

A Portrait of the Poor in Proverbs

Well, our topic this morning is poverty in the light of Wisdom Literature. Biblical teaching about poverty in Wisdom tradition and Christian responses and responsibilities in the light of what we learn in biblical wisdom literature regarding poverty.

You know, one of the dangers of becoming a part of the church (I don't know if you have ever thought that going to church or being a Christian could be dangerous), but one of the dangers of becoming a member of a Christian community of believers is that we cut ourselves off from the world outside. And in order to come together to worship God and meet other like-minded Christians, we leave the world behind us. We are in danger of developing a kind of dualism between the church and the world. [i.e. Luther's concept of two kingdoms].

We often come and do our Christian thinking in isolation from contemporary social reality. Except that today it has been brought into our midst, so that we cannot forget it.

Well, I am very anxious today that we won't do our thinking in isolation from the world. I pray instead that we may open ourselves both to God's word, on the one hand, and what God has to say about the poverty, and to the appalling statistics of the world poverty on the other. It should prove, if you like, a valuable exercise in what I sometimes call in my teaching classes "DOUBLE LISTENING". Listening, on one hand, to the voice of God as it comes down to us through the Holy Scriptures; and listening, on the other hand, the voices of the modern world, particularly as they come to us not only through the cries and sighs of the oppressed but also through the official statistical reports of the official departments of the United Nations.

We listen to God.

We listen to the United Nations. What a strange thing to do. ... Not at all! We need to relate the ancient Word to the modern world. We need to listen to both in order to understand and make our response appropriate.

So, I begin with a few statistics. It's very difficult to take in statistics. I know that myself. I often switch off when other people begin some statistical statements. Please don't. Try and absorb this what I am going to tell you now. More than 1,000 million people in the world, approximately 1/5 (one fifth) of the world population, live in ABSOLUTE or ABJECT poverty. And those words mean that they lack basic necessities for survival. This means that one fifth of the world is going to bed hungry every night. It's a statistic worth remembering when we eat our large Sabbath meals.

Here is another: one third of all the children in the developing world are undernourished. And another: one fifth of human population own (4/5) four fifths of the world's wealth – which is the indication of the economic imbalance in the world today.

Here is another: less than 50% of the population of the developing world are literate. Less than 50%. Over 80% are literate in the industrialized nations - less than 50% in the developing world.

Or take access to clean safe water, for example. That's not luxury, is it? We turn our taps, or forceps, and out comes clean, fresh, cool water on the mains. Only 50% of the developing world have access to clean and safe water. So, you see, the imbalance is startling in these statistics of world poverty.

Now, it's in the light of these statistics that you and I are going to turn to Scripture for help. How are we to think about poverty and the poor in the light of these appalling statistics? Because we must face them. I want to be frank with you this afternoon and to tell you that I myself am very troubled by the standard reactions which are given by many Adventist Christians when they are faced with poverty statistics like these. It is not only a reaction of Adventist Christians but also of many other Bible believing Christians in the western world today. You and I, who call ourselves Seventh-day Adventist people, are meant to be the most biblical people in the church, among Christians world-wide. We believe in the Bible, we say we submit to the authority of the Bible. Well, maybe we do - but not in this case. There are many Bible-believing Christians who deviate from teaching of God in the Holy Scripture in this matter of facing world poverty.

I want to ask you to consider, in my introduction really, two of the commonest objections which some Adventists raise against concerning themselves with the poor in order to pacify their conscience and invade their responsibilities. I am almost embarrassed to tell you what they are. But here is the first: "the poor are lazy". 'Their plight is mainly their own fault. Help them, and you'll only increase their dependence. Let them give up scrounging and stand up on their own two feet.' I hear that from my brothers and sisters (mostly in the Western World). And it makes me angry. I hope it makes us all angry; angry with Christian anger. I correct many papers in ethics classes both in the traditional program at Columbia Union College as well as through Griggs University, where students express themselves in a very negative way about the poor. They call them thugs and suggest that it is absolutely their fault why they are in such a predicament. When I ask a question in the class "Are we in the West in any way responsible for the poverty in the world?" or "Do we have any responsibility to the starving people in the third world?", students stare at me with disbelief and say that they do not understand what I mean. "Are we 'our brothers keepers'? Why would we even ask such questions? Of course that we have nothing to do with the starving millions on the other side of the world", they imply.

Now, let's think carefully. The Bible in the Wisdom literature, realistic book that it is, concedes that there is a small minority of people who are lazy. If you read the book of Proverbs, you'll be introduced to a vivid picture of the people who are known as sluggards. And the sluggards sleep when they ought to be working, and they are told to go to the ants in order to learn wisdom and industry. It's true that Bible admits that there is a small minority of people who are lazy. The Bible also teaches that dependence is a dangerous thing and that it is usually a mark of immaturity. And therefore, better then dependence is independence or, the best of all, interdependence. The Bible teaches both of those things. But the same Bible goes on to insist that **the great majority of the poor are not scroungers on other people's charity but victims of other people's injustice.** There is a great deal about INJUSTICE in the Bible. Our responsibility is not to condemn the poor, except that small minority, but to support them.

Now here is my second embarrassing excuse that is sometimes uttered. “Well, the poor are a perennial and insoluble problem. And since the problem can’t be solved, why try to solve it. Why,” objectors go, “even Jesus taught that. ‘The poor you always have with you!’, he said. (Mark 14:7.)

Yeah, I know that verse and it’s reference. I hope that talk angers you as well. It is very easy to twist and manipulate Scripture by quoting it out of its context. Jesus did say “the poor you always have with you”. But did you know this: he was quoting from Deuteronomy 15. And have you ever looked at Deuteronomy 15. This is the only context in which to understand what Jesus said. There are two important references to the poor in Deuteronomy 15. One is this, verse 11: “There will always be poor in the land”. Yes, that’s what Jesus quoted. But seven verses earlier, in verse 4, we read in Deuteronomy 15, “there should be NO poor among you!” - because of the provision of resources that God made in the world to feed the poor and the hungry. So, how can we reconcile these two verses? One says, “There **will be** poor”, the other says, “there should **not be** poor”. How do you bring together the will-be and the should-not be? Well, there is only one way to reconcile them: THERE SHOULD NOT BE POOR, because poverty is not God’s will – THERE WILL CONTINUE TO BE POOR, because of the continuance of human injustice. It’s the will of God that says that should not be any poor; it is the injustice of human beings that says there will continue to be poor. This is the only way you could reconcile those two verses. Continuing existence of poverty in the world is stated in Deuteronomy 15 *not* as an excuse for inaction, ... but as an argument for generosity.

DEUT 15 points to the Sabbatical YEAR principle that Adventists in general and ADRA in particular should uplift regularly. As a Sabbath believing Christians we should make much more use of the Sabbatical year and what that means in terms of the weekly cycle of Sabbaths that we utilize in our name and in our reason for existence. Allow me to elaborate what I mean by this statement and to look at our Sabbath doctrine from the point of view of the poor and disadvantaged. And for this, I shall utilize several of our contemporary living Adventist scholars.

Sakae Kubo was among the first to point to the meaning of the Sabbath observance and its "relationship to our practical Christian life". (Kubo, *God Meets Man*, (1978), p. 7.)

He raised several points worth noting. Using Philo's expression that the Sabbath is "the birthday of the world" and consequently a "festival, not of a single city or country, but of the universe" (Philo, *On the Creation*, XXX, as cited in Kubo, (1978), p. 19.), Kubo points to the universality of the Sabbath. And the universal Sabbath makes no distinction among people. Instead it makes all people equal before God.

God's presence is not limited to any special place or country, building or people. God selected nothing within space to be his medium through which he could be in contact with his created beings.(Jack Provonsha illustrates this point by the use of "a black rock in the midst of the garden" as an inadequate sign for human beings in *A Remnant in Crisis*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1993), p. 86.) Indeed, if he had appointed

a place or a building to be his holy special place, this would have favored only people living nearby. Instead, God chose a segment of time to come closer to people. Time is universal, and therefore no person stands in a place of advantage. "With time all are equal. The Sabbath becomes a worldwide blessing".(Kubo, (1978), p.28) And if people worldwide are equal because of their equal access to the Sabbath rest, God points towards the ideal social structure in which all human beings share the same status regardless of their origin, economic status or gender. The Sabbath, in such a way, presumes human rights, and promotes them on a regular weekly basis in a very powerful and meaningful way.

But the Sabbath doctrine does not involve only the Sabbath day; it concerns the other six days of the week as well. The atmosphere and the principles of the Sabbath will not only "extend beyond the worship service to the dinner table and the living room" (Kubo, (1978), p. 27.) on the seventh day, but they would also become a part of the Sabbath attitude which ought to be practiced throughout the week. In the words of Jack Provonsha,

True Sabbathkeeping touches the whole of life. The Sabbath sanctifies the week. One cannot be dishonest on Monday and truly keep the Sabbath, because the Sabbathkeeping is essentially a posture toward God that is not a one-day-in-seven kind of activity. (Provonsha, (1993), p. 87.)

The concern for other people which the Christian should have on the Sabbath must be extended to a way of life which the Christian should exercise daily. The Sabbatical concern, which extends from the weekly Sabbaths to Sabbatical years also, was to teach the Jews about the needs of the less fortunate, the poor, the widows and the orphans (Ex 35:12-33). In the similar way, Christians should develop a greater 'Sabbatical' conscience for the poor, the unfortunate, the unemployed, and the powerless whose basic human rights are denied.

Jesus is again the supreme example of the way how God desired to have fellowship with man and how he intended the Sabbath to bring meaning to the worshipping community. As "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), Jesus took pains to clarify the true meaning of the Sabbath. At the time of Jesus, the Sabbath had become a legalistic exercise of self-righteousness on behalf of different groups of believers who wanted to prove their perfection. Jesus, however, pointed out to the almost forgotten humanitarian function of the fourth commandment. As Bacchiocchi rightly notes,

To counteract prevailing legal interpretations which restricted humanitarian service on the Sabbath to emergency situations only, Jesus intentionally ministered on this day to persons who were not critically but chronically ill.(Bacchiocchi, Divine Rest for Human Restlessness, (1980), pp. 194-195.)

In such a way Jesus pressed the Sabbath into salvation history, making it a day intended for the benefit of humankind (Mark 2:27).

The Sabbath points to equality among all human beings. It is a memorial to God the Creator. Remembering weekly that God is our Creator, and that all human beings are

only creatures among whom the differences are really non-essential, should encourage Sabbath observers to accept and respect others regardless of their occupation, ethnic or economic background or educational level. Richard Rice observed that on the Sabbath day,

...differences of occupation and education lose their significance. We realize that what we have in common before the Lord is more important than the various structures that distinguish us during the week, so we can associate with each other as equals and enjoy each other's company as brothers and sisters in Christ. (Richard Rice, *The Reign of God*, (1985), p. 370.)

Rice extends his idea a step further when he asserts that the basic concept of the Sabbath must bring forth the idea of freedom. After all, claims Rice, "the Sabbath is a day of freedom", and as such, "the freedom from labor means freedom from bondage to other people. According to the fourth commandment, servants are not to work on the Sabbath. Since no one is subordinate to another on Sabbath, each person stands before God in his individual identity and dignity.(Ibid.)

So the Sabbath becomes the true means of liberation for humanity. It celebrates God's merciful act of liberation and deliverance from the bondage of Egypt (Deut 5:15) but it also points to the ultimate liberation from sin and all its consequences which Jesus proclaimed and exercised both on the Sabbath and at all other times (Luke 4:18; 13:16).

Also, as Charles Bradford remarks in his treatise on "The Sabbath and Liberation", the Sabbath lay at the very heart of the first great freedom movement. Moses delivered God's message to Pharaoh: "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Ex 7:16). This was a direct appeal to Pharaoh to allow the enslaved people to observe the Sabbath rest. Later, God re-established the Sabbath as a sign of their liberation (Deuteronomy 5:15).

However, Bradford continues, this arrangement was to be permanent because Sabbath rest and Sabbath observance have something to do with human dignity and freedom. Yahweh never intended for one human being to tyrannize another, or for one nation to subjugate another nation.(Charles E. Bradford, "The Sabbath and Liberation: With the Sabbath, No One Can Keep Us Down", in *Anchor Points*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1993), p. 28.)

Bradford calls Isaiah's description of the Sabbatical attitude in Isaiah 56:1-7, 'Yahweh's manifesto', or God's sign of freedom, independence and liberation.(Ibid., pp. 29.31.) And 'Yahweh's manifesto' is relevant and applicable to the whole human family, especially to the outcasts - the poor, the powerless, foreigners (e.g. refugees) and eunuchs (politically and economically impotent). Bradford adds that "The Sabbath is a sign in perpetuity and a constant reminder of the relationships that exist between human beings and their God and between human beings and their fellow humans - their brothers and sisters." (Ibid., p. 28.)

Bradford, as a black Seventh-day Adventist, identifies with the theme of liberation taken up by African-American and Third World theologians. He understands that "they are

closer to those parts of the world where the misery index is highest", and why they remind us "that God is on the side of the poor", and as a result why they "send out a ringing call for justice and equality".(Ibid., p. 30.) But Bradford cannot accommodate the idea of calling exclusively for secular, political solutions to human problems.

In this respect Bradford sees liberation theology as not sufficiently radical - radical, in Bradford's definition meaning 'getting at the root of a matter'. He remarks:

“Political solutions are not the final end. They cannot possibly get to the root of the human dilemma - sin, rebellion against God. Political revolutions only throw out one group of robbers to be succeeded by another gang.” (Ibid., p. 30.)

However, continues Bradford, there is an authentic theology of liberation which Jesus came to preach. It was Jesus who promised freedom to the nations - total freedom. His inaugural message is both radical and revolutionary. And, in the words of Bradford, Jesus's message "makes the Sabbath the sign of liberation and independence." (Ibid., p. 31.) Ultimately, Bradford concludes, God is for freedom, liberty, dignity, and for the empowerment of all people. Hence, now is the time for all people to make God's sign of liberation their banner. (Ibid., p. 32.)

Kubo similarly believes that the theme of freedom not only reminds us of our deliverance and liberation, but it "commands us to extend the blessing to those under oppression or servitude." (Kubo, (1978), p. 46. Cf. Sakae Kubo, "The Experience of Liberation", in *Festival of the Sabbath*, edited by Roy Branson, (Takoma Park: Association of Adventist Forums, 1986), pp. 43-54.) It is not enough to enjoy one's own benefits of redemption. One must also work with God in bringing liberty "to the captives, and recovering the sight of the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18). Kubo rightly judges that:

“Sabbath observance has integral social and humanitarian aspects that we dare not forget. The Sabbath as sign of redemption points in two directions - to our own redemption and to that of the oppressed. We must bring rest to those who live in servitude.(Ibid.)

Coming back to the text in Deuteronomy 15, we find that the extensions of the weekly Sabbath idea applies to the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee emphasizes almost exclusively humanitarian aspects. From a week of days to a week of years God's desire for the poor and the oppressed to be liberated is the prime concern of the true Sabbath principle (Ex 23:11 and Lev 25:10). The idea of the land resting (lying "unploughed and unused") on the seventh year focuses on the concern for the poor, the slave, the underdog, as well as the rights which go beyond mere human rights and, again to those of you who are environmentalists, I believe that this suggests certain environmental rights. If one truly observes the Sabbath, one cannot remain satisfied only with one's own redemption, restoration and liberation. One must show concern for one's neighbor not only spiritually but also physically - and the Sabbath provides adequate opportunity for this.

As a day of freedom, the Sabbath has important social implications. As Rice rightly concludes,

It attaches such value to human beings that no person can ever be merely the property of another. A real appreciation for the Sabbath would therefore make slavery impossible. The Sabbath speaks against every practice that deprives human beings of their sense of worth and dignity. Oppressive economic and social structures, which make it impossible for people to provide for themselves, contradict the message of the Sabbath. Those who appreciate the meaning of the Sabbath will seek to eliminate such things. (Rice, *Reign of God*)

Seventh-day Adventists should be among the first to advance the ideas of justice, equality and freedom among all people within as well as outside of their community. If they fail to do that, the letter of the law would be observed but the spirit of the Sabbath-commandment would be totally lost.

Back to proverbs. [For the choice of these three proverbs and partial structure I am indebted to John Stott.] I want to bring to you three verses (three little known verses) from that Wisdom book. These are just exemplary verses from the Wisdom Tradition. This is not an exhaustive study of every verse on poverty from every book of wisdom sayings in the Bible. We looked yesterday morning at Jesus and the Gospels. There are many who include the sayings of Jesus into the greatest Wisdom Tradition. So, what we are going to do, as we look at the book of Proverbs, is a natural continuation of what the followers of Jesus, illuminated by the Christ event and His teachings, would do. Jesus depended on the Wisdom Tradition of the Jewish Scriptures. He read and often quoted some of the most outstanding of his sayings from the Old Testament. For example, the great (so called) Nazareth manifesto, in which Jesus outlined his mission and purpose, namely that he came to preach and realize freedom to the prisoners, and the good news to the poor, and to bring the acceptable area of the Lord was a text from the O.T. So. We naturally proceed from The founder of our Christian community, Jesus, the great wisdom teacher and the Word, to what is description of Jesus in the personalized word WISDOM. God is Wisdom and God's ideas and desires are characterized as Wisdom

So, I want to bring to you three verses from the Wisdom Literature, namely from the book of Proverbs. There are other texts that we could have chosen:

Psalms have much to say on the subject, for example. Just think of Psalm 14:6: "You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge" or Ps 140:12 which says "I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy." Indeed we could and maybe should take Psalm 82 as a whole and study it in our groups later on to see what implications it might have on our discussion as a great representative of Wisdom Literature.

Then we could have consulted Job 30:24 & 25, "Surely no one lays a hand on a broken man when he cries for help in his distress. Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor? Or Job 34:19: "show no partiality to princes and do not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands?"

But these three from Proverbs are just exemplary verses from the Wisdom Tradition. It would not surprise me if all three were unknown to quite a number of people here, and that is why I am choosing them for today. I am almost sure that one or two of these three are unknown. And together these three verses give us, what I'd like to call, the biblical profile of the poor. If you prefer it, the biblical portrait of the poor in biblical wisdom tradition, that is to say, how we ought to think of the poor. These three verses give us not only the biblical profile of the poor but they give us all the motivation that we need to take our responsibilities to the poor seriously.

OK. Got your Bibles ready? Because there are three different proverbs that don't come together except that they are all in the book Proverbs. Proverbs for the poor. The first is in the chapter 14 and verse 31. (Prov 14:31) [**“he who – or whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker, but whoever is kind to the needy, honors God.”**]

Striking, isn't it? We must never think about the poor without thinking about God who is the Maker of the poor. Because our attitude to the poor is reflected in our attitude to God and, at the same time, our attitude towards God is reflected in our attitude to the poor. And if we think of the poor in relation to thinking about God, it will revolutionize our understanding and attitude to the poor.

Look at **Proverbs 22:2** – **“Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.”** Job also said it well in **Job 34:19** – **“the rich [and] the poor ... are all the work of his hands?”**

We have to learn to look beyond the poor, behind the poor, to the God who created them. Oh, that does not mean that God created their poverty. That does not mean that God is responsible for their poverty. No, no! It simply means that the poor, because they were created as human beings by God, have an intrinsic value and an intrinsic dignity that is our responsibility to recognize. They have this dignity because God made them. And implicit rather than explicit, he made them in his image and his likeness. The poor are God-like human beings. That is why we have to respect them. “To oppress the poor is to despise God!” “To honor the poor is to honor God!” I think that should be enough to change Adventists' attitude to the poor! And Proverbs really repeat this verse again in 17:5a – **“He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker.”**

Here is another implication from the same text. The same God who made them, made us. That is to say, we share the same Creator. We are equal bearers of the divine image. Some Adventist Christians echo Cain's question: “Am I my brother's keeper?”, expecting the answer to be, “No, I am not!” But the correct answer to Cain's question is, “Yes, we are!”

“Ah, but the poor are not my brothers and sisters in Christ,” some go on to say. On the contrary, many of them are. Large numbers of the poor are Christian men and women, our sisters and brothers in the family of Christ. And the rest may not be our brothers and sisters in redemption terms but they are our brothers and sisters in creation terms - what

Paul meant talking to the philosophers in Athens, when he spoke of us being all God's children, God's offspring. He used a special word. He meant that God is the Creator rather than intimate Father of all. We are his offspring, so we are brothers and sisters, we are related to one another – we have responsibility to the poor on that account.

In a painfully graphic way, Dutch theologian Kornelis Miskotte demonstrates the religious significance of the poor: “The poor man is the real neighbor; the way in which he stands, or rather lies, in his life has something to do with the nature of the fear of God itself! ... The poor man is above all the figure in whom the neighbor meets me, as it were, in classical form, as a test case. The book of Proverbs bears witness to this.” (*When the Gods Are Silent*, (London: William Collins, 1967 [dutch original 1956], pp. 249-250.) “The neighborly act of the poor towards us who are rich by comparison is literally to lie in our way as we go about our business.” Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p. 94.)

“Through the poor, the creator of heaven and earth becomes vulnerable to our contempt! Likewise, in them God waits to be honored. The Gospel parable of “the sheep and the goats” (Matt 25:31-46) develops this insight: “Just as you did it [or did not do it] to one of the least of these, you did it [or did not do it] to me”. Thus we learn that righteousness is not a matter of conformity to some objective code of behavior. Rather, it is finally a matter of how we treat God, who is directly on the receiving end of our action, both good and evil.” (Davis, *ibid.*, p. 95.)

We must express our “SOLIDARNOST”, or our solidarity with the poor. And in doing so we will honor their maker. That is the first thing.

Now, you are ready for the second proverb. Proverbs 29:7. This is the one, I think, many would not have come across, and I want to urge you to learn it by heart. (**Prov 29:7** “The righteous **care** about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.”)

It's worth reading it again: “The righteous **care** about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.” So, here is an addition to the biblical profile of the poor. First, they are human beings with human dignity because they were made in the image of God. Secondly, they are human beings with human rights. Because, JUSTICE is about HUMAN RIGHTS. It isn't just sympathy that the poor need, it's justice. And how are we to understand justice for the poor? Well, I wonder how carefully you attended to the Scripture that was read to us by my colleague in the Religion Department, in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 8. You may not want to look at it now but listen to this. These are the key words that Bogdan Scur read. “Our desire is not that other people would be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there may be EQUALITY. And, then Paul goes on, at the present time, your plenty will supply their need, so that in later time, their plenty would supply your need, so that there will be EQUALITY”. Twice - equality.

Do you know that the Greek word, *ISOTEIS*, which is used there for equality, can also mean justice or fairness. Justice demands certain degree of equality. And what is meant by this equality that justice demands? Please think very carefully with me now. Our goal, if we are seeking justice for the poor, is not what is commonly called, egalitarianism.

Egalitarianism is a drab, colorless uniformity. A year ago I had an opportunity with 35 American philosophers to spend almost two weeks in People's Republic of China. We visited 9 largest and most important universities in four cities and met with our counterparts, professors and academics in the field of philosophy. The most striking thing at some of these universities were statues of Chairman Mao Tsetung. And we were reminded of Chairman Mao's "cultural revolution" through which he attempted a communist version of egalitarianism. All people to look the same, to dress in the identical clothes, live in the exactly the same type of house, equipped with identical furniture, and most importantly to think the same. But modern China proves that Chairman Mao failed to a large extent. Well, that's egalitarianism – and it is drab, colorless uniformity, and it is not what is meant by biblical equality. We know that because God the Creator is not egalitarian. To be sure, God made us equal in dignity, equal in value. But God did not make us equal in gifts. Some people he makes more intelligent than others, some more handsome than others, some are more healthy than others, some are tall, some are thin, and some are **not**. He's made us all different. And our doctrine of creation is of an equality of value with a diversity of gifts.

So, then, what is the equality that biblical justice demands? It's not equality of everything. It's equality, particularly, in opportunity. Christian men and women should be in forefront of those who are demanding equality of opportunity for everybody throughout the world. That means the equal chance to hear the gospel. Isn't that a form of justice? We want everybody to hear the good news, and everybody to have a chance to respond to the gospel.

We want equal chance to have access to the good earth. God created the planet earth for all its inhabitants. Not just for a few of them. And the resources of the earth of which he made us stewards are meant for everybody.

Then there is an equal chance to enjoy the healthcare and food and water and, above ALL, an equality of an educational opportunity. You know that the great value of education is that it helps the young people to develop their human potential. It draws out what God had made them in order for them to become fully what he has made them to be. Educational opportunity. Again, Adventist Christian should be in the very forefront of demanding education. But you heard me say that more than 50% in the third world are illiterate. They never had an opportunity to learn to read and write, let alone to develop their full potential as human beings. I believe that ADRA should look seriously at this aspect of human development which could be labeled educational.

On another level, two sentences in Proverbs 14:20-21, as Davis suggested, "look at the same phenomenon from different sides: those who are judged according to their financial condition, and those who do the judging. . . . one of the great trials of poverty is the sense of shame that often attaches to it. But the second verse directs our attention to the source of real shame, namely, failure to treat the poor with respect. The person who overcomes contempt of poverty with shame is more than "happy", at least in the conventional understanding of the word. The Hebrew word ('ashre) has a distinctly religious connotation; it is better

translated “blessed”. This verse is one of the OT “beatitudes” (see also Prov. 3:13;8:32;Psalm 1:1; 114:15, etc.). Like Jesus’ Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23), it identifies those who are privileged in the eyes of God. That status is attained only through defiance of the value judgments commonly rendered in every society.

It is a curious and often neglected fact that the Old Testament gives far more attention than does the New Testament to the *religious* significance of the poor. The phrase “poor and needy” designates those who are righteous and humble before God; their plight and their voice are often heard in the Psalms (Ps 40:17; 70:5; 72:4. 12-14; 109:22, etc). The sages, like the prophets, make it clear that God responds to us according to our response to the poor: “If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.” (Prov 21:13) (Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p. 94.)

Come back with me to **Proverbs 29** – justice for the poor. **Verse 7**: Notice ‘**the righteous CARE**’. The righteous are caring people, but ‘**the wicked have no such concern**’. Did you notice these words: **CARE and CONCERN**. They are words that belong to the vocabulary of love. It is love that cares, and it is love that is concerned. And that teaches me that Love and Justice, which are very often put in the anti-thesis to one another, belong to one another. Love and justice are not alternatives. Love seeks justice for the oppressed. We need to care, to be concerned.

Then there is another thing before I leave Proverbs 29:7 and that is the reference to the righteous and to the wicked. The Old Testament wisdom literature, the five books of wisdom: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, all of them have a lot to say about the righteous and the wicked. They set the righteous and the wicked in the contrast to one another. They say that righteous set God always before them, the wicked neglect God and don’t think about God at all. The righteous meditate in the word of the Lord, the wicked neglect the word of God. The righteous obey the law, the wicked disobey the law. So, we have this contrast.

In your understanding of what it means to be righteous and wicked, have you ever included verse 7 of Proverbs 29? Here is a mark of the righteous that we forget. And the mark of the wicked that we forget. The righteous care about justice for the poor. The wicked have no such concern. Not to care about the poor is to be numbered among the wicked. Does this not speak volumes about ADRA and the Seventh-day Adventist attitudes towards the welfare and education and care and concern for the poor of the world? Do we as a community desire to be counted among the wicked by ignoring the plight of the poor and downtrodden and disadvantaged? If we as a community of the faithful believers strive for righteousness and do not want to be numbered among the wicked, our duty is not only to tell the world about the hope that our belief in the second coming initiates, but also what that means here and now in-between Christ’s first and his second appearing. It is exactly in this concept of the Kingdom of God here among us as well as in the future glorious appearing that matters.

Well, let me for a brief moment think with you about the Kingdom of God, and especially about Adventist view of the Kingdom. When I talk to my students about the kingdom of God, they often look surprised about the two stages and two aspects of the Kingdom.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the kingdom of God was perceived by most Christian scholars as the present kingdom which Christians should work towards and make real on earth. Contrary to that opinion, the early Seventh-day Adventists, to start with, meant by the Kingdom of God the eschatologic-apocalyptic kingdom established by God at the end of the millennium. Because of Ellen White, this emphasis within Adventism shifted. Ellen White proposed the concepts of the "kingdom of grace" and the "kingdom of glory" which gave foundation for other Adventist thinkers to develop the idea further. Initially in the 1950s with the movement of 'Adventists-towards-evangelicalism', and especially in the 1980s with the new breed of Adventist theologians and ethicists, Seventh-day Adventists experienced a new emphasis on a number of issues and doctrines, including the kingdom of God. This time, the dual nature of the kingdom expressed as the two phases or stages not only affected the theological discussion of the timing of the kingdom, but also opened up a discussion about the moral and ethical effects of the kingdom of God. For the first time the doctrine of the kingdom of God resulted in considerations of a socio-ethical nature. The conclusion was that "eschatology and ethics must go hand in hand".¹⁹

The ethical reasoning that springs from the concept of the kingdom of God must be taken very seriously. There is no doubt that Jesus both in the Synoptic gospels and in the Gospel of John reiterated the dual concept of the kingdom.²⁰ While Jesus proclaimed that his kingdom would come with power and glory after he had gone to the Father to prepare the place for his followers in the eternal kingdom, and while he taught disciples to pray for this future kingdom to come and instructed them to wait for him, Jesus also encouraged them to proclaim that this same kingdom is at hand in their time, that it is within them, and that they need to make a personal commitment in order to enter it.²¹ Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom included serious ethical implications: preaching the good news to the poor, proclaiming the freedom for the prisoners, healing the sick, releasing the oppressed and proclaiming God's favor (Lk 4:18-19).

Jesus' ethical implications of the kingdom are expressed in the most explicit way in the Sermon on the Mount. There, the inhabitants of the kingdom are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the persecuted and the peacemakers. These are the true salt and light of the world (Matt 5:1-16). In order to take the part in the kingdom, Christians cannot just talk - they must do "the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21). And, in such a way, God's will was fully manifested in Jesus' life - the unselfish life for others in every moment of his earthly existence as he "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil 2:7).

Employing this kind of humility of Jesus, looking after the "least of these brothers of mine", helping our "neighbor" in need as the Samaritan had done is the true Christian response to the message of the kingdom. Entering into the sphere of the kingdom of grace here and now is not only a possibility for a Christian, it is the requirement. For, as Brunt pointed out, "how can we possibly be committed to the principles of God's kingdom without showing now that we accept and live by them?"²²

However, commitment to the principles of God's kingdom here and now, does not take away from the anticipation of the final fulfillment of the promises of the second phase of the same kingdom when Jesus comes. Commonly described, the kingdom of glory is a biblical concept of the eschatological kingdom established by God in his own time, which nobody knows. Jesus' command, "Occupy till I come" has ethical implications for human rights in the world we live in. The command gives Christians direction as well as a sense of belonging to the kingdom which was promised in the Old Testament period, expected by God's people of all ages, verified by the Incarnate God with his sacrifice and the resurrection, and proclaimed and lived through by many faithful believers throughout the centuries. For the contemporary Christian the "eschatological vision of our future hope actually contributes to the content or shape of our daily lives. It helps us see how we should live responsibly here and now".(Ibid., p. 16.) How we treat others in this world will not bring about the kingdom of God, but it should prove that this kingdom is in our hearts, that we are the new creatures who entered the sphere of the kingdom of grace and that we anticipate the fulfillment of promises of the kingdom of glory in the near future.

We come back to our text in Proverbs. Here is a mark of the righteous and the mark of the wicked that we often forget. The righteous care about justice for the poor while the wicked have no such concern. Not to care about the poor is to be numbered among the wicked.

I just wonder if there may be people who come to worship to Seventh-day Adventist churches throughout the world, who are in need of making an extraordinary discovery that, despite the fact that they thought they were righteous, they might have been wicked in terms of Proverbs 29? – And all because they do not care about the poor. Let's take this to heart, it's serious. "The righteous care about the poor, but the wicked have no such concern." Many of our people may need to revise their understanding of the categories of the righteousness and the wickedness, and re-evaluate where they belong.

This brings me to the third verse. Two chapters further on, in **chapter 31, and verse 8**. The verses of chapter 31 are said to be teachings of the King Lamuel, but he says that he learned this wisdom from his mother. He talks about moral self-control and comes to verse 8 where he says: **"Speak Up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. Speak up, and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and of the needy."**

Here is the third feature in the biblical portrait of the poor, namely that the poor are powerless, ... and voiceless! You know, in the biblical understanding of the poverty, as you go right through the Old Testament particularly, poverty and powerlessness are closely related to one another. Governor of New York, Alfred E. Smith, put it succinctly in his NY State Legislature when he said: "The great curse in poverty lies in the utter helplessness that goes with it." (Alfred E. Smith, Speech, NY State Legislature. Quoted in M. and H. Josephson, *Al Smith: Hero of the Cities*, 1969.)

The worst plight of the poor is not so much inability to survive, but they lack the ability themselves to change their situation. Consequently, it is the duty of those who are neither poor nor powerless to speak up for those who are.

This is what God tells us in his word that he does. For example, in Proverbs 22:23 he says that if his people do not defend the poor, he will do it himself. Let me read it to you: Proverbs 22:23a. – “... for the LORD will take up their case.”

You know, don't you, that God describes himself again and again in Scriptures as God of the poor, Friend of the weak, Father of the fatherless, Defender of widows, Judge of the oppressed, Protector of aliens. Listen to this in Psalm 146. “The Lord upholds the cause of the oppressed, comes to their defense, he gives food to the hungry, he sets the prisoner free, he lifts those who are bowed down, he watches over the alien, he sustains the fatherless and widows.” God of the poor, Friend of the weak – those two phrases of an old English hymn are true.

This is the kind of God He is. And since this is the kind of God he is, this is the kind of people we should be. We have got to imitate him in his care for the poor and the powerless. Job is the biblical character who was like this, he was righteous, truly righteous. Listen to what he said about himself before he was smitten with all his calamities. He said: “I rescued the poor when they cried for help; I rescued the orphan who had none to assist him; I put on righteousness as my clothing and justice was my robe and my turban. I was a father to the needy and I took up the case of a stranger.”

What about today. You know, probably one of the most lamentable recent examples of the church's failure to be the voice of the voiceless and power of the powerless, was that of the so-called German Christian at the heart of the Nazi regime. In theological literature they are often called “the German Christian”. Please do not misunderstand me here. I am partially of German descent and I can be frank about this. We as a community must be frank about it and recently I had the privilege to comment and edit for publishing approval an Andrews University Press forthcoming book on Adventism and Holocaust. So, besides studying this issue myself I had an early chance to see many other Adventists' theologians and historians openly talk about these issues. I am so grateful that we could look back and admit our mistakes. I hope soon we could do it about Rwanda and Yugoslavia and other parts of the world. So, many Christians, including some Adventists, compromised with Adolf Hitler. They attempted a theological defense of Hitler's myth of racial purity, and they turned the blind eye to the Holocaust as it was carried out in the gas chambers. And all this is carefully documented by historical scholar Richard Gutteridge in his book entitled *Open Thy Mouth For the Dumb*, which is the quotation from Proverbs 31.

He traces the complicity of the Christian church in Germany back to the middle of the 19th century. He points out that there were only a few brave Christian leaders who protested against the growing anti-Semitism of the National Socialism. Karl Barth was an exception. He called this racial teaching of Adolf Hitler, the sin against the Holy Ghost. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was another. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted again and again Proverbs 31 and verse 8. Listen to Bonhoeffer as he writes from the prison: “Some [Christians] seek refuge from the rough-and-tumble of public life in the sanctuary of their own private virtue. Such men, however, are compelled to seal their lips and shut their

eyes to the injustices around them.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 18-19)

“Open your mouth for the dumb and speak out for those who cannot speak up for themselves”. Adventists should have done it in Germany, and Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, and many other places. Maybe the second world war would never have taken place, if they had. Those Christian churches were guilty of silence when they should have spoken.

Well, I wish to finish. Let me recapitulate for a moment and conclude. Here is the biblical profile of the poor in the Wisdom Literature. First, the poor are human beings created by God in His own image and therefore we must respect and serve them. Second, the poor are human beings with human rights; therefore we must seek justice for the poor – specially the equal opportunity. Third, the poor are powerless and voiceless. So, we must speak up for the voiceless and defend the powerless. That’s our responsibility.

Recently, I took on photography as one of the hobbies that I loved as a youngster. And last Summer, it was natural for me, when I took my daughter Natasha to the airport, to take a number of pictures. When the film started going beyond numbers 37, 38 and 39, I felt that something was seriously wrong with my camera. Finally I gathered courage and opened the film compartment just to find out that I forgot to put the film in, in the first place. So, I actually took 39 blank shots, over a period of weeks, and now all these memories were not recorded on film. Well, I could have gone into depression and reminiscent on the lost opportunities and be sad (or angry) with myself. And that is how we could feel after seeing hundreds of lost opportunities and moments when we could have made a difference. But there is no point in thinking about the could-have-beens.

I finally put another film in and started clicking while Natasha was still there. I took new opportunities and decided that I could do something about those. And if I missed some before, I sure was not going to miss them from now on. Well, may we take the spiritual films into our cameras (and since I know that I am talking to the choir - go and encourage others in our community to do so) and go out to make a difference because:

The poor are human beings created by God in His own image and therefore we must respect and serve them. Second, the poor are human beings with human rights; therefore we must seek justice for the poor – specially the equal opportunity. Third, the poor are powerless and the voiceless. So, we must speak up for the voiceless and defend the powerless.