategies must have job creation for self sustenance development as the ultimate goal rather than dispensing of charity.
3. The government needs well organized monitoring and evaluation plans for each poverty alleviation program initiated, coupled with well articulated transition process for sustainable development in the country.
4. Church leaders need a re-orientation on the church's primary responsibility. More emphasis should be placed on building of lives rather than empires. It is the job of the church, the body of Christ, to care passionately and genuinely for the poor. The impact of our work extends to God's kingdom in ways we will never understand.
5. The government and church should embrace volunteer services as a strategy to reach out to the poor. This strategy is less cumbersome to adopt.
6. Poverty alleviation starts with building long-term relationships, getting our hands dirty, and addressing real needs. It extends beyond policies, programs and philosophies.
7. The church should have a well articulated monitoring and evaluation plan as part of her mission. This enables them to assess their impact in the society.
8. Curriculum for Integrative poverty alleviation programs and strategies should be designed for our theological institutions to equip the pastors to be with some technical-know-how.
9. The church needs to organize periodic capacity building for her teaming political office holders, to enable them give priority to the poor in the society.
10. The gospel message must be preached in a way that emphasis is laid on the symbiotic relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis
11. The church should be the voice of those who are oppressed and marginalized.
12. The Church leaders must not allow unholy romance with the powers that be, which in turn justifies and promotes oppressive structures in the society.
13. The church must work towards the empowerment of her members to be self-reliant and productive in the society.
14. The church should not place more emphasis on economic deprivation in her teachings to the detriment of spiritual poverty.

***Conclusion:***

The biblical concepts of “the poor” and “poverty alleviation” cover a wide range of meaning, which underscores the expansive nature of the topic. Gleanings from the Bible reveal that as bad as economic deprivation may appear in human society, against what the society has made

us believe, the neediest of all persons are the unregenerate poor who have little or no regard for God. Again, for the fact that not all poor people are destitute, the meaning of the term is heavily dependent upon context. Ayiemba, Theuri, and Mungai (2015) examined the biblical approaches to poverty alleviation and concluded thus: “assistance to the poor is therefore not a new phenomenon to the church.”

The biblical concept of ‘the poor’ reveals that every human being on earth is consciously or unconsciously poor in one way or the other, and as such needs some special poverty alleviation measures. The duty of the Church is to adopt the yardsticks discussed in this paper to ascertain the kind of poverty each of her members is suffering from and meticulously design some mitigation strategies with the aid of the Bible in order to help such members. By so doing, the Church would be fulfilling her role on earth. Having seen that varied factors touching implementation, coverage and approaches are responsible for the failure of various poverty alleviation programs initiated by the government, the church should collaborate with the government for a more comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

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