

In this issue John Bueno, executive director of Assemblies of God World Missions, shares four scriptural aspects of reaching out to the poor: God and the poor, the believer and the poor, the Church and the poor, and the gospel and the poor. With each aspect, he shows how Scripture addresses the responsibility of Christians to minister to and defend the poor who live among us.

BY L. JOHN BUENO

Remember the POOR

Dana Dominguez

Remember...

God and the poor

For five years during my devotional Bible reading, I took note of how often the believer's ministry to the poor is mentioned. I intentionally did not go to a concordance for an exhaustive reference to the word *poor*. Instead, I asked the Lord to speak to my heart through His Word. I didn't want my views on the poor to come simply from what I had experienced or learned, but rather from having God's Word speak to my heart about His thoughts and precepts on the subject.

Although some of my actual experiences in ministry to the poor are included here, the basis is from the Word of God.

By speaking to this need, my intention is not to take away from the importance of our world missions thrust: to communicate the message of Jesus Christ through preaching and other methods God has given us to evangelize our world. I don't believe God wants us to be distracted in any way from sharing Jesus Christ with the masses of humanity. None of our ministries or programs is of any value unless Jesus Christ is at the center, for He is the One who brings hope to the lives of men and women.

When people know Jesus Christ and experience His saving power and the blessings that come to us through redemption, that relationship can help alleviate many of the poverty issues in our world. When a person is redeemed and lives a life according to Scripture, not only his personal life changes, but also the lives of those with whom he comes in contact will change. I have seen this kind of obedience and the results of it time and time again. Unless the gospel of Jesus Christ reaches into the lives of men and women, poverty and other issues present a hopeless task.

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Editor's note:

In two trips to El Salvador Randy Hurst met many former students of the Liceo Cristiano school system who are now in full-time ministry or various professions of medicine, law and education. Their stories are telling examples of the transformation that results in the lives of children who have been blessed by this ministry founded by John and Lois Bueno. Some of these testimonies are interspersed throughout John's article.

Lucy Cabellero

In 1968, Lucy Cabellero was a widowed Assemblies of God pastor's wife when she came to John Bueno for help. Destitute, she had no way to educate her seven children, ages 6 to 15, at Liceo Cristiano. John and Lois personally sponsored two of the children, and the school provided scholarships for the other five. Today all seven of Lucy's sons and daughters have professional careers or are in ministry. The eldest, Tobias, was an electrical engineer but later felt the call of God on his life. He now pastors a church and personally sponsors children at Liceo Cristiano. Two other sons became high school teachers, two daughters are commercial secretaries, one daughter is a psychologist, and one son is an accountant.



Aubra George

Remember...

What Scripture says to me is this: (1) once redemption comes to our lives, then we are to become agents of change, (2) God puts a love in our hearts not only for Him, but also for our fellowman, and (3) a natural result of our born-again experience is a response to the needs around us.

Many of the Scriptures I underlined during my devotional study are listed here. I pray you will allow these verses to speak to your heart much more than any additional commentary I make.

God says He will defend the poor. Regardless of what happens, He will take care of them. Scripture gives insight into God's genuine concern over the plight of the poor.

"He will take care of the helpless and poor when they cry to him; for they have no one else to defend them. He feels pity for the weak and needy, and will rescue them. He will save them from oppression and from violence, for their lives are precious to him" (Psalm 72:12-14, Living Bible).

God intrinsically feels the needs of the poor because He is a loving God. He includes the "widows and orphans" and His concern for them always demonstrates His passion for the needy. He speaks to their need primarily because they don't have anyone to care for them.

In several verses, God says if the Church or the government doesn't take care of the poor, He will defend them.

"Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them" (Proverbs 22:22,23, NIV).

These verses mainly target the injustice of political or religious systems that makes life harder on the poor.

"Learn to do good, to be fair and to help the poor, the fatherless, and widows" (Isaiah 1:17, Living Bible).

God is saying the church and the individual are responsible to make sure something is done for people with less opportunity than others to have even the basic needs in life.

In this whole process there is a sense of God's justice, prompted by the intrinsic need of people. But the subject is even greater in the sense God is just, and when men, be it individually or collectively, make unfair decisions or develop unfair systems that somehow deprive the individual of justice, God speaks. He promises to do something about it himself. He makes a commitment to destroy the purposes of man if they violate the justice of people who are needy or poor.

"He is the God who keeps every promise, and gives justice to the poor and oppressed, and food to the hungry. He frees the prisoners. ... He protects the immigrants, and cares for the orphans and widows. But he turns topsy-turvy the plans of the wicked" (Psalm 146:6,7,9).

Finally, God makes an indictment against those who don't remember the poor.

"If you give to the poor, your needs will be supplied! But a curse upon those who close their eyes to poverty" (Proverbs 28:27).

Remember...

The believer and the poor

When I first went to El Salvador at age 23, I was greatly affected by the tremendous poverty. A small country on the Central American isthmus, El Salvador has one of the highest population densities in the Western Hemisphere; its people deal with a constant lack of provision for their basic day-to-day needs. I saw mothers and fathers lament they had nothing to feed their children. I often felt terribly frustrated I didn't have the means to help all of them.

At first my reaction was: *Since the poverty is so overwhelming, there is nothing I can do about it.* But one of the principles God spoke into my life is from the prophecy in Zechariah 4:10: *"Do not despise this small beginning, for the eyes of the Lord rejoice to see the work begin"* (Living Bible). The first matter was simply getting started.

I believe this responsibility is given to every Christian. We dare not rely on the government, the church or anyone else to respond to the needs of the poor. Each agency has its responsibility, but the individual Christian also must respond to the needs in his or her environment.

"The Christian who is pure and without fault, from God the Father's point of view, is the one who takes care of orphans and widows, and who remains true to the Lord — not soiled and dirtied by his contacts with the world" (James 1:27).

This Scripture underlines the fact the responsibility of meeting the needs of the poor falls on each of us.

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Eelin Auxiliadora Romero Valle

Eelin Auxiliadora Romero Valle was born with a disability that would cause many people to give up on life. She attended a small village school for four years before the opportunity came to attend Liceo Cristiano. Traditionally, most of the children from her village never finished elementary school, but Eelin was determined. She graduated from Liceo Cristiano High School and went on to a university where she completed a doctorate in a specialized field of law. Through the years, she hasn't forgotten her past and reaches out with compassion toward children who desperately need the same opportunity she was given.



Remember...

First, we must recognize that “remembering the poor” is something close and dear to God’s heart. *“Anyone who oppresses the poor is insulting God who made them. To help the poor is to honor God”* (Proverbs 14:31).

Second, our attitude and actions must reflect the true spirit of following God. God laid out this principle in the Old Testament for the Children of Israel. During the days of the Law, His people were told to defend the rights of and respect the poor.

Sometimes a great gap exists between our words and our actions. We can give mental assent to remembering or ministering to the poor but fail to act upon it.

“I hate your show and pretense — your hypocrisy of ‘honoring’ me with your religious feasts and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and thank offerings. I will not look at your offerings of peace. Away with your hymns of praise — they are mere noise to my ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is. I want to see a mighty flood of justice — a torrent of doing good” (Amos 5:21-24).

When following up with our actions, our response should be the result of a deliberate attitude in our hearts. We do something as a genuine response — because this is God’s heart, not because we feel guilty.

We must be sensitive to the needs of the poor rather than say, “The poor, if they wanted to, could fend for themselves. They could get a job.” This statement may be true for some of the poor in the United States, but it’s not true worldwide. Many are poor because of circumstances: family background, sickness or major problems that developed and created a poverty situation. Sometimes the poor may be too depressed or discouraged to look for a job.

Our response can be manifested in many ways, including providing the means for the poor to get out of their poverty to a point where they can work.

Sometimes if someone simply takes the time to listen to the poor with understanding, it may be just the encouragement and push they need.

Instead of saying, “Let somebody else do it,” or even, “Let the church do it,” God wants to develop in us the heart attitude that personally responds to the needs of the people around us.

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Remember...



Maria Schleusz

Maria Schleusz, a dentist, attended Liceo Cristiano from first grade through high school. She says her



teachers' affection and attention were genuine. She especially remembers her Bible class teacher, who shared the Word with tearful, moving conviction. Her teachers and classmates were a family to her.

Maria is moved with gratitude as she looks back on her Christian education. "A secular institution can provide an education," she says, "but cleaning up the morals of society requires a change in the heart. This school provides spiritual formation. That is what changes a life."

Joaquin Garcia

As a young man, Joaquin Garcia accepted Christ after watching John Bueno's life and commitment to the people of El Salvador. At a church gathering he had



joined in an improvised soccer game in which John also participated. Since the weather was hot, the men were drinking water from small bowls made of coconut shells. Garcia had taken a few sips and was about to toss the rest onto the ground when John asked, "May I have the rest of your water?"

Shocked and embarrassed, Joaquin complied. "He did not even turn the bowl to avoid where my mouth had been," he recalls. "I decided right then that if this missionary would drink from my bowl, his love and friendship were sincere. Even though that seems very simple, it's what led me to commit my life to the Lord." Joaquin later became the director and general administrator of the Liceo Cristiano school system in El Salvador.

Remember...



Dana Dominguez

Gaylon Wampler



The Church and the poor

During my early years as a missionary to El Salvador, I saw a young boy standing alone selling newspapers on the streets of San Salvador almost at midnight. I thought to myself, *Who will buy today's newspaper at this time of night?* I felt God impress me to buy the rest of his newspapers so he could go home to his family.

That experience birthed in my heart a larger response to the poverty and spiritual needs of Latin America's children. It led to the establishing of Christian schools in El Salvador and later Latin America ChildCare, which represents a sizable program for improving the lives of thousands of children across Central and South America.

When followers of Christ as an outgrowth of their love for their Lord respond to a need, the Holy Spirit guides and strengthens and coordinates their response to a level secular relief agencies can never achieve. Jesus showed us the Church should be the vehicle God uses to meet some of the greatest needs of humankind.

We can't strategize from within some ivory tower how this response should take an active form. Instead, believers individually and collectively respond to the poor in the moment they see the need and in the prayerfully measured acts of the Spirit-led life.

In a world of plenty, nearly half of the 6 billion people on the earth are defined as poor. Nearly 1 billion people live in "extreme" poverty with an income of less than \$1 a day. They are so poor their lives are in danger. Asia leads in numbers, but Africa has the largest proportion — nearly half its population. These people are chronically hungry, unable to get health care, lack safe drinking water and sanitation, cannot afford education for their children,

Remember...

and often do not have even basic shelter and adequate clothing. Currently, more than 8 million people around the world die each year from the effects of poverty.

We in the United States have difficulty comprehending how deep the cycle of poverty is. We live in a land of wealth and comfort. Even the most poverty-stricken places in the United States do not compare to the plight of the millions of people in the world who don't have their basic nutritional needs met or who are unable to combat diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS.

But what if all the Christians in the world would mobilize their resources to address the needs of the poor? Think what a major impact we could have!

God asks us to respond to the poor not only in our individual attitude and responsibility, but also in our collective responsibility as the Church. Local churches need to include measures in their policies and bylaws that will enable the body of Christ to reach out to the less fortunate.

One of the main issues the New Testament church had to deal with was the feeding of the poor. The church's response to that need brought conflict because the apostles appeared to be devoting too much time to it and were accused of discrimination.

When God talked to the nation of Israel, He said they should not discriminate against the poor or the aliens.

"Tell them to stop oppressing widows and orphans, foreigners and poor people, and to stop plotting evil against each other" (Zechariah 7:10, Living Bible).

The New Testament church's response to the poor depended upon its members' taking personal responsibility. People sold their houses and properties and gave to the church, not to take care of the church but to take care of the poor. God recognized the value of their actions.

In a parallel example, God responded to the Gentile centurion Cornelius simply because he gave alms — apparently to the poor.

"One day at about three in the afternoon he [Cornelius] had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!' Cornelius stared at him in fear. 'What is it, Lord?' he asked. The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God' " (Acts 10:3,4, NIV).

Examples like this are recorded throughout Scripture. Some may say, "That is social gospel." But that kind of attitude can be a cop-out for the Church.

Others may say, "Taking care of the poor is the government's responsibility or the individual's responsibility." But Scripture speaks to the Church's collective responsibility to care for the poor.

Sometimes we may be tempted to shield ourselves against the responsibility of helping the poor by looking at the many helps available from the government, such as welfare and public assistance. But we know that many people around us do not have access to government programs.

With a clear understanding of what the Scripture says, it is vital we avoid passing off a need as something too big or that doesn't fall under our responsibility. Scripture is clear in stating we are directly responsible as Christians and collectively as the Church to respond to the needs of the poor — wherever they may be.

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Edgar Borja

Edgar Borja thought he had one chance. An excellent swimmer, he hoped to earn an athletic scholarship, get into a good secondary school and draw himself out of his hopeless circumstances. When he was 13, his training and hard work appeared to pay off after a school offered him a scholarship. But when



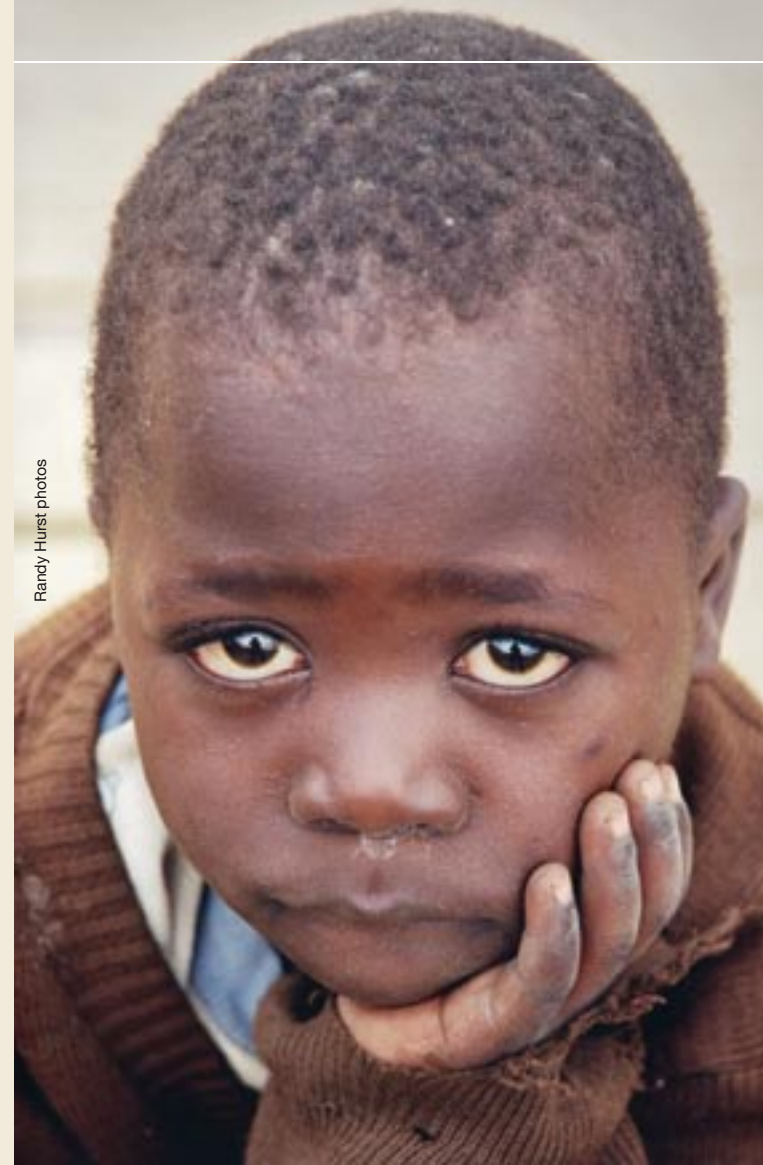
the time came to attend, the scholarships had all been canceled. Edgar was disheartened, his hopes ruined.

Close to where he lived was a Liceo Cristiano school. Edgar applied and was

accepted. Though he attended chapel and the mandatory two hours of Bible classes every week, he didn't receive Christ until five years later, shortly before he graduated from high school.

Edgar went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration and established two successful businesses with 124 employees. He also served as business manager at the small Assemblies of God church he attended. Eventually, he was given responsibility for a cell group in an impoverished area. The group grew and after three years was established as a church. Edgar became the pastor, and the church started a school.

Edgar's life is representative of many thousands of children whose destinies have been changed because of the Liceo Cristiano schools. This ministry is a compelling witness that Jesus Christ offers both eternal life and a better existence here and now.



Randy Hurst photos

Remember...

Dana Dominguez photos



The GOSPEL and the poor

The Church has the responsibility of evangelizing the world by sharing Jesus Christ. When we respond to human need — when we remember the poor — we do so not only because of our concern for their physical needs, but also because we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest thing we can give them.

Our primary purpose as the Church is to share Jesus in everything we do — whether it is a feeding program, school program, water wells or health clinics. Whatever we do must not only minister to the physical needs of people, but also touch their lives in some way spiritually. Otherwise they remain hopeless in this world.

Scripture gives us an overview of Jesus' ministry and His intentions in helping the poor.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted and to announce that captives shall be released and the blind shall see, that the downtrodden shall be freed from their oppressors, and that God is ready to give blessings to all who come to him” (Luke 4:18,19, Living Bible).

This passage sums up all that God's Word teaches in the Church's relationship to the poor. It forms the basis for our understanding that the gospel of Jesus Christ includes reaching the whole person as it points the way to eternal life. While eternal life is the great hope of the Church and the great blessing of the gospel, we cannot diminish the effect of what Jesus said by applying all of it to the future. Instead we must recognize Jesus also came to minister here and now to the downtrodden and to free us from the oppressions of this life.

Remember...

Jesus sets out a pattern in this Scripture that covers some of the major areas of His ministry. While His message was not limited to reaching only one group of people, He lists four major categories that show what ministry to the poor is.

“He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted.” I believe He is speaking to the emotional and psychological needs of our world. While these needs are not limited to the poor in the strictest of terms, they are part of “preaching the good news.” Jesus often dealt with this without actually mentioning the words *emotional* or *psychological*.

“Announce that captives shall be released.” The message here speaks both of demon possession as well as the political oppression Christians would have under unjust political systems. The only time we will have true justice is when Jesus rules this world, but the gospel gives us insight into what that justice might be. We know in today’s world a great imbalance exists as it relates to wealth.

“The blind shall see.” Here, Jesus is speaking of divine healing. Although He announces healing for all, it benefits the poor more in the sense they often don’t have resources to find proper medical care and treatment necessary to help fight many of the diseases that plague us. An example of this, of course, is the HIV/AIDS pandemic sweeping the world.

“The downtrodden shall be freed from their oppressors.” This refers to release from the injustice we see all around us, particularly in some parts of the world. Political oppression underlies the fact God will have the final say in all these matters. We can better tolerate some of the injustices we see today when we know God will have the final word. His promise is the gospel of Jesus Christ will free the downtrodden from their oppressors.

“And that God is ready to give blessings to all who come to Him.” This final sentence proclaims the universality of what God is going to do for us. This Scripture, of course, applies to the whole gospel being preached to humankind. It helps us broach the subject of God’s ministry to the poor and our responsibility to follow through in the preaching of the gospel, because it projects in graphic terms the essence of what Jesus wants to do.

Around the world, our missionaries and national church leaders are reflecting God’s concern for the poor through their actions as they share the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. Scripture is clear in asking us to respond in similar Christlike manner to the needs of the poor who come to our attention either through the media, the message of a missionary or a personal venture into our world today. **tpe**



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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



Guillermo Izaguirre

Guillermo Izaguirre received Christ at Sunday School when he was 9 years old. His parents were not believers, but when Guillermo was 12, he convinced them to let him attend a Liceo Cristiano school. Two years later his father died, and Guillermo’s mother couldn’t



afford the cost to keep her son in school. The director sent Guillermo to John Bueno. After John heard his story, he wrote a short message on a piece of paper and gave it to Guillermo. It said, “I am his sponsor — John Bueno.”

John and Lois paid for the remainder of Guillermo’s schooling. Guillermo says he was wavering in his spiritual commitment, but when John gave him that piece of paper he rededicated his life to the Lord. He went on to college and graduated with a degree in Christian education. Today he directs the central Liceo Cristiano school with more than 3,000 students.