

Theological and biblical mandate for the Church's challenge and response to orphans and vulnerable children

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"We wanted to stay together after our parents and grandparents died of AIDS. I want to go back to school but there is no money. I must work hard to get a good life and look after myself not to get the disease my mother and father had." Felix, 15 year old, the sole income earner in a household that includes his five younger siblings and one 80 year-old great uncle"

1. Introduction

Bone-chilling statistics emanate from the World Health Organization, AIDS Conferences, Newspaper articles etc. Indeed the latest statistics on HIV infection, AIDS sufferers including orphans and vulnerable children send shock waves throughout the world. Space and time is too insufficient in this article (as in any book, presentation etc.) to portray a comprehensive picture of the victims and devastation of the HIV/AIDS scourge.

The worldwide epidemiology of HIV/AIDS has evoked resources from many national governments (particularly in developing countries), the United Nations bodies, Non-Profit Organisations, etc. Aids is undoubtedly the number one killer in developing countries. An increasing number of people are falling sick, suffering physically, emotionally and spiritually – many in abandonment and desolation. Many women, young people, children and babies are severely socially and emotionally afflicted. Daily, people die of AIDS related diseases. Daily, children become orphaned when mothers and fathers leave them alone in a world that is not equipped to care for them.

HIV/AIDS has done great damage to families and their children. Due to HIV/AIDS, grandmothers find themselves caring for their sick children, grandchildren and orphaned grandchildren. Children orphaned by AIDS are found in almost every country of the world. In some countries, there are only a few hundreds or a few

thousands. But in Sub-Saharan Africa, the UN estimates that currently, there are 14 million AIDS orphans and by 2010 there will be 25 million. These orphans suffered the tragedy of losing one or both parents to AIDS and many are growing up in deprived and traumatic circumstances without the support of their immediate family.

Research on orphans and other vulnerable children shows that many programmes have not adequately addressed the physical, cognitive, emotional and psychological plight of the OVC. Worse still, very little has been researched and published on the philosophical, theological and biblical basis for the church's response to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children. In this presentation, an attempt is made to highlight the biblical mandate of the church's involvement with orphans and vulnerable children. The presenter wishes to strongly argue that the church is generally apathetic towards the needs of orphans and vulnerable children because its theology and missiology on the subject is ill-informed and naive. The church has been often criticized for being the last to respond to developments in society, for merely reacting rather than taking a lead in some of the pressing needs of the day. The presenter persuasively submits that the church's intervention, support and care of the OVC is not a suggestion or option but a command, mandate and obligation. In order to achieve this objective, the author looks at the Old and New Testament perspectives on the church and its response to orphan care.

2. Old Testament perspective

Many Christians are well aware that the Bible addresses issues of poverty and justice. Yet, many of us tend to think that the key to righteousness is right belief. Strictly speaking, this is correct. We cherish the fact that the righteous shall live by faith (Heb. 10:30). This was of course the dazzling truth Martin Luther discovered and that sparked the Protestant Reformation along with an extended period of renewal. We are justifiably relieved by the good news that our salvation is a gift from God, received through simple faith and not works of righteousness (Eph. 2:8-9). Our eternal life with Christ is guaranteed if we confess Him as Lord and believe that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). We have characteristically emphasized right belief especially in the 20th and 21st centuries. Despite this firm scriptural basis about the importance of right belief, there are so many "troubling" passages in the Bible

which seem to suggest that the key to righteousness is “right behaviour”. We shall first look at OT’s basis for orphan care.

Maybe before an extrapolation of OT perspectives on orphan care, it is worth mentioning the socio-cultural background of the OT on the subject. OT scholarship agrees that the Ancient Near East has brought greater clarity to the divinely inspired revelation of God in the Old Testament.

A case in point is the well-known literary motif of the widow, the orphan and the poor. For instance in ancient Mesopotamia, the protection of the widow, the orphan and the poor is detailed in two well-known law codes, that of Urukagina of Lagash in the twenty-fifth century B.C. and the Ur Wammu, the founder of the so-called third dynasty of Ur in the twenty-first century B.C. The famous law codes of Mesopotamia, that of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century B.C. says,

“To make justice appear in the land, to destroy the evil and wicked (and so that) the strong might not oppress the weak – to give justice to the orphaned (homeless) girl and the widow”

In ancient Egypt the protection of the widow, the orphan and the poor was the continual boast of the King. Thus, Merikane of the First Intermediate Period is instructed by his father, Khety III, that the good king does not oppress the widow or confiscate the property of the orphan. In Syro-Palestine, the theme of the widow, the orphan and the poor are attested. In the Aqhat Epic, the conduct of the Kings is described in the following fashion:

“Thereupon Daniel the Raphaman picks himself up, he sits before the gate, he judges the cause of widows, he adjudicates the case of the fatherless”

Now, turning to the Old Testament we find that the same motif is utilized. The difference between the extra-biblical literature and the Old Testament is that the church believes and experiences the OT as inspired, authoritative for faith and life. The OT is alive today! What does the OT corpus (Pentateuch, Poetical and Prophets) say about the plight of orphans? How should God’s people respond to their calamity? Throughout the OT the care of orphans, widows and the poor are

intricably intertwined. It therefore becomes difficult in this text to mention or discuss one in exclusion of the other/s.

The Pentateuch

It is worth noting that in the first five books of the OT, the concern for the widow, the orphan and the poor is permanently woven into the fabric of those crucial sections dealing with the covenant made between God and His people, Israel, both in the covenant code of Sinai and its renewal before entering the land of Canaan. In Exodus 22:21 – 24; 23:6 the widow, the orphan, and the poor fall under the protection of God Himself. This is reiterated in Deuteronomy, where God is represented as the Supreme Judge who has the interest of these elements at heart (10:18ff). This is true not only with regard to the set feasts of Israel's religious and social life, as well (Deut. 14:28-29. 24:17-22). In the key section, Deuteronomy in which the climax of the oath of ratification occurs (26:8-19), the God of redemption invokes the law of charity upon His people so that they continuously remember the magnitude of this redemptive grace toward them. In Deut 27:19 His redemptive grace toward them has a curse:

“Cursed be he that perverteth the judgement of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all people say, Amen.”

The Poetical books

In the book of Job, the evil man is described as one who oppresses the widow, the orphan, and the poor (14: 1-4, 14, 21). In the third round of discourses between Job and his “comforters”, Eliphaz sin language accuses Job as follows: “Thou hast sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless have been broken.” In his defence, Job vows that such has not been the case. Indeed, in his final summation and protestation of his innocence at the end of the three rounds of discourses, Job again pleads and swears under oath that he is free of any such evil practices (29:7-7; 31:16-17, 21-23).

The Psalmist likewise extols the God of triumph because of His righteous character with this same motif (Ps. 68:1-5). Thus he says of Him: “A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.” In the eighty-second

Psalm, God is declared to be the righteous judge who prescribes justice for all the downtrodden: “Defend the poor and fatherless: Do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: Rid them out of the hand of the wicked.”

The Prophets

The cause of the widow, the orphan, and the poor is not neglected by the prophets of Israel. They point out that Israel had betrayed their wickedness and lack of God-oriented perspective in their treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the poor (Isa. 1:23; 10:1-2; Jer. 7:4-16). Typical of this use of the motif are the words of Ezekiel 22:6-7:

“See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood. In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the alien and ill-treated the fatherless and the widow”

Detail by detail the sad and sordid tale unfolds. Parents were lightly esteemed and robbed of the honour due to them, even though honour to father and mother was one of the most frequently stated commands of the law (cf. Exodus 21:17; Lev. 20:9; Deut 27:16). This relationship ultimately underlies the proper submission of citizens to their rulers. If parents were slighted, the sojourner could not hope for consideration. Him they oppressed, forgetting that they were formerly sojourners in Egypt (Exodus 22:21, 23:9). Those without human protectors, the fatherless and the widow, were wronged, the wicked forgetting that God had made Himself their special and sufficient Defender.

True righteousness, a living relationship with the Lord, would be evidenced in a type of conduct that reflected His high ethical standards: “Thus saith the Lord; Execute ye judgement and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place (Jeremiah 22:3, see also 7:4-7).

Because of her sins Israel was to face the chastisement of God’s outstretched hand (Isa. 9:16-17) and was herself to become widowed (Zech. 7:8-14). Jeremiah lamented: “How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! How is she become

as a widow! Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens, we are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows.” (Lam 1:1, 5:2-3)

The above discussion clearly illustrates that throughout the OT orphans (and other vulnerable people) are particularly enjoined upon Israel as befitting a redeemed people who are entrusted with the character and standards of their Redeemer. Even in Malachi (the last book of the OT) the theme is utilized in pointing to the coming ministry of the forerunner of the Messiah and of the Messiah Himself and of righteousness that would then be inaugurated (Mal. 3:1-6). But one may ask for the reason for the prominence of this motif, the widow, orphan and the poor? It has been noted that the motif is an integral part of the covenant stipulations of the OT wherein Israel in pure treaty formulae is represented as the vassal to her Sovereign God. Therefore, Israel is commanded to take care of orphans on behalf of God. What truth the church must learn from!!

3. The New Testament perspective

In the critical moment in human history, Christ appeared as God’s Anointed One. He came to demonstrate God’s mercy and love.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted to proclaim liberty and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18)

“Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about Him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed, and he healed them”. (Matthew 4:23-24)

“A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing” he said “be clean.” (Matthew 1:40-41)

Christ's offer of his grace, abundant life, healing, peace, etc. was and is still for all. The gospel as proclaimed by Jesus was inclusive in nature. This is seen in his parables. For instance in the parable of the great banquet, a Pharisee acts as a host, Jesus and his disciples are invited. Jesus challenges the host

“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours, if you do they may invite you back and so will be repaid. But when you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind”

(Luke 14:3-13)

This parable emphasises generosity of God's invitation, which does not discriminate among those invited on grounds of their merits, abilities, social standing, beliefs or moral standing. Jesus concern to the sinners, poor and outcasts is made explicit in the gospel narratives. This category of people included children, women, prostitutes, tax collectors, the impoverished, publicans and the sick. They were particularly excluded from full participation in the social, religious and legal institutions.

Jesus' message and mission challenged the then notions of who was acceptable to God and for what reason. He scandalised the official custodians of religion and morality by proclaiming an inclusive rather than an exclusive message. Jesus behaviour was a living testimony of God's will to have fellowship with all. The fact that Jesus opponents (the Pharisees, Saducees and Scribes) reviled him for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners is evidence that he practised what he preached. (Matt.11:19; Mark 2:16; Luke 7:34). For his opponents were unable or unwilling to celebrate the redemptive, liberating and inclusive activity of God, powerfully symbolised in the table fellowship of Jesus (Luke 14:15-24). Jesus offer to have fellowship with the outcasts is an explicit reputation of temporal norms of worth and status (Mark 2:15-17). It is also an expression of Jesus' belief that all people are valued by God and that God's will for relationship excludes no one. This leaves us with no doubt that if AIDS was a disease in Jesus time, he would have included the infected and affected in his ministry. The church therefore ought to learn from the example of Jesus.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees for devouring widows' houses. Jesus was particularly concerned with the poor. He preached a message of good news to those who were lacking earthly privileges and told parables that encouraged generosity toward the poor. Jesus taught that voluntary poverty was for some, but not everyone and love is essential in voluntary poverty.

The early Christians provided for the needs of poor widows, and Paul exerted great effort to collect funds for the poor and needy because of a famine in Jerusalem. This positive attitude toward the underprivileged was always present among all the early believers. The condition and hope of the Orphans and Widows among the deprived were most vulnerable. The Orphan is a fatherless child while the Widow is husbandless. In both cases, no mature male figure defends against unscrupulous persons who would wish to defraud these individuals. Consequently, biblical legal codes provide for the protection of the rights of the Orphan and the Widow.

The poor, the orphan and the widows were to be included in the celebrations of the worshipping community. In the New Testament; James defined worship acceptable to God as meeting the needs of orphans and widows. The image of the needy orphan without a helper forms the background for Jesus' promise that His disciples would not be left orphans or comfortless. They would not be defenceless since the Holy Spirit would act as their advocate.

The New Testament measured true Christianity character by a person's care for the orphan and the widow. Compassion towards the poverty of others will be rewarded. Compassionate actions are seen in the form of the treatment of the Poor, the Orphan and the bereaved widow. They are not to be neglected or treated unjustly; they are to have special rights and privileges, they are to be cared for and helped generously. God defends their rights and expects His people to do the same.

Although the poor, orphans and widows will always exist, their need can be alleviated as well as being encouraged to help themselves to gain employment. Both in the Old and the New Testaments, God's Word teaches that the poor are expected to help themselves when and wherever it is possible. Relatives should be willing helpers and those who are far better off financially should help those in need in whatever way that is possible.

4. Conclusion

People infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (including orphans) need counselling, material, bereavement, medical and spiritual help. Good solid biblical based pastoral care is vital to ministry to persons and families dealing with HIV/AIDS and orphans. Good pastoral care begins with reaffirmation of the need to respond to people with AIDS as persons and not see them primarily in the context of the circumstances in which their disease was contracted or how they were orphaned. In addition, it is important to remember that the gospel means good news. Our response to orphans must embody a kind of presence that indeed sounds like good news to them.

During times of great crisis, the church has always had great opportunities for ministry. And many times, the church has responded in extraordinary ways. The International Red Cross began as a Christian organisation which sought to care for wounded soldiers. The Salvation Army began as William and Clara Booth ministered to the homeless, the hungry, and the destitute. The YMCA and YWCA were founded by Christians. Human slavery was outlawed in England and America because of the persistent efforts of dedicated Christians. There is hope for the church today to address the plight of AIDS orphans:

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13)

“...Hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption.” (Psalm 130:7)

“Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart all you who hope in the Lord.” (Psalm 31:24)

The Church must remember that there is no government or system that is going to be able to adequately supply the people resources and finances needed for the AIDS crises in Africa. As AIDS becomes more widespread, and orphans increase we must get actively involved...not passively involved. We can certainly do it because Jesus lives in us and He commissioned us in His Word to do it.