

**SPEECH AT THE ECUMENICAL ROUND TABLE
THE NAIROBI ECUMENICAL GROUP
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POVERTY – A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANS. 24 May 2003**

Thank you for the opportunity accorded me to participate in this ecumenical meeting. It is gratifying to note that many Churches and Christian organizations are realizing that, “United we stand, divided we fall.” The sayings of our elders are taking roots, namely: that while a single broom stick may sweep, a bunch will do a better job. Most of all, the prayer for unity by our Lord as recorded for us in John 17, is bearing fruit. Such meetings like this one are a testimony to this fact. I congratulate those who initiated it and those who are doing their best to keep it going, and to make it stronger.

I have been requested to give a brief talk on POVERTY – A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANS.

WHAT IS POVERTY?

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the word poverty as, “having very little money with which to buy one’s basic necessities.”

Poverty is really hard to define because it is a relative term. This is because it depends on who one is being compared with. A condition that one may consider as poor may be regarded as not being so when viewed in comparison with someone else.

I am of the view that those who are really poor are those who are lowest in the strata of the society. Usually, they are those who have very little or nothing when it comes to meeting the basic necessities of life. These include items like: food, water, clothing, shelter, health facilities, means of transportation, etc. Furthermore, they have difficulties in accessing these basic needs, on top of not affording them.

WHAT CAUSES POVERTY?

Even though it is almost impossible for anyone to exhaust a list of the causes of poverty, we can group them under four categories:

Poverty Caused By Religious Error.

A society may find itself in abject poverty because of that “...society’s fidelity to a religious view of world and life that is inconsistent with the revelation of God in Scripture.” (Beisner, p.195). Please read Exodus 23:24-26; Deut. 11:26-28; II Chronicles 24:20; Isaiah 65:11-14).

Poverty Imposed By the godless Wealthy:

In their quest to get rich quick or add to their riches, the ungodly who are wicked oppress others so much so that they contribute to their poverty.

Poverty Imposed By Civil Rulers:

By refusing to defend the rights of the defenseless, the less fortunate are pushed more and more into poverty. (Job. 24: 1-12).

Self-Imposed Poverty.

There are a host of ways by which one can impose poverty on himself or herself. Through laziness or indolence (Proverbs 6:10-11), evil association and sin (Proverbs 28:19); love of pleasure (Proverbs 21:17), stinginess (Proverbs 11:24); as well as drunkenness and gluttony (Proverbs 23:21; 24:34). Fear of the unknown and of failure; Hopelessness; Illiteracy and Ignorance; as well as lack of Innovation and Initiative.

WHY IS THERE A GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR IN AFRICA?

In my opinion, the reasons why we have a gap between the rich and the poor, and the gap seems to be widening by the day – are:

- Greed and selfishness of human beings.

- The love of money, which is the root of all evils.
- Wickedness.
- Heavy taxation.
- Poor governance, resulting in the lack of adequately harnessing the country's resources for the benefit of the majority.
- Neo-colonialism resulting in various atrocities like poor and unfair pricing of raw materials.

HOW CAN THE CHURCHES TOGETHER MEET THE CHALLENGE OF POVERTY?

The Church has a God-given role to be involved in a holistic ministry of reaching the total human being (body, soul, and spirit) after the examples of Christ. Unless the Church realizes this, it will have the tendency of regarding poverty as a subject outside its domain. Furthermore, we must not see our role as only preparing people for heaven and ignoring what affects their life here.

We have not taken the challenge seriously in the past, because when Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you," (Matthew 26:11), he did not imply that we should therefore not do anything about poverty.

I would like to suggest that the Churches can individually and collectively try to meet the challenge of poverty in the following ways:

- Recognize that it is a serious challenge, discuss it at various levels, and map out strategies for dealing with it. (If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. If you aim at nothing, you will hit it).
- Consciously study what the Bible says about it, preach and teach about it, and seek to apply these Biblical principles in ministry.
- Empower the poor to help themselves.
- Empower the politicians to play their roles in a godly manner, applying Biblical principles in their work.
- Show an interest in national issues, government programs and participate in debates as well as seek to influence government decisions.

LESSONS FOR LIVING FROM THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS.

The story is found in Luke 16:19-31. We can summarize some of the lessons that emerge from this parable as follows:

- The rich man did not go to hell because he was rich, but because he ignored God. Conversely, Lazarus did not go to heaven because he was poor, but because he feared God.
- Heaven and hell are real places for bliss and for torment eternally. (vv22-23).
- Death is sure for both the rich and the poor. No matter how we try to ignore it, it will come sooner or later – as surely as we were born. (vv.22-23).
- We ought to listen to what the word of God is saying to us before we die; because it is too late to try to make our ways right after we die. (vv.27-31).
- All humans have only one of two places to go after death: heaven or hell. But, the final destiny is determined before we leave planet earth. (vv.27-31). And that depends on what we each do with Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Like many other challenges around us, if we are not careful, we can spend our time and energy trying to treat the symptoms rather than the cause.

For example, the best way to eradicate cob-webs from your house is not to clear them each morning, but to kill the spider. In the same way, we can do much towards eradicating poverty by addressing the root causes.

Allow me to end with the words of Paul, "For we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through His poverty might become rich."

