



Conducted by
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“Some of my friends and neighbours have said that God should not permit so much poverty and suffering in the world. Do you think this is why so many people are rejecting Christianity, and what effect will it have on the Church?”

It seems quite evident to me that media exposure of world situations is having a profound effect on peoples' minds. Wars are now being fought in our lounges. Pictures of unrelieved grief and misery imprint themselves on our minds, and the cries of hapless and helpless victims of war, disease, drought, famine, and racial discrimination assail our ears three or four times a day as news items. Small wonder, perhaps, that the uncommitted are questioning the power – or even the existence – of a Supreme Being whose nature is said to be essentially Good. Just the other day a fellow-Christian said to me, “It would be far better if we did not have so much media coverage”; on the other hand we hear comments such as, “I’m glad that we are now beginning to understand how much suffering there is in the world”. It seems as if one would like to shut out the misery from our cosy little world, while the other sees the knowledge as an opportunity to help. This polarity of perception exists in many aspects of life, but it is particularly disturbing among Christians. It seems to me that those inside and outside of the Church appear to alleviate chronic conditions by applying palliatives. But let us explore the question a little further.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that God has the power to intervene conclusively in world affairs if He so desired. We can cite the Biblical accounts of the plagues which He wrought against Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the confrontation with the prophets of Baal, and perhaps the greatest intervention in sending His Christ into the world. But we have to ask ourselves the further question, “Does He operate and intervene in the same way now, and what sort of world or personal conditions would determine His willingness to do so”?

Perhaps Jesus Himself furnishes us with some clues. You will recall, of course, that when Peter struck off the ear of the priest’s servant in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to him, “**Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?**” (Matt. 26:53). That would have been intervention indeed, but obviously that was not to be the way. The die had been cast. God’s Will was enshrined in Christ, and it had to be fulfilled as planned. In the same chapter, Jesus refers to the poor of that day. The disciples referred to the anointing of Jesus as a waste of money; their idea was that the alabaster box of precious ointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor. However, the reaction of Jesus was not as they expected, for he said, “**Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.**” (26:10,11). Of course, there are deeper implications in the anointing of Jesus than in His references to the poor, but His answer does seem to indicate the permanence of poverty in the world; that does not mean that attempts should not be made to alleviate that condition, but we shall return to that later. The thrust of our inquiry is to determine whether God should or will remove poverty from the world, and by what means He will accomplish this.

THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

I think we all understand that poverty and riches are relative. A person with, say, two thousand pounds in the bank would be classed as relatively poor when compared with a millionaire, but would be classed as relatively rich when compared with a person who has two thousand pounds in debt. This relative classification becomes important, I believe, when we have to consider people's **expectations** together with their **needs**. But first we must investigate how people become poor, and our investigation will, I think show us that poverty is not always the lack of money. Furthermore, I think it will reveal that the most dedicated social activist, and the most committed Christian, will be forced to acknowledge that the pursuit of equality in material things is, and always was, a pipe-dream.

The first cause of poverty is social deprivation. There are many people in this country, and indeed in countries across the world, who are socially deprived. I served in Africa, India, and Burma, and saw much poverty. The poor breed the poor, until poverty becomes endemic in some sections of the community. These people have no one to lift them out of their situation, and unless the societies of which they are a part make provision for their distress, then they are either forced to beg or to take the most menial of jobs for which the remuneration is a pittance. The question has to be posed; is it right to blame God for their poverty? It was reported in the Press only yesterday that according to the description of poverty as defined by the Western world that Britain now tops the list of European nations as regards the number of poor people.

The second cause – and one which we are increasingly being made aware of – is political oppression. Millions of innocent citizens, because of warring factions within their own countries, are being forced from their homes to wander in inhospitable wastes, without adequate food or shelter. Modern technology can bring such scenes into our homes almost immediately. But the lens of the camera, apart from recording the tragic scenes, always seems to critically focus on God, as if He were to blame for it all.

A third cause, to my mind, is education and training. Socially – minded activists have striven to establish an equality of opportunity, both in education and industry. Education and training have become, broadly speaking vocational, but who then copes with the frustrations of those who may have been educated and trained to do a particular job only to find that there are no jobs available for them to do? Does our class-tiered society really want equality of opportunity, for who then would do the low-paid menial jobs which many people think are below them?

Consequently, everyone seems to shrug off these problems and cry, "Come on, God. Get off that high pedestal of yours, and sort out this mess. After all, you created us, so it's your responsibility". But is it?

IN DEFENCE OF GOD

I use this caption knowing full well that God does not need me, or anyone else for that matter, to defend Him. However, when we have to deal with uninformed or ill-informed people, some explanation is necessary.

Does God know about poverty and oppression? Well, of course He does. The Bible teaches us concerning Jesus, "**For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich**" (2 Cor. 8:9). Poor in this passage means 'poor as a beggar, destitute'. Isaiah also says of Jesus, "**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.**" (Isa. 53:7). Jesus left the glory and splendour of Heaven and lived in this world as a poor person; more than that, He suffered abuse and finally crucifixion, and He did it all for you and me. Oh yes, God knows about

poverty and oppression.

Has God, then, not made adequate provision for His Creation? I read not long ago that the world's resources would provide an adequate standard of living for four or five times the world's present population. It is a fact, however, that one-fourth of the world's population lack the basic necessities for survival, while a further one-fifth who live in affluence consume approximately four-fifths of the world's income. When tears well up in our eyes as we see the plight of the dispossessed, we ask ourselves, "Well, who is fooling who?"

It would seem that we need reminding of God's way in dealing with this and other associated problems. The Christian way – which, of course, should be God's way – is outlined by Paul in his Galatian letter, "**As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith**" (Gal. 6:10). The 'all men' includes those who are outside the Church. The Christian 'rich' (and we must not forget what we said earlier about relative riches) are to be 'rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate' (read 1 Tim. 6: 17-19). The rich are not exhorted to become poor, but to use their material possessions in a generous manner, and adopt a lifestyle which is simple.

The whole of humanity should heed the cry of Cain to God, which echoes down the ages and besets our ears today, "**Am I my brother's keeper**"? Yes, we are. A note of warning must be struck here, though. Even though we are exhorted to help wherever we can, we are not to condone a 'sponging' attitude. There is no comfort in the scriptures for those who can help themselves, but expect others to keep on providing for them. The scripture is quite explicit on this point, "**If a man will not work, neither shall he eat**"; that is if he can work, of course.

As regards the direct intervention of God to alleviate human distress, I believe the incident of Lazarus and Dives serves as a guide. Dives wanted a supra-natural act; he wanted Lazarus to be sent down to earth to warn his (Dives) brothers about the torments of hell. This evidently was not to be the case, for the answer was, "**They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them**" (Read Luke 16: 19-31). Perhaps the best way that the child of God can help to alleviate the imbalance in this life (in addition, of course, to helping materially when and where he can) is to try to convert people to God through the preaching of the Gospel, and to live its principles. Far be it from me to say that God has never intervened directly in human affairs, nor ever will; that is His prerogative. He never forces salvation on anyone, so perhaps He wants us to solve our own problems.

All questions, please, to
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