

**THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN LIBERATING THE POOR:
JESUS' PEACEFUL AND STRATEGIC APPROACH
TO EMPOWERING THE MARGINALIZED**

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Abstract

This paper examines the Messianic identity of the life and death of Jesus, emphasizing his self-identification with the marginalized and liminal people. The work looks at Jesus as the foot print of a Crusader for justice, who pitched his tent with the poor and the suffering, against the tax collectors, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus' revolution started from a radical solidarity with the down trodden. He overlooked those of high class and started from the oppressed. With respect to the liberation of the poor, this paper assesses the enthusiasm that Jesus sparked in the poor and the marginalized of his era. The paper equally evaluates the fact that those individuals understood

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Jesus, and Jesus knew how to respond to their questions and their needs. It also looks at Jesus as a pioneer in the development and liberation of the down trodden and identifies the strategic options he employed to protect them from oppression. A multi-disciplinary approach was adopted and the findings reveal Jesus Christ as a 'suffering servant' in relation to the reality of poverty, and marginalization experienced by the poor of his time with the conclusion that the need to care, provide and protect the poor and the marginalized is deeply rooted in the Bible. The paper recommends that the Church as Christ's offshoot should befriend the oppressed and create programs that will help reduce oppression, poverty and promote social welfare in our Nigeria society.

Key words: Jesus, Marginalized, Church, Justice, Poverty, Oppression.

Introduction

Christianity is a practical religion established by Jesus to restore human dignity to the poor and the marginalized; by pulling down the walls that deprived the poor of their rights and duties. The question is what is the Church of today doing in continuation of this practical work of Jesus? In the spirit of the church which is the spirit of Christ and relying upon her ample and solid doctrine, the church should be able to intervene in social matters. This, in a nutshell is what this work is all about. That the church, as Christ's offshoot in our world today should stand against every

form of oppression and actions that lead to the subjugation of the poor, as shown in the Bible.³

The role of the church in society is mainly a religious one, but to carry out that religious role, it is necessary for the church to work with the people in society.⁴ In view of this religious mission, it becomes unthinkable that the church should remain silent when faced by great injustices in society. Such silence could be understood to be consent or support for the oppressors.⁵

Christ the liberator has given us the grace to share in his saving work; the church should therefore come out fully, in participation of this saving work of Christ. So, like Christ, the role of the church is to minister to both the spiritual and the material wellbeing of all men and women. Though the church is not of this world, its mission is in and to the world. Therefore, the church must be interested in the material things which affect the daily life of men and women. This is the main focus of this work, which is to encourage the active participation of the church in the struggle for the promotion and defense of the oppressed in Nigeria and in the world in general.

³ John Odey, *Nigeria: Search for Peace and Social Justice* (Snaap Press, 1997), 55.

⁴ David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, *Renewing the earth* (Doubleday and Company, 1960), 135.

⁵ Harry M. Clor, *Public Morality and Liberal Society* (Notre Dame Press, 1996), 140.

The Social Teaching of the Old Testament

The prophets in the Old Testament made a deep impression on us because they were men whose passion for justice knew no bounds. For instance, Hosea declared to the oppressors of his time that God wanted love of neighbor and knowledge of him and not sacrifice.⁶ Isaiah condemned the oppressors and made it clear to them that God would neither listen to their prayers nor accept their sacrifices because their hands were covered with blood. He urges these people to take away their wrong doing, cease to do evil, learn to do good, help the oppressed, be just to the orphans, search for justice and plead for the widow if they really want God to listen to them.⁷ Jeremiah and Amos were so enraged by the action of those who thought they could win God's favor only by offering sacrifice, even while they oppressed the poor; both declared that God never asked the Israelites to offer Him sacrifices.

In the Old Testament we admire the prophets for their uncompromising defense of the liberator God, their vigorous denunciation of the rights of the marginalized and their proclamation of the messianic world. We see in the Book of Exodus the epic recounts of the politico-religious liberation of a mass of slaves who, through the power of the covenant with God became the people of God.⁸

Poverty is a central theme both in the Old and the New Testaments. It is treated both briefly and profoundly; it describes

⁶ Richard J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of Apostles* (Orbis Books, 1988), 86.

⁷ *The New Community Bible (Catholic Edition)*: Isaiah 10:1-2.

⁸ Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles*, 86.

social situations and expresses spiritual experiences communicated only with difficulty, not clear and the relationship of persons with each other.

It says in Isaiah:

You who make unjust laws and publish
burdensome decrees, depriving the poor of
justice, robbing the weakest of my people, their
right, despoiling the widow and plundering the
orphans (Isaiah 10:1-2)

The prophets condemn every kind of these abuses, every form of keeping the poor in poverty or of creating new poor. The Bible speaks of the positive and concrete measures to prevent poverty from becoming established among the people of God. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy there is very detailed legislature designed to prevent the accumulation of wealth and show the consequence of exploitation. It is said, for example that what remains in the fields after harvest and the gathering of olives and grapes should not be collected; it is for the aliens, the orphans and the widows (Deuteronomy 24:12-21; Leviticus 19: 9-10). Characteristic of all stands of Israel's tradition is the concern for the widow, the orphan, the poor and the sojourner. They are always warned not to wrong a stranger or oppress him. Not to afflict any widow or orphan. This concern for the defenseless in society is not a command designed to promote social harmony, but is rooted in the nature of Yahweh Himself is the defender of the oppressed. Yahweh reveals Himself as a God who is compassionate to the oppressed and their vindicator. When Israel is the oppressed one, He (God) leads them out of slavery; when they inherited the land, He again emerges as the protector of the landless. He gives justice to the weak and the fatherless,

maintains the right of the afflicted and the destitute, rescues the weak and the needy.⁹ This is God's instruction to the Israelites; and with this you will agree with Hosea that Yahweh's justice is not deduced from reflection on his nature, but is intrinsic to the covenant relationship (Hosea 2: 19).

Amos, one of the earliest prophets (c.760-750 B.C) is one of the strongest to call Israel to return to justice. As already mentioned, one of the transgressions of Israel is that: they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth. Amos culminates his judgment against the rich and the exploiters of the day by proclaiming that their injustice negates their worship of Yahweh: "I hate, I despise your feast, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... but let justice roll down like river waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5: 21).

Two of the most striking text which affirms Yahweh's concern for the poor and show that faith in Him involves the doing of justice is from Jeremiah and Isaiah. In these texts the core of Israel's faith in God and praising Him in the cult, is equated with the doing of justice. In chapter 22:3, Jeremiah is commanded to deliver a word of the Lord to the King: "do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless and the widow".

Isaiah 58 begins with a cry to declare to the people their transgression. The people assemble for worship and ask of

⁹ C. Dean Freudenberger and Paul M. Minus, Jr., *Christian Responsibility in a Hungry World* (Abingdon, 1976), 137.

Yahweh's righteous judgment (Is. 58:2). They come in fasting and prayer, but hear no answer (Is. 58:3). The answer of Yahweh appears in verses 4-7. The cultic fast which the people choose is a charade because "in the day of your fast, you seek your own pleasure and oppress your workers". The true fast demanded by Yahweh is described thus: "Is this not the fast I choose: to lose the bounds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him/her, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

To live in Old Testament term is to be open to relationships with the marginal groups in society that is, the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens; because they are the exploited or forgotten, neither worship of God nor knowledge of Him can result in true religion. The God of the Exodus account is a God who heard the cries of the slaves by the slave-drivers of Pharaoh and so came down to set them free and lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey. This account clearly shows that justice means taking sides with the oppressed. The Yahweh of the Exodus takes the part of the oppressed. Here we see a theological principle that God's impartiality makes God love the marginalized with preference. The poor person is the "client" of Yahweh; poverty is the ability to welcome God, openness to God, a willingness to be used by God and humility before God.¹⁰

The message of the Old Testament prophets is clear. They teach that we do not truly love God unless we also love our fellowmen.

¹⁰ Joseph Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John* (Orbis Books, 1976), 353.

They preach that worship of God is fake unless it is accompanied by respect for the rights of men and women, especially of the poor. The religion of the Bible is all about justice: first, justice to God; then justice to men based upon justice to God. The God who saved is the God who created.¹¹ Very often, when the Bible proclaims God's law, we are reminded that it is he who upholds justice for men and will himself vindicate those whose rights are violated. The blood of a murdered man cries to God for protection. For instance, if just wages are paid to workers, it is God who upholds their claim since they will not have the power to fight for their rights. God, in the Old Testament reveals Himself to us the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from His people faith in Him and justice towards their neighbor. So, it is our duty as God's children to fight for the rights of the marginalized.

The Social Teaching of the New Testament

The Old Testament was promise; the New Testament is fulfillment. Christ is the reality of which the religious history that went before Him was only sign. He could not have been that fulfillment and that reality if he were not the defender of the poor, the protector of the weak, and the liberator of the oppressed. These were, in fact, precisely the terms in which he introduced himself at the beginning of his mission:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has
chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has
sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and

¹¹ Clodovis Boff and George V. Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor* (Orbis Books, 1989), 89.

recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed. (Luke 4:18).

The Beatitudes are the most powerful expression in the Gospel of Christ's love for the poor in spirit. The poor, the hungry, the victimized and the persecuted are the privileged ones in his kingdom. This basic Christian truth is a special theme in the gospel according to Luke

Christ did not come to the poor as a stranger, an outsider, as a visitor who passes by to offer the gospel as read on most Sundays of liturgical sympathy, and then departs. Christ identified himself with the victims of injustice.¹² He suffered humiliation and Himself became the victim of injustice and oppression. As Christians, we should take note of this life of Jesus; that feeling with the poor, identifying and sharing with them are among the ways we come to share the mind of Christ.¹³ In Jesus Christ, God establishes a relationship with humanity that breaks with the patterns of "natural" thinking. The very God, the God of the Exodus, became present in Jesus to set humanity free from all expressions of sin. The God of the prophets who loved every one through his preferential love for the poor is revealed in a definitive form which from now on becomes the norm for recognizing God in all people.¹⁴

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is presented as one of the poor, and as a poor man, he showed solidarity with other poor people. Jesus tells the young aristocrat who asks him what he should do to inherit

¹²Gremillion, *The Gospel of peace and Justice*, 353.

¹³ Luigi Civardi, *How Christ Changed the World: The Social Principles of the Catholic Church* (Tan Books, 1991), 45.

¹⁴ Civardi, *How Christ Changed the world*, 87.

eternal life to sell all his goods and distribute the money to the poor, and then follow Him like any other poor person (Luke 18:18-23). In Matthew (6:33), Jesus says “seek first his kingdom and his justice” and in Matthew (23:23) Jesus criticizes the scribes because they have neglected the weightier matters of the law, “justice and mercy and faith”. In exhorting to liberality Paul cites the example of Jesus who, though was rich yet became poor for our sake, so that by his poverty, we might become rich (2Cor.8:2). Paul in his letters continues the tradition of justice as almsgiving by constantly exhorting his communities to share their wealth with the poor, especially the poor of Judea.

It is interesting to note that in the context of Matthew’s theology, the new law of the Christian community is that the just are those who meet the demands of fellowmen because they live in a covenant relationship with a Lord who has given them mercy.¹⁵ The dramatic scene of the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 shows Jesus’ concern for the marginal ones in the community: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcome me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. The just ones seem puzzled about how and when they did these things to the Lord, and He answers: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 24: 40). This parable is a warning to Christians of all ages that they must discover not only what the doing of justice is, but where justice is to be located.

¹⁵ Gustav Gutierrez, *A theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1971), 103.

Luke is the evangelist who is most interested in what we could call today “social justice”, and the Jesus of Luke’s gospel is very much a prophet in the Old Testament Model. In a canticle at the commencement of Jesus’ birth, His mother Mary, in the canticle proclaimed Jesus as one who is to show the saving mercy and justice of God: “he will put down the mighty and will exalt the lowly and fill the hungry with good things”.¹⁶ This prophetic motif is taken by Jesus in His inaugural sermon (Luke 4:18-19) where He applies to Himself the role of the servant prophet of Isaiah 61:1-2 who will proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. Like the prophets of Old Testament, Jesus speaks on behalf of God (Luke 2:7, 20,49); He performs symbolic actions and mighty works; He shows concern for the poor (Lk 7:11) and takes the cause of the stranger in the land (Lk 10:2-37). It is interesting to note that the poor in Luke’s gospel are the liberal poor, not the “poor in spirit”.¹⁷ This is because woes are directed against the rich and those who have refused to help the marginalized. The disciple of Jesus according to Luke’s gospel is one who is to “sell your possessions and give alms” (Luke 12: 33). In the parable of the great supper, those invited after the initial refusal are the “poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind”- the marginalized of our society (Luke 14:21; Luke 14: 13).

From these readings one is bound to say that there is no way a Christian who calls him/herself a follower of Jesus can make it without associating with the poor. Jesus our savior and model

¹⁶ Vincent P. Mainelli, *Social Justice* (Mcgrath Publishing Company, 1978), 11.

¹⁷ Clor, *Public Morality and Liberal Society* (Notre Dame Press, 1996), 145.

never turns away from the poor and so why should we His followers? We should rather do the same; it was the exploitation of the poor in the temple that first enraged Jesus (Luke 19: 45-48). He finds out that the poor were been exploited even in His father's house and He reacted against the rich by fighting for these poor men and women of His time. Jesus believes that the true worship of God is not simply the recognition that another person has equal rights to the goods of God's creation, but His active engagement in securing these goods for them. So, the cause of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed is now the cause of Jesus. He is the son of man, present in the least of his brethren. Christians are therefore called on to bear one another's burdens; this is to fulfill the law of Christ, to be just people. For, to oppress the poor is to offend God; to know God is to work justice among human beings.¹⁸ We meet God in our encounter with other persons; what is done for others is done for the Lord.

The Social Teaching of the Church's Documents

This study, here focused on the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church over the past hundred and thirteen years. The church in the earliest times withdraws herself from any talk about the world. It is *Rerum Novarum*, the epoch-making encyclical of Leo XIII, that officially inaugurated the social teaching of the church. Faced with the misery and abject poverty of workers, the church had to raise high its voice to speak for those who had no voice. It is in line with this, that we as church are challenged to look critically at the situation of the rights of the children of God.

¹⁸ George V. Lob, *Christian Living according to Vatican II* (Theological Publication in India, 1995), 10.

Catholic social thought always supports the fact that all men and women are created equal, and that each one is a subject of certain inalienable rights, including the right to sustain one's life and sustain one's family from the resources bestowed by the benevolent God.¹⁹

- a) Leo XIII'S *Rerum Novarum* (RN): In this encyclical Leo blames the class war on the shameful reality for the inhumanity of employers and the greed of the competitors who misused the working class as instruments for gain and value them only as so much mere energy and strength, leaving them isolated and helpless. The state, Leo said, has a right to intervene with suitable laws to restore sanity when the common good or the good of certain groups within the common wealth is in jeopardy. So, *RN* talked about the small minority of rich employers who owned land and capital, and a large majority of poor employees who were completely at the mercy of these employers in a free competitive economy – here we would understand why the conservatives in Leo's day called this encyclical "socialist", and later church documents refer to it as "the magna carta for a humane economic and social order".²⁰
- b) Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*: In 1931, Pope Pius XI issued a social encyclical on the reconstruction of the social order, to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of *RN*. Pius affirms the teaching of *RN* on the relative rights and mutual duties of the rich and the poor, and of the capital and labour. He reiterates the Leonine teaching on the part that must be played by the church,

¹⁹Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, Nos.16, 55.

²⁰Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, Nos.16, 64.

the state and the Association of workers and employers. The church, he says has a right and the obligation from God to address social and economic issues in so far as they fall under the moral law. Pius XI, like his celebrated predecessor ascribes only limited role to the state, as he so clearly states in what came to be known as the principle of solidarity: “.... Just as it is wrong to withdraw from the individual and commit to a group what private enterprise and industry can accomplish, so too, it is an injustice, a grave evil and disturbance of right order, for a larger and higher association to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower societies”.²¹ He urges that social and economic activities be imbued with Christian principles of justice and charity; that the true remedy to social disorder is a renewal of the Christian spirit.

- c) John XIII’s *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963): These encyclicals of Pope John XIII are considered by many writers as marking the beginning of the new era in the church’s teaching on social issues. According to the Pope, the gap between the rich and the poor people was widening, and while some were growing daily in affluence, especially with the achievements of technology, the majority of the human population were still subjected to subhuman socio-economic conditions, including the phenomenon of hunger and starvation. He maintained that there was widespread injustice, a situation that undermines the fundamental rights and freedom of individuals and even nations. In helping the marginalized people, the Pope urged the rich to recognize and respect their

²¹Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, Nos.39, 45.

individuality and culture; that in the pursuit of economic and technical progress, the true hierarchy of values must be respected. John XIII observed that many rich men and women in society are to be discredited because they fail to respect human dignity.²²

- d) *Pacem in Terris*: Here the Pope says that peace can only result when men and women subject themselves to the order established by God. For him, peace needs to be based on order “founded on truth, built according to justice, vivified and integrated by charity, and put into practice in freedom”. He argued that the stock of arms that has been and continued to be manufactured is highly distressing. It deprives the poor countries of social and economic progress, and creates a climate of fear. Justice, right reason and the recognition of human dignity cry out insistently for a cessation of the arms race: “The stock piles or armament which has been built up in various countries must be reduced all rounds and simultaneously by the parties concerned; nuclear weapons must be banned...”.²³
- e) The Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes*: At the beginning of the Second Vatican, the council fathers issued a message to humanity, in which they noted two issues of special urgency facing the world – the issue of peace and social justice. The document which has been described as the most important in the church’s social tradition, announces the duty of the people of God to scrutinize the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. It is the church’s duty to work for the enhancement of human

²² Pope John XIII, *Mater Et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Nos.149; 101.

²³ John XIII, *Pacem in Terris*, Nos. 149; 101.

dignity and the common good. The council urges that everyone should look upon his or her neighbor with dignity, and come to the aid of all who are in need, “whether he is an aged person abandoned by all, a foreign worker despised without reason, a refugee, an illegitimate child...”. The council proceeds to identify and condemn the prevalent crimes against humanity as follows: “... all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental fortune, undue psychological pressure; all offences against human dignity such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where men are treated as mere tools for profit rather than free and responsible persons...”.²⁴

- f) John Paul II’S *Redemptor Hominis*: John Paul II who assumed papacy on October 16, 1978, issued his first encyclical on March 14, 1979 titled: *The Redeemer of Man*. At the centre of his reflection is always the human person, the concrete, unique and unrepeatable person. If God gave His only son so that the human person should not perish, then in the eyes God, he or she must be precious beyond human comprehension; that in face of injustices and starvation, the church as prophetic voice should fight for the defense of the marginalized. The church as a teacher has the vocation to make the human person more human by making him or her more like Christ. The church which is the mystical body of Christ in her kingly, prophetic and priestly role is the “sacrament” of truth to men and women, for in spite of everything, the human

²⁴ Cf. “*Gaudium et Spes*”, Nos. 149, 121.

heart is restless, it hungers for freedom, and this treasure which the church possesses should not be wasted.²⁵

Who are the Marginalized?

The marginalized are the materially deprived, particularly those unfortunates, who are so locked in a struggle for sheer survival, wondering where the next meal will come from.²⁶ Included too are those who, though having sufficient worldly good themselves, take up the cause of the poor and are one with them in their struggle. For instance, Jesus took side with the marginalized and was condemned and destroyed simply because of his love for them.²⁷

The marginalized are the poor and the weak in our society who are finding it impossible to reach out for their legitimate share of the daily morsel.²⁸ They are the poor, the helpless and the miserable men and women we find in our world today. They are those who own a litany of deprivation; the “non-significant persons”, the “not important persons”.²⁹ The marginalized are “insignificant”, “anonymous” and “nameless”.³⁰ These are the people who, we as Christians should rise and defend from the unjust order of the society.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Nos.1, 35.

²⁶ Odey, *Nigeria: Search for Peace and Social Justice*, 95.

²⁷ Odey, *Nigeria: Search for Peace and Social Justice*, 123.

²⁸ John C. Haughey (ed.), *The Faith that does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change* (Paulist Press, 1977), 127.

²⁹ Haughey, *The Faith that does Justice*, 129.

³⁰ Carolyn Osiek, *Rich and Poor in the Shepherd of Hermas* (The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983), 112.

Jesus' Charismatic Approach to Social Issues

When we talk of a charismatic approach, we are simply talking about Jesus' consideration of other dimensions of suffering. The world did not dictate Jesus' agenda.³¹ He often responded with compassion to the needs which came across His path, as when He healed the servant of the centurion, or fed the 5000 in the wilderness; but the need alone did not determine His action.

To talk about Jesus' charismatic approach to social issues, we would first want a more detailed consideration of the general direction of New Testament thought in this whole regard. For instance, in Matthew 9:36, Jesus saw a great need: "the crowd was harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. It tells us that "he had compassion for them"³² The New Testament writer took seriously the material world, and in this, they were not too different from any of us. But when we understand the world as Jesus and the Apostles did, their apparent disinterest in society begins to make sense. The world as they saw it was a world at war. So, Jesus and the Apostles envisioned nothing less than their total deliverance from the dominion of evil. For Jesus, the response to injustice must be direct and practical. That is why He worked to eliminate social inequalities by exerting pressure and influence on the power structures of society. He rigorously opposed justice and oppression at every turn, taking an active role in the struggle of the "disadvantaged".³³ A charismatic approach to social issues must look beyond the immediate or seemingly

³¹ Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospel: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 182.

³² Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels*, 188.

³³ Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels*, 189.

obvious solution to a problem. "This solution to men's problem, said a leader of the Ann Arbor Charismatic Community, must be a total solution, a total meeting of man's needs." ³⁴This means dealing not only with the need that meets our eye, but also with the enemy whom we do not see with our eyes-dealing with him by using "the weapons of our warfare". ³⁵ When the rich young man approached Jesus for the good work he can do to attain everlasting life, He replied: "keep the commandments". But the young man insisted: all these I have kept, what yet is wanting for me?" And Jesus answered: "if thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come follow me" (Matt.19:16-21).

The life of Jesus was one continuous act of kindness. He went about doing good. To the disciples of John who ask Him if He is the Messiah, Jesus, as a proof of the fact that He is, points to his good works; "Go and relate to John what you have heard and seen: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear...". Twice He performed the miracle of the multiplication of loaves by pronouncing these touching words: "I have compassion on the multitudes, because they continue with me now three days and have nothing to eat and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint on the way" (Matthew 11:4-5).

Jesus Championed the liberty of man and woman, for as we have seen, slavery was the social condition of the great majority of people; and this work of social redemption He accomplished not

³⁴ Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition* (Harper & Row, 1966), 105-113.

³⁵ Osiek, *Rich and Poor*, 120.

with violent means, but by the peaceful preaching of lofty moral principles which, like grains of yeast, penetrated into the great mass of humanity and gradually transformed it.³⁶ The charity commanded by Christ has the greatest possible comprehension because there is no limitation to the sacrifice called for it. He taught us that we must give not merely our affection to our brothers, not merely our goods but ourselves as well: our strength, our efforts and our very life when required by the supreme needs of the natural and supernatural life of our neighbours. From all these evangelical principles, there springs forth as a practical corollary: the moral freedom of every man. And in truth, to equal subjects belong equal rights. Neither, can a brother fetter a brother nor a Son of God becomes a slave to man.³⁷

Jesus' Relationship with the Poor and the Outcast

Jesus provoked the opposition of the powerful through his strategy of salvation which favored the poor and suffered persecution on account of it. Jesus is the way to God and we have read his life correctly when we emphasized His solidarity with the poor, his service to those in need and his firmness in confronting the opposition of the powerful.³⁸ Jesus manifested the meaning of God's kingdom by His close association and table fellowship with sinners, the ritual and legal outcast of His time. He is the one who has come not to call the just, but sinners (Mark

³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 253.

³⁷ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 254.

³⁸ Larry Christenson, *Social Action: Jesus Style* (Dimension Books, 1974), 84.

2:17). By His fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners, Jesus makes present the love and saving mercy of God to those whom the social structure of his time would classify as unjust and beyond the pale of God's loving concern. In association with these groups, Jesus is a parable of God's justice where mercy (*hesed*) and justice (*sedagah*) are not in opposition, but in paradoxical agreement. Jesus abandoned his own town and the security of his family in order to be in solidarity with a community of equals; he placed himself at the side of the least in society; the possessed, prostitutes, lepers, the homeless. From their side he questioned not so much, the power structures directly, but rather the religious tradition which made the poor accept social differences as something inevitable.³⁹

The God of Jesus as we have already seen is with the poor, showing solidarity with their needs and struggles. Jesus shows us the way to the father by showing solidarity with the poor-with the spiritually and materially poor. So, following Christ demands solidarity with the poor, service to the needs of the marginalized and readiness to suffer, like Christ, the persecution that will follow from these actions. Christ undeniably made a personal option for the poor and held them to be the main recipient of his message.⁴⁰ The supreme Judge (Christ) stands by the side of anyone who is oppressed. They are seen as the brothers and sisters of Jesus: "I tell you solemnly, insofar as you did it to one of these least brothers of mine, you did it to me". It is only those

³⁹ Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 119.

⁴⁰ Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 121.

who commune in history with the poor and needy, who are Christ's sacraments, that will commune definitely with Christ.⁴¹

The Jewish society is a divided society: clean and unclean. When Jesus came, he began by redrawing the map; a map without internal barriers, an all-inclusive map. And one of the approaches of Jesus to widen the map is his approach to sinners. For the Jews, no sinner is a guest of God; they could not commune with the divine. This society is impatient with sinners. But the invitation is to be just as the heavenly father just. It is this unjust mentality that Jesus came to break. He began his task by eating with the tax collectors, those who are morally debased. He did not aim so high. Rather, he came so low; a revolution from below. Jesus used the occasion of meal to teach the poor and the outcast his mission. This is why he was always found eating with the tax collectors and sinners. That he has come to heal the sick and not the healthy.

Jesus always uses the occasion of meal to manifest his relationship with the outcast (Luke 7:36). He tried to upgrade those that have been downgraded as against those who claim to be righteous (Luke 10:25). Jesus came to redraw the map by bringing the outsiders into the map. The Jews kept opposing and rejecting Jesus' moves to enlarge the map; this is when his ordeal started. Jesus left the just, the religious authorities of his in the streets and invited people whom no Jewish rabbi would invite.⁴²

⁴¹ Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 121.

⁴² Malina Barker, *New Testament* (Orbis Books, 1986), 86.

The “Unclean” Jesus

When we talk about clean and unclean, we are not talking about the rule of hygiene; it is simply about the drama that existed between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Jews never saw Jesus as a clean person that was why they described him as the “prince of Belzebul”, all because he made the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized his friends, and stood by them at the slightest subjugation by the wealthy.

For the Jews, if you do what the society rejects, you are out of place; you have become an anomalous being and a ritual has to be performed to bring you back. For them (Jews) to be out of order is to be ‘unclean’, you are contaminated; and the fact of pollution separates you from the ‘clean’ because between the ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, there is a line of separation. This line of separation is the line of ritual confrontation; the line of no-meeting point. For the Jews, those with physical infirmity can also be regarded as ‘unclean’: the blind or lame, hunchback, eunuchs, people with rickets are considered to be ‘unclean’; but these are the people Jesus took as his own, those who have no say in society, the marginalized. When the Jews saw this, they pushed Jesus into the group of the ‘unclean’ because he has mixed with the ‘unclean’ fellows. To be ‘unclean’ in the Jewish world is to be cut-off from the covenant society and to be separated from the covenant society is to separate yourself from God.⁴³

The Jews again described Jesus as an ‘unclean’ person because everything in the Old Testament comes to walk on its head as

⁴³ Christenson, *Social Action*, 98.

soon as it comes to Jesus. He (Christ) becomes the one reality to decontaminate and depollute; he restored the 'unclean' to the 'clean' state.⁴⁴ The purity laws which the Jews kept were put aside by Jesus and this enabled him to mix freely with people. In Mark 4:41, we see Jesus re-integrating those who were outside the covenant society; he ejected those from the superclass and started from the oppressed. What Jesus came to do is to redefine the concept of 'clean' and 'unclean' as understood by the people of his time. He tried to let his contemporary know that law was not everything; Jesus accused them of setting aside the commandment of God in favor of their own tradition; what constitute immoral acts are those that come from the mind. With this view of his, the Pharisees came to see Jesus as an impure person who has come to break the boundary between the 'clean' and the 'unclean'.⁴⁵

This redefinition of the Jewish world by Jesus is double edge; firstly, it led to the shameful death of Jesus on the cross. Secondly, it led to the liberation of the oppressed. This was because, the rejected were able to go to Jesus freely without any fear of molestation, for they knew that the person they were going to, would not turn against them. What is more, Jesus on his part was able to mix freely with the marginalized, not minding what the Pharisees thought of him. His movement was a mass movement.

⁴⁴ Christenson, *Social Action*, 99.

⁴⁵ Mandell George, *The Tenth Generation: The Biblical Tradition* (John Hopkin's University Press, 1973), 220.

Jesus' Relationship with Women

According to the Jewish historian Josephus: "the woman says the law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation but that she be directed, for authority has been given by God to the man".⁴⁶ For them women were born inferior species. In fact, it reached a stage when an average Jewish male will rise up in the morning to thank God for not creating him a woman. Imagine this kind of environment; an environment where women were reduced to a mere "thing". People could not talk about the human right of the women in the Jewish community. The man in a marriage tribunal did not need to launch his complaint anywhere, he could do whatever he like with his wife because she is a woman. And the fate of a divorced woman in this community is that she would become a rolling stone; a wonderer, who has nowhere to go. Woman for the Jews is a property; she has no right to challenge her husband. It is a male dominating society, where women have no place of importance.

The position of the Jews is what Jesus also came to attack. In the gospel according to Matthew 19:2-12, when the Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking "is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" Jesus in his response took a radical stand; he involved men in the discussion about marriage. All the while it has been women and women alone, but Jesus came and said that the issue of marriage should not involve only women but both since they are all created in the image and likeness of God.

⁴⁶ William Barker, *Women and the Liberator* (Fleming H. Revel's Company, 1972), 15.

For him, men, like women are also bound to be condemned in the law court. He says in Luke 16:18 “anyone who divorces his wife and moves to another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Luke’s Gospel portrays several instances in which Jesus praised conduct by women and indicated that their behavior served as an example. This is the case in Luke 7:44-50 when Jesus bestowed praise and forgiveness on the woman who in contrast to his hospitable host, washed and anointed his feet. It is also the case in Luke 21:1-4 where Jesus praised the generosity of the poor widow in giving to the temple and stated that, compared with the others who donated, she “has put in more than all of them”. For Jesus, the woman’s action was commendable. Jesus’ attitude towards women is interesting; he included women among the group of disciples traveling through the town and villages of Galilee and these women provided for the financial needs of the group out of their own resources. Jesus never pushed women away from himself rather; he allowed them to operate as free persons around him. In John 4:27 we saw Christ talking with a woman; even his disciples were shocked when they saw him doing this. If women were “disease”, Christ would have kept off from them. What Jesus was doing was to emancipate himself from these ingrained Jewish ideas about women and he was doing this to enable him carry out his work freely. His motive was to teach the Jews that before there is no dichotomy; no man or woman. For God, there is no gender specie. God wants all men and women to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. That is why Jesus Christ came as the only mediator between God and humanity. He supersedes all previous religions, customs and

institutions; He replaces all those stone jars as symbols of rigid legalism.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The need to care, provide and protect the poor and the marginalized is deeply rooted in the Bible. The poor are never left to suffer and die, in the life of Jesus. The poor are so much thought of as God's people; thus, every effort is made to sustain them in life. This requires the church to formulate a new theology of the poor; that is a theology that emphasizes service to the poorest in the community or neighborhood. It is the theology of including the poor in our lives, of sharing what we have with have not and being in solidarity with them as evidence in the life of Jesus Christ. Christians in Nigeria are lagging behind when it comes to the practical gestures of solidarity with the oppressed. We, as Christians have not really done much in challenging the unjust and inhuman oppression of the marginalized in Nigeria by some the poor and their rights. As Christ's followers we must take up their cause and be their mouth piece.

⁴⁷ *Justice in the world*, Nos. 29-27.