

**BIBLICAL MODELS FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION WITH REFERENCE
TO PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA
LANA Emmanuel Olusegun & AJANI Olanrewaju Tunde**

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SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

LANA Emmanuel Olusegun

Department of Christian Religious Studies,
School of Arts and Social Sciences,
Federal College of Education, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria
E-mail: lanaeo@fceiwo.edu.ng

&

AJANI Olanrewaju Tunde

Department of Religious Studies,
School of Arts and Social Sciences,
Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria
E-mail: lanrebrobre@gmail.com

Abstract

The study examined biblical models for poverty alleviation and how Pentecostal churches in southwestern Nigeria could practically contribute to poverty alleviation through adaptation of the biblical models. Relevant biblical texts were studied using grammatico-historical method of exegesis while field data were collected using a structured questionnaire which was administered to 600 randomly selected Pentecostal Christians across the six states of Southwestern Nigeria. The result was analyzed using descriptive statistics, namely frequency, mean and standard deviation. The study concludes that poverty is not a spiritual problem hence, its solution is beyond prayer and fasting, but requires strategic human responsibility. The study therefore recommends that Pentecostal churches in Southwestern Nigeria should desist from spiritualizing poverty and take responsibility for its alleviation through pragmatic teachings, accountability and provision of well managed poverty alleviation programmes, such as small scale business capitalization loan scheme, affordable housing and basic educational institutions for indigent members.

Keywords: Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Pentecostalism.

Introduction

Poverty is arguably one of the most serious problems confronting the Nigerian society. Result of the 2022 *Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey* recently released by the Federal Government of Nigeria through the *National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)* reveals that 133million, constituting 63%, of the people living within Nigeria are multi-dimensionally poor (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Worse still, most of the existential problems of the country today stem out of the tension and class anxiety arising from the increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

Many scholars have demonstrated that Nigeria is so highly endowed with both human and material resources that she ought to be one of the most prosperous nations in the world (e.g. Chukwuemeka, 2009; Oshewolo, 2011). Therefore, the high poverty rate in the country, when viewed within the holistic context of the nation's wealth and potentials, is paradoxical and symptomatic of distributive injustice, rather than lack. Hence the problem of poverty in Nigeria is largely a moral issue.

Consequently, religious institutions, being moral agencies, have critical roles to play in poverty alleviation. Given its wide followership and dominant influence, Pentecostal Christianity is a relevant movement as a force capable of exercising significant role towards tackling the problem of poverty in southwestern Nigeria, which is the study area of this research.

The study employs the principles of biblical exegesis to identify biblical models of poverty alleviation with a view to proposing practical ways by which Pentecostal churches in the study area can contribute meaningfully in tackling the menace of poverty. Field data for the study was collected using a structured questionnaire which was administered to randomly selected Pentecostal Christians across the six States of southwestern Nigeria, namely: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo. The questionnaire measured respondents' perspectives on poverty and Church role in poverty alleviation as well as contributions of churches to members' career and business development. The result was analyzed using descriptive statistics, namely frequency count, mean and standard deviation.

Literature Review

Scholars have written extensively on poverty, and poverty alleviation models and challenges. The review of scholarly works on these themes is undertaken in this study with a view to bringing out the pros and cons of the discourses towards locating the vacuum to be filled.

Many scholars submit that there is no single universally acceptable definition for poverty as its meaning depends on the ideological context of reference (Oshewolo, 2011; Osahon & Kingsley, 2011; Yakubu & Aderonmu, 2010; Okoh, n.d). According to Chinonso (2014), since poverty affects many aspects of human condition such as physical, moral and psychological, a concise and acceptable definition of the term is elusive. Nonetheless, poverty is broadly defined as the lack of, or inability to achieve, a socially acceptable standard of living, or the possession of insufficient resources to meet basic needs. However, the meaning of "socially acceptable" itself is relative and ambiguous. In the words of Suich (2012), "it is created and perpetuated by different processes and social relations in different locations, and is experienced and conceived differently according to context."

Yakubu and Aderonmu (2010) adopt the position of Meier by defining poverty from two perspectives of "moneylessness" and "powerlessness". The duo conceptualize poverty, on the one hand, as an insufficiency of cash and chronic inadequacy of resources of all types to satisfy basic human needs such as nutrition,

rest, warmth and body care; and on the other hand, as a state of being governed by forces or persons outside one's control, such as people in positions of authority, or perceived 'evil forces' of 'hard luck'. The definition of poverty along monetary terms is corroborated by Oriola (2009), who asserts that poverty is often defined based on income or money. According to him, the poor are often considered as those earning below a particular income recognized as minimum amount needed to provide the basic necessity for a living. He goes further to put the “minimum amount” at US\$275 and US\$370 per annum for the extreme poor and moderate poor respectively. However, he adds that poverty is more than income because it also “entails lack of access to a range of basic services and infrastructures which include, education, health...” (Oriola, 2009 cf. Atoloye, 1997; Igbinedion & Igbatayo, n.d). Thus, it is evident that poverty is multidimensional. It represents “lack” in various ramifications.

Oshewolo (2011) presents a conceptual dissection of poverty whereby he delineates between two forms of the concept, namely, “absolute poverty” and “all-pervasive poverty”. He surmises that “absolute poverty” is a condition of life degraded by disease, deprivation and squalor while “all-pervasive poverty” is a situation where the majority of the population lives below income levels sufficient to meet basic needs, and the available resources even where equally distributed, are barely sufficient to meet the basic needs of the population. The dissection of poverty by Oshewolo is very instructive but it fails to account for a situation of lack and deprivation experienced by part of a population not necessarily due to non-availability of sufficient resources, but rather due to the problem of access and distributive imbalance.

According to Suich (2012), many poverty analyses describe the condition of being poor, rather than considering how or why the condition exists. These descriptions, she says, typically focus on individual attributes in terms of what people lack or deprivations suffered by them. Suich argues that it is necessary to understand the structures and processes that underlie these deprivations. The point Suich has made is that the definition of poverty should not be limited to lack and deprivations experienced by people considered poor; but should also embrace the factors and circumstances that are responsible for these predicaments. This contribution to the conceptualization of poverty takes us beyond what can be described as the “symptoms of poverty” to its origin. A striking revelation emerges here – that most definitions of poverty focus on lack and deprivations, hence these definitions are merely descriptive and fail to address the root cause of the menace. While poverty generally manifests through various forms of lack and deprivation, its conceptualization must point to the psychological, environmental and social (plus perhaps, the spiritual) conditions that create or promote the lack and deprivation. On this note, we concur with Suich (2012) that:

Social differentiation, distributional concerns and issues of power are central to poverty analyses. Government structures and other formal and informal processes and institutions govern social relations and power structures, which extend over

various spatial, temporal and social scales. These in turn affect people's opportunities, their ability to make choices, their access to resources, etc., and therefore the distribution of benefits, costs and risks within and between individuals and groups (p. 5).

Aluko (2003) offers some reasons why poverty is a problem. According to him, poverty has a range of sociological implications both for the individual and the society at large. He posits that poverty is anti-development; man's most powerful and massive affliction; progenitor of much pain ranging from ignorance, hunger, disease to social and civil conflict. The view of Aluko on this is buttressed and presented more broadly by Quinney (1980), who asserts that crime is a direct product of poverty. Poverty creates pent-up grievances and resentment against the power elite and the ruling authorities. It breaks up family as women and children are usually its worst victims. It leads to social and environmental degradation, because poor people can hardly be expected to care about their environment as they are persistently faced with constant battle for survival (Aluko, 2003 cf. Fadayomi, 1988). The National Human Development Report (NHDR, 2013)) shows that poverty manifests in short life expectancy, high infant mortality, acute malnutrition, increased unemployment, corruption, robbery, prostitution, human degradation, living in squalor, shanties shackles, overcrowded and poorly ventilated homes.

Adegoke (2013) adapted the Anomie Theory to the study of the problem of kidnapping in Nigeria with major focus on the Niger Delta region. The study confirms that class complex created by poverty is a threat to social tranquility. According to him, upon discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, multinational companies were invited to carry out exploration activities. In the process of exploration, economic activities of the people of the area were badly affected leading to a situation whereby the expatriates and Nigerian staff of the oil companies live in affluence in the midst of poor indigenes. He submits that it was as a result of this that aggrieved youths in the area came together to form militant groups vandalizing oil installations and engaging in kidnapping for ransom. In the same vein, it has been reported that Nigeria accounts for 26% of global kidnap cases while every case of kidnapping has been traced to poverty (Editorial Report, Daily Independent Newspaper, 21 August, 2022). In view of these negative effects, it is clear that poverty constitutes a threat, not only to the lives of its victims, but also to the society at large.

Sociological researches on poverty have also examined the causes of poverty. According to Aluko (2003), the macro and micro perspectives in sociological theorizing highlight these causal factors. He explains that from the macro perspective, poverty is seen as a social problem to be handled by systematic action and provision of welfare services geared towards removing institutionalized constraints within the social, economic and political environment. On the other hand, from the micro perspective, poverty is seen largely as a product of personal disposition and deficiency in personal character and morality. This perspective views the poor as thriftless, lazy, indisciplined, lacking in initiative and characterized by

inferior worldview. The micro perspective on poverty coincides with the theory of “culture of poverty” introduced by the American anthropologist, Oscar Lewis (Iroegbu, n.d.). Lewis produced the concept of “culture of poverty” through a study of the urban poor in Mexico and Puerto Rico and reported that the “culture of poverty” constitutes a design for living that is passed on from one generation to the next. People influenced by the “culture of poverty” have a strong sense of fatalism, helplessness and inferiority. They possess certain cultural features which differentiate them from other people in society. The cultural features inhibit them from taking opportunities to escape from poverty. According to Lewis, as cited by Iroegbu,

People in the “culture of poverty” have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, (and) personal unworthiness...

Two major remedial approaches to poverty emerge from the micro versus macro perspectives on poverty reviewed above. Any realistic remedy to poverty must address both levels of poverty causation. One, a realistic poverty alleviation programme must address the micro basis of poverty causation by offering contra-poverty worldview and a new social orientation geared towards liberating the poor from the “culture of poverty” and personal attitudinal dispositions that engender poverty. Two, such approach must adopt well-thought systematic and sustainable welfare programme geared towards helping the poor and providing them leverage through concrete provisions. Churches can achieve this, on the one hand, by desisting from spiritualization of poverty and providing pragmatic teachings to members and, on the other hand, by putting in place various welfare schemes and poverty alleviation programmes.

Biblical Concepts of Poverty and Poverty Alleviation Models

Biblical literature is replete with references to poverty. Scholars have generally identified seven distinct but closely related terms for “the poor” in the Old Testament. The separate works of Pleins (1996) and Black (2009) are highly commendable for their extensive treatment of each of these “Old Testament poverty terminologies”, which are: ' *nî*, ' *n wîm*, ' *ebyôn*, *dal*, *r š*, *misk n* and *ma?sôr*. The connotation and contextual variations in the use of these words in the Hebrew Old Testament provide deeper insight into the concept of poverty.

The word ' *nî* is the most common word used to represent the poor in the Old Testament. It is basically used for a person suffering some kind of disability or distress as a result of oppression and exploitation. The word ' *nî* is most likely derived from the root *nh* which means “to be bent, bowed, down or afflicted”

denoting someone who is wrongfully or undeservedly impoverished or dispossessed. According to Black, the ' *nî* lives a meagre day-to-day existence and is socially defenseless, often being the object of oppression. The ' *nî* is afflicted, suffers material deprivation and lives in serious difficulties. He is thus an object of divine concern as God instructs the people to deal justly with the ' *nî* (Isaiah 10:2) while the king is charged with overseeing their rights forever (Psalm 82:3). God commands the people to give alms to the ' *nî* (Deuteronomy 15:11). God also instructs his people to grant the ' *nî* of Israel loans even if all they could offer as collateral was their outer garment. Creditors are not expected to subject them to further affliction by keeping the outer garment overnight, because the ' *nî* would need it to keep warm (Exodus 22:25-26).

The next terminology, ' *n wîm*, is closely related to ' *nî*, and means, “poor”, “pious”, “humble”. Pleins (1996) explains that though ' *n wîm* is not the most common word for “poor” in the Old Testament, it is one of the most frequently discussed among scholars, because many see the word as a merger of poverty and piety, possibly making a political movement among the pious poor. There are only few passages alluding to the circumstances of the ' *n wîm* – Psalm 22:26/27 (they lack food); Psalm 37:11 (they are landless); Psalm 69:32/33 (they are in pain); Isaiah 32:7 and Amos 2:7; 8:4 (they are victims of social injustice). God relates actively to the ' *n wîm* by rescuing and guiding them (Psalm 25:9; 34:2/3; 76:9/10; 147:6; 149:4). There is hope for them because they would find a just judge in a future king (Isaiah 11:4); they would rejoice before God when God topples the tyrants (Isaiah 29:19); they are the exiles to whom the announcement of release is presented (Isaiah 61:1). The portrait of the ' *n wîm* coupled with its plural form indicates a reference to “the masses” of the population subjected to various forms of deprivation through social injustice perpetrated most especially by the ruling class.

The concept of poverty in the Old Testament is further broadened by the word, ' *ebyôn*. The word ' *ebyôn* is often paired with ' *nî*; so we have ' *nî ve' 'ebyôn*, translated, “poor and needy” (Deuteronomy 24:14; Jeremiah 22:16; Ezekiel 16:29). The ' *ebyôn* include the artisans, beggars, slaves, unemployed, landless labourers who are on the lowest rung of the social ladder. They are portrayed as people characterized by physical insecurity and homelessness (Isaiah 14:30; 25:4; Amos 8:4), hunger and thirst (Isaiah 32:6-7; 41:7; Ezekiel 16:49), exploited by the rulers of society and other evil doers (Isaiah 29:19; Jeremiah 2:34; 20:13; Ezekiel 18:12; 22:29; Amos 4:1), unjust handling of legal issues (Isaiah 32:7; Jeremiah 5:28; 22:16; Amos 5:12), and economic manipulation (Amos 2:6; 8:6).

The term *dal* means “one who is low”. It is from the root *dl* which means, “to languish”, “to be weak”, “to be little”. The *dal* comprise the indigent and indebted peasants who lived in serious economic difficulties without being totally impoverished or marginalized. Black (2009) infers that the *dal* likely still owned some land (Proverbs 13:23) and as a result, were liable to taxation, especially unfair grain taxes that were paid to large landowners (Exodus 30:15; Leviticus 14:21). They

were susceptible to unfair treatment in legal disputes (Isaiah 10:2; 11:4; Jeremiah 5:28), abused by the debt-slavery system (Amos 8:6), and exploited and oppressed in an unspecified manner (Amos 2:7; 4:1).

The word, *r š* is also used for the poor in the Old Testament. It implies destitution and often points to the circumstances common to the “lower class”. The term is used by David in describing his unworthiness to marry Michal, the daughter of King Saul (1 Samuel 18:23). Nathan also used *r š* in reference to Uriah in his parable to illustrate the sin of King David (2 Samuel 12:1-4).

The next word is *misk n*, which is used sparingly in the Old Testament. It only occurs in Ecclesiastes 4:13; 9:15-16. Little is known about the distinct connotation of *misk n* among the other terms for the poor in the Old Testament. There are however two major clues about the dimension of poverty represented by *misk n*. First, its use in Ecclesiastes 4:13 in contrast between the poor man and the king implies that the term refers to poverty as a result of lower social status. Secondly, its translation in the Septuagint (LXX) as *penach* (*penache*) defines it as “a person who does not have extensive possessions and must work for his living”, as opposed to the rich man who can live on his income without working.

Lastly, we have the term, *ma?šôr*, which occurs mainly in the book of Proverbs and therefore could be said to be a wisdom term. The word *ma?šôr* usually denotes a lack of material goods caused by laziness (Proverbs 6:11; 14:23; 21:5; 24:34) and excessive living (Proverbs 21:17). The term therefore refers to poor people brought to poverty by their own actions and/or inactions, not by the actions of others.

Apart from the terminologies just examined, the Old Testament portrays two categories of people as generally poor. These are widows and the orphans or fatherless. The Old Testament presents widows and orphans as vulnerable and inevitably susceptible to poverty, lack, indebtedness and maltreatment (Ruth 1:21; 1 Kings 17:7-12; 2 Kings 4:1; Job 6:27; Ezekiel 22:7).

It is abundantly clear from the foregoing conceptualization that the Old Testament reflects that the poor are people who suffer lack and deprivation as a result of oppression or exploitation; misfortune or calamity; and/or attitudinal impropriety, personal folly or deficiency in character manifested through idleness, failure to take initiative, poor choices and lack of wisdom. Also, the twin concept of “widows and fatherless” connote the loss of “husband” or “father”, impliedly the death of a male provider.

The New Testament concept of poverty cannot be well discussed without recourse to the socio-economic situation of the Graeco-Roman world, which served as the background to the New Testament. The work of Watson on *Roman Social Classes* supplies vital information on social and economic classification of people in the Graeco-Roman world (Watson, 2000). According to him, Roman social stratification was based on three major factors, namely economic class, which was determined by access to wealth and means of production; status, which was

bestowed by birth and legal status rather than education or wealth; and power. The population was classified into two vastly un-equal categories, namely the upper classes (less than one percent [1%] of the population) and the lower classes. The upper classes included the aristocratic classes established by law and qualifications of poverty ownership. It included the senatorial class, the equestrian class, the *decurions* or provincial aristocrats and “Caesar and his household”. The lower classes, which constituted more than ninety-nine percent (99%) of the population comprised people who had little or no property, wealth, power and status. The lower classes which are called the *humiliores* (of lowly birth and status) did not only constitute the vast majority of the population, but also the bulk of early Christians fell under this category. They were sub-grouped into four categories of people. The first and, perhaps, the largest category of the lower classes were owners of small farms and businesses. Watson (2000) aptly characterizes them as follows:

These owners usually employed slaves, whether the owners were masters of the slaves or the owners were free men or freedmen hiring slave labor.... The small businesses included such ventures as auctioneer, baker, barber, butcher, dyer, fuller, grocer, innkeeper, moneylender, potter, slipper, smith, tanner, trader, weaver and wine and oil exporter. These artisans and craftsmen took pride in their work and handed down the trade to their children. They could rise to be magistrates and *decurions* in the aristocracies of their local communities... (p. 1001).

The second category under the lower classes comprised the “free poor” people. These were freeborn Roman citizens who had an advantage over freedmen, slaves and freeborn non-Roman citizens. However, the “free poor” were economically disadvantaged because they could not afford resources required to engage in business activities as freedmen could. Thus, the “free poor” relied on menial jobs like working on farms, docks and in construction. In the words of Watson, “they were often fishermen, fowling, hunters, shoemakers, barbers and other occupations in which the equipment was not expensive”. They lived under serious economic uncertainties because survival depended on availability of work and the benevolence of others.

Freedmen constituted the third category of lower classes. They were a class of former slaves who had been freed. The socio-economic fate of these people divided them into two groups. The first group consisted of those who, while under slavery, were taught a trade or given a wage which enabled them to practice certain professions or start their own businesses after freedom from slavery. The second group, however, ended up as day labourers without the certainty of having their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter met as it were when they were slaves.

The last category under the lower classes was made up of slaves who were legally classified as commodities. Slaves were of two major types, namely those born in slavery to a family already in slavery; and those subdued to slavery by conquest or pirates. Slaves worked for their masters or owners on farms, construction sites, harbors, shipping and mining. Slaves in rich households enjoyed decent food,

clothing and shelter, fair wages and the benefit of having their children well-raised. Many slaves were well-educated and served as tutors for the children of their masters (Watson, 2000).

The New Testament reflects that early Christians predominantly belonged to the various categories of the lower classes within the socio-economic stratification of the Graeco-Roman world. There are several references to small business and craft people such as Simon the tanner (Acts 9:43), Paul and the couple Aquila and Priscilla as tent-makers or leather workers (Acts 18:2-3), Lydia as textile dealer [Acts 16:14] (Watson, 2000 cf. Meeks, 1983). We also have references to free men and slaves like those of the household of Caesar in the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:22); slave and masters (1 Cor. 7:20-24; Eph. 6:5-9); and “those who worked with their hands”, a presumable reference to artisans and day labourers (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:6-13). However, early Christians also included people who were fairly wealthy in their own rights as indicated by their possessing houses able to accommodate large households, church meetings and itinerant apostles. Examples of these include the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), Jason (Acts 17:5-9), Titius Justus (Acts 18:7), Nymphia (Col. 4:15), Philemon (Philem. 2) and the couple Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3, 18; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19).

There are two primary Greek words used for the poor in the New Testament. They are $\rho\tau\upsilon\chi\omicron\varsigma$ (*pt_chos*) and $\pi\epsilon\eta\eta$ [*pen_s*] (Neyrey, n.d.). Hanks (1996) gives an insightful comparison of the two Greek words. According to him, the word $\rho\tau\upsilon\chi\omicron\varsigma$ (*pt_chos*) is far the most common term used to depict poverty in the New Testament; while $\pi\epsilon\eta\eta$ (*pen_s*) was the most common term in ancient Greece. The word, $\rho\tau\upsilon\chi\omicron\varsigma$ (*pt_chos*) refers to a beggar, someone who is destitute of all resources, especially farm and family; a wanderer void of social ties. On the other hand, $\pi\epsilon\eta\eta$ (*pen_s*) refers to a person who must do manual labour to survive, and so is contrasted with $\rho\lambda\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\varsigma$ (*plousios*) - a member of the wealthy landowning class.

According to Neyrey (n.d.), most people in New Testament society, estimated at 75% of the population, were merchants very few of whom were well off. They also included artisans, most of whom lacked basic amenities of life; and fishermen, who had varying but insufficient amounts of possessions. Thus, poor people within the context of the New Testament could be grouped under two major categories, namely “the begging poor” and “the working poor”. This classification based on the separate works of Neyrey and Malina aptly captures the idea of poverty in the New Testament. The “begging poor” include the blind, the lame, lepers, wanderers, scavengers and destitute. Examples in this category include the blind Bartimaeus, a roadside beggar (Mark 10: 46-52); Lazarus, a beggar at the gate of a rich man's house (Luke 16:19-31); the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1-10). The “begging poor” were extremely needy people who were void of family ties.

On the other hand, the “working poor” were people who worked round the clock but had nothing to show for it due to the heavy burden of tax. Neyrey (n.d.) identifies the various kinds of taxes in the Graeco-Roman period to include head tax;

land tax; requisitions such as billeting soldiers, surrendering food and animals for military use; tax on all produce and manufactured goods brought to market. The taxation system was so burdensome that it took up to 30-40% from peasant farmers and artisans.

Pregeant (n.d.) in his study, *The Bible on Community, Poverty and Riches*, asserts that economic justice constitutes a central motif in Jesus' preaching of God's Rule hence the teaching of Jesus is replete with expressions of solidarity with the poor and condemnation of both the rich and the exploitative system that made most of the people poor and just a few rich. He also attributed the pervasive poverty of Jesus' time to oppressive taxation. According to him, the Israelites under Roman Rule paid taxes to the Jerusalem Temple, the Herodian royal household and Rome itself. The Herods used taxes to fund elaborate building projects; the Romans used them to feed their troops and the population of Rome; while the tithes and offerings the Temple demanded added to the burden borne by the people.

The foregoing review of socio-economic life and concept of poverty in the Graeco-Roman and New Testament perspectives clearly show that poverty and economic oppression were prevalent problems that went hand-in-glove in the New Testament. Given the socio-economic stratification of that society, we can safely submit that poverty was the most prevalent social problem of Jesus' times. A careful study of the ministry of Jesus against this backdrop shows that Jesus could not be, and was not, oblivious to the existential problem of poverty caused mainly by social injustice, wide inequalities and oppressive taxation system. Thus, all economic expressions of Jesus including those he made against wealth, the rich and possessions could not be correctly interpreted without due recourse to these socio-economic realities of his time. The rich were objects of condemnation and harsh instructions in the teaching of Jesus, apparently because their wealth was mostly proceeds of corruption, exploitation and an oppressive economic system that enriched a few at the detriment of many people.

This submission reveals the socio-economic and theological significance of the proclamation of Jesus in Matthew 11:28, "Come unto me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." This proclamation indicates that Jesus sought to repair the socio-economic status of the people by offering succor for the oppressed masses. The "rest" he promised could be situated within the community of social justice, equality and egalitarian fellowship to be represented by the *ekklesia* (*ekklesia*): church. Thus, the Christian Church has a social responsibility that is not subordinate or inferior in any respect to its spiritual purposes.

We have a model of distributive justice as a strategy for poverty alleviation in the New Testament as the early Church showed practical concern towards poverty alleviation through the distributive scheme in Acts 4:32-35 where the contributions of members was handled as a "commonwealth" administered by the apostles towards bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. This practice of organized distribution ensured socio-economic advantage for the less privileged and promoted

fellowship within a community that increasingly strived to minimize inequality. Thus, we can surmise that the early Church sought poverty alleviation and an egalitarian socio-economic community through practical wealth distribution geared towards providing equal means for meeting human needs within the community of believers. It is remarkable that with this practice of wealth distribution, the early Church was not only focused on spiritual edification and doctrinal impartation of its members, but also expressed social kindness through pragmatic concern for the poor and the less privileged.

The whole narrative on the idea of distribution in the Early Church by the author of the book of Acts is not limited to Acts 4:32-35. The narrative develops in pericopes across Acts 2:44-45; 5:1-11 and 6:1-7. A synthetic reading of these three additional or supplemental pericopes together with Acts 4:32-35 shows that the scheme was threatened in practice by various factors ranging from corruption through human dishonesty and conspiracy as in the Ananias and Sapphira scenario (5:1-11) on the one hand, and alleged injustice, nepotism and favouritism fuelled by ethnic solidarity (6:1) on the other hand. Acts 6:2-7 shows how the apostles attempted to resolve the issues that threatened the scheme. Therefore, a thorough interpretation of the concept of distribution as a panacea for the gap between the more privileged and the less privileged within the context of early Christian community must embrace four pericopes in the book of Acts, namely: Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 5:1-11 and 6:1-7. It is noteworthy from the onset that these pericopes successively developed the entire narrative on the idea of distribution so systematically. The first pericope (2:44-45) indicates that the practice of selling personal possessions for philanthropic purposes served as the impetus for the idea of organized distribution in the early Christian community. The second pericope (4:32-35) portrays how the personal practice of philanthropy developed into an organized system or scheme whereby the proceeds from sale of personal possessions were entrusted to the apostles for organized distribution. The subsequent pericopes (5:1-11 and 6:1-7 respectively) reveal the challenges that threatened the sustainability of the distributive scheme and how the early Christian community addressed those challenges. Inferably, the scheme developed from a personal practice to an organized system and then to a sustainable system.

Results

Tables 1 shows the numbers of the questionnaire administered and retrieved; Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents while Tables 3 & 4 present results obtained from respondents views on poverty and church role in poverty alleviation as well as contribution of church to members' vocational development.

Table 1: Copies of Questionnaire Administered and Retrieved

Items	Number
Number of questionnaire administered	600
Number of questionnaire retrieved	585
Percentage of questionnaire retrieved	97.5

Table 1 shows that 585 questionnaire out of 600 printed copies of questionnaire were administered, representing 97.5%.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	N	%
(a) Gender		
Male	138	23.6
Female	447	76.4
Total	586	100
(b) Age (years)		
18 - 25	33	5.6
26 - 45	267	45.7
46 - 60	285	48.7
60 & above	0	0.0
Total	285	100
(c) State of Residence		
Ekiti	95	16.2
Lagos	97	16.6
Ogun	96	16.4
Ondo	98	16.8
Osun	99	16.9
Oyo	100	17.1
Total	585	100
(d) Occupational Status		
Apprentice	0	0.0
Business Owner	31	5.3
Government employee	509	87.0
Private employee	9	1.5
Student	36	6.2
Unemployed	0	0.0
Total	585	100

Chart 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

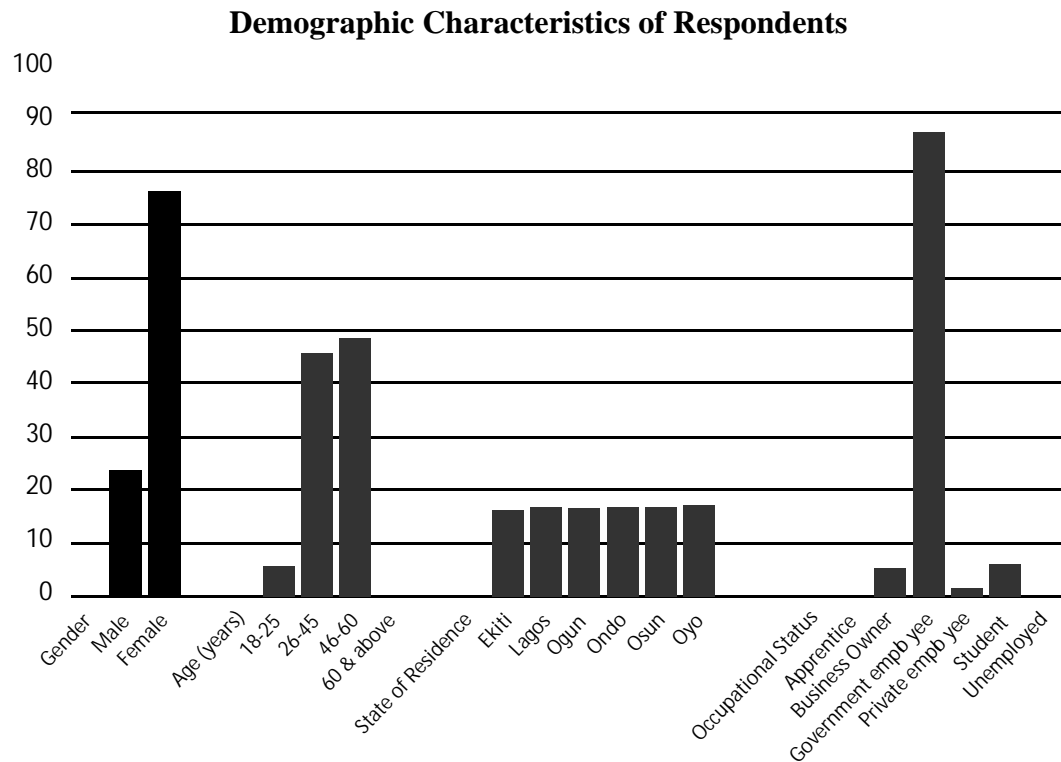


Table 2 and Chart 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents. They both show that 585 respondents were sampled with 138 male (23.6%) and 447 female (76.4%) thus revealing that majority of the respondents sampled were female. The table and the chart also show that the sample is dominated by respondents aged 46-60 which accounted for 48.7% of the total sample, followed by respondents aged 26-45 which accounted for 45.7%. Those within the age range of 18-25 accounted for 5.6% while there was no respondent aged 61 and above. The table and the chart show even spread and distribution of the respondents across the six south-western states with Oyo having 17.1% of the total sample, followed by Osun with 16.9%, Ondo with 16.8%, Lagos with 16.6%, Ogun with 16.4% and Ekiti with 16.2%. The occupational status of the respondents is also shown on the table and the chart. They reveal that the sample is dominated by government employees who accounted for 87.0% of the total sample, followed by students with 6.2%, business owners with 5.3% and private employees with 1.5%. None of the respondents was unemployed.

Table 3: Perspective on Poverty and Church Role on Poverty Alleviation (N=585)

(Mean of 2 and above and standard deviation of 1 and above make a statement significant)

Item	Statement	Yes	No	Undecided	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	Poverty is generally a spiritual problem	46	493	46	1.95	0.86
2.	Someone may be a good Christian and yet be poor	533	14	33	2.8	1.5*
3.	Churches have roles to play on poverty alleviation	569	16	-	2.9	1.63*
4.	Wealth creation and money matters should be taught in church.	523	33	29	2.8	1.46*
5.	My church/denomination is doing enough on poverty alleviation.	123	371	91	2.0	0.54*
6.	Churches may run a business loan scheme for members.	405	111	69	2.51	1.04*
7.	Churches should have a welfare scheme for unemployed members	493	34	58	2.68	1.36*
8.	Churches should run scholarship scheme for needy students	539	17	29	2.80	1.53*
9.	Churches should provide subsidized or free housing for needy members.	422	44	119	2.46	1.12*
10.	Churches should cater for the welfare of widows and orphans	482	-	103	2.56	1.34*
	Weighted	413.5	57.7	2.55*	1.24*	

Table 4: Contribution of Church to Members' Vocational Development (N=585)

(Mean of 2 and above and standard deviation of 1 and above make a statement significant)

Item	Statement	Yes	No	Undecided	Mean	Standard Deviation
11.	Churches should be interested in the vocational development of members	541	13	31	2.8	1.53
12.	My church holds career and business development programmes	409	153	23	2.59	1.05*
13.	My church offers vocational training or skill acquisition for members	372	111	102	2.4	0.92
14.	Wealth creation and money matters are taught in my church	426	117	42	2.59	1.11*
15.	My church helps members to find jobs and/or business patronage.	412	96	77	2.51	1.06*
	Weighted average	432	98	55	1.53	1.14*

* Significant

Table 3 shows the respondents' perception about the role of church in poverty alleviation. The table shows that the respondents disagreed that poverty was a spiritual problem as seen in the lower mean and standard deviation ($\bar{X} = 1.95$; $SD = 0.86$) compared to the expected mean and standard deviation. Therefore, poverty is not a spiritual problem. The table also shows that churches and denominations were not doing enough to address the menace of poverty alleviation ($\bar{X} = 2.0$; $SD = 0.54$) and shows that a good Christian may be poor ($\bar{X} = 2.8$; $SD = 1.25$) if necessary poverty alleviation programmes such as teaching of money matters in churches ($\bar{X} = 2.8$; $SD = 1.46$), business loan scheme ($\bar{X} = 2.51$; $SD = 1.06$), welfare scheme for unemployed members ($\bar{X} = 2.68$; $SD = 1.36$), scholarship scheme for needy students ($\bar{X} = 2.55$; $SD = 1.24$) shows significance in respondent's opinions that church has role to play in alleviating poverty among her members.

Table 4 shows the contributions of churches to members' vocational development. The table shows that churches should be interested in members' vocational development ($\bar{X} = 2.8$; $SD = 1.53$) but most churches do not offer vocational training or skill to members ($\bar{X} = 2.4$; $SD = 0.92$). The table also shows that wealth creation and money matters were taught in churches ($\bar{X} = 2.59$; $SD = 1.11$). The table further reveals that the respondents agreed that their churches hold career and business

development programmes ($\bar{X} = 2.59$; $SD = 1.05$) and also help to find jobs and/or business patronage for members ($\bar{X} = 2.51$; $SD = 1.06$).

Discussion of Findings

The gap between the rich and the poor is a source of social tension and criminal tendencies in society. The wider that gap becomes, the worse the level of insecurity. Therefore, poverty alleviation is *sine qua non* for peace and sustainable development. All causes and circumstances of poverty in the Old Testament indicate that poverty is an accident as the biblical text consistently attributes the menace to oppression and exploitation – a sociopolitical accident; personal misfortune or calamity – an individual accident; and lack of wisdom or attitudinal deficiency, which can be described as psychological accident. In the same vein, the New Testament reflects that the mission of Christ to destroy the works of Satan includes solution to the problem of poverty.

Conclusion

The biblical text contains practical models by which believers in the Old Testament and the early Church, which were similarly confronted by the problem of poverty and socio-economic inequality, sought to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. The Church generally, everywhere and every time, has a socioeconomic obligation of caring for the poor and less privileged. This socioeconomic obligation is arguably the most essential expression of the theological ethos of fellowship which is binding on any Christian community. It represents the practical expression of the doctrine of brotherly love which the biblical text imposes on believers as proof of discipleship. The Church must always adopt practical strategies to protect her members from oppression and exploitation. It must offer direct support for victims of poverty caused by misfortune such as job loss and/or death of provider-figure. It must also address, through pragmatic teachings, the attitudinal impropriety or personal character flaws that engender poverty, such as idleness, failure to take initiative, poor choices and misplaced priorities. Given its wide followership and dominant influence, Pentecostal Christianity is a relevant movement as a force capable of exercising significant role towards tackling the problem of poverty in southwestern Nigeria.

Recommendations

To achieve their obligatory roles in poverty alleviation, Pentecostal churches in southwestern Nigeria must desist from spiritualizing poverty. They need to re-orientate their members that poverty is a challenge that requires, not merely spiritual solution like fasting and prayer, but human responsibility. They must emphasize in their teaching, the dignity of labour and necessity for those virtues that are necessary for escape from poverty, such as: diligence, taking initiative, creative imagination and maximization of economic advantage within their environment. They must be transparent and accountable in the utilization of resources accruing to the church as

these constitute commonwealth that must be applied for the common good. Lastly, they must put in place specific poverty alleviation programmes, such as small scale business capitalization loan scheme, affordable housing and basic educational institutions for indigent members.

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