

INSIGHT PAPER

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A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO WORKING POVERTY

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Biblical insight & enterprise for social purpose

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1 Introduction

This Insight Paper provides a biblical response to one of the most pressing social and economic issues of our day – the rise of working poverty. It considers the nature of this problem, the different aspects of it, and seeks to provide a clear biblical perspective. In particular, our focus is on the relationship between workers and their employers in the private sector and how this affects workers and their incomes. This paper is being published to inform discussion across churches and businesses to provide a vision and framework for action.

1.1 Working poverty

A significant number of households in the UK live in poverty today. A surprising proportion of these households now include working people. The nature of poverty has changed in the UK in recent decades and now the majority of people in poverty are actually also working.

‘Poverty’ can be defined in many ways but usually reflects both a lack of financial means and a deeper and more social challenge too. A classic definition of poverty is Townsend’s:

‘Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong.’¹

Today, we have the highest recorded level of working poverty for a generation. The IPPR note that 17% of those in working households in the UK currently live in poverty – nearly 5 million people.² For many people today, therefore, work does not pay; they work hard but they and their families still have an unacceptably low standard of life. Something has gone badly wrong.

What does this look like and why is it happening? As well as longer term economic and political trends, there are several immediate reasons, all now well evidenced. Firstly, despite recent increases to the government’s minimum wage (the ‘National Living Wage’), many workers continue to earn low hourly wages. About one in five jobs in the UK pay below the ‘real Living Wage’ – an independently calculated hourly wage designed to be high enough to lift a full-time worker out of poverty.³ The minimum wage is less than the ‘real Living Wage’ for many people, strikingly so in London and also for younger workers under 23 years of age for whom the minimum wage is set at a lower level.

Low pay is compounded by surprisingly large numbers of employers flouting employment laws and paying below the legally required minimum wage – affecting 400,000 workers at the last estimate.⁴ We also currently have one of the highest rates of inflation for 40 years undermining wage rates at all levels.

Secondly, for many people, their working income has become somewhat unpredictable and precarious. Many low paid workers are on zero-hours contracts and often rely on shift work which can be changed at short notice, leading to unpredictable incomes from week to week. A recent study found that 50% of low paid workers had less than seven days’ notice of their

shift patterns, often requiring short-notice changes to travel or childcare plans which can even add to their costs. Insecure work has grown significantly in the last 20 years.⁵

This precarity is further exacerbated by the inadequacy of sick pay. The UK's statutory floor for sick pay is one of the lowest in Europe, with Statutory Sick Pay not applying at all to those on the lowest pay and only providing a small income from the fourth day for most others. This means that when people fall ill they face a tough choice between staying at home and earning no money at all or trying to go to work, potentially causing harm to themselves and sometimes others. This posed a serious challenge to many during the pandemic.

Thirdly, many workers are underemployed. They may be in work but not working sufficient hours each week to maintain a viable income. This is a key problem for many.

Evidence on the social impact of working poverty is also growing. There is plenty of well-established research showing how low pay leads to stress, negative impacts on health and wellbeing and how it undermines family life. Nearly a third of workers earning less than the real Living Wage say they regularly skip meals 'for financial reasons'. One in four parents on low pay say it impacts on their relationships with their children.⁶ For some, their income is so low it leads to hunger; one in six of the 700,000 people using a foodbank in 2019/20 were actually working.⁷

We also saw during the pandemic how many of the UK's frontline 'key workers' – whose contribution is essential to our society – are often living at or below the poverty line. Is clapping for them enough?

More broadly, we can also see how the welfare state picks up the bill for supporting low incomes through Universal Credit and other benefits – costing the taxpayer a lot of money, whilst still often failing to provide enough resources to take people out of poverty. Whilst a strong case can be made for a decent level of benefits, don't employers also have responsibility to pay decent wages to their employees? Where does the balance of responsibilities lie between employer and government?

As well as the data, there are countless personal stories of suffering, making the extent, and the social cost, of working poverty in the UK today a national scandal.⁸ And the rising cost of living means that it is currently getting worse, not better. Christians are repeatedly warned about ignoring the cry of the poor (e.g. Proverbs 21:13). But how exactly should we respond?

1.2 Shaping a biblical vision

The purpose of this paper is to go back to first principles and explore the biblical perspective on work, wages and employment. How are we to understand these? Who is responsible for doing what?

Much of the commentary on poverty emphasises the role of the state in addressing our nation's social problems. It clearly does have a key role to play, as do other actors (including workers themselves). But our focus is on the often neglected role of the employer. This paper seeks to provide a clear biblical perspective on this key issue in a way which is helpful for setting an agenda for action.

Although our discussion applies to all workers and employers, we have a particular interest in this paper in private sector employers. This is partly because they account for three-quarters of job roles in the UK but also because we recognise that public sector employment is subject to different constraints outside the marketplace.

1.3 This paper

Section 2 of this paper will show how the spiritual reality of the gospel cannot be separated from its holistic outworking. A biblical understanding also makes love both a public and a private good. Section 3 expands on this, showing how valuing people includes valuing workers in a way that has a concrete impact on economic relationships. When we start from a view of working poverty as a relational problem between employers and workers, we have an immediate route to change that does not need to wait for systemic transformation. Section 4 draws together our discussion in a brief conclusion.

2 A theology of employer-worker relationships

2.1 The holistic gospel

A lot of Christian thinking over the years has been devoted to social and economic justice as well as economic issues more generally.

This paper focuses on the issue of working poverty and seeks to provide an explicitly biblical perspective. Our pledge to be 'biblical' is not about extracting a few isolated verses to make a point about working poverty. Nearly any perspective can be (and has been) argued on the basis of proof-texts taken out of context. Instead, we begin from the premise that Scripture has a centre and work from there.

The centre of Scripture is the person of Jesus Christ, revealed in the gospel message as the centre of all things (Colossians 1:15–20). From this central message of creation, sin, redemption and new creation in Christ, Christians have the basic co-ordinates of God's purposes. Ethically speaking, the heart of these purposes is love – a God of love who loves creation and redeems people from mutual hostility to an eternal life of love. We see this message summed up in one of the most famous verses of the New Testament – John 3:16. On top of this, there are multiple repetitions of the command to love (e.g. Matthew 22:34–40; John 13:34; James 2:8).

'Love' means many different things to many different people. But that does not make it subjective or vague; it is epitomised in Jesus' death on the cross (1 John 3:16). Through Jesus' other actions in the Gospels as well as the various practical injunctions in the Epistles, it becomes clear that love involves holistic concern for others, treating them as kin. Within an understanding of kinship, it's pretty clear what loving others involves.

We can go further when we take into account the Old Testament background to the ethic of love for God and neighbour: 'all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' (Matthew 22:40). In the Torah especially, love for God and others is worked out through the social, economic and political relations of Israel, hence the Jubilee Centre's long focus on 'relational thinking'. However, as is graphically illustrated by the economic critique of the New Testament, and ultimately the cross itself, this way of life occurs against a hostile backdrop. Biblical love runs against the dominant pattern of society including in the marketplace.

2.2 A social vision

Across Scripture as a whole, to love is to give oneself for other people's flourishing. What it means to 'flourish' is spelled out in Genesis 1–2: it is about living in right relationship to God, other people and non-human creation, thus participating in all the goodness of divine life. What this complex relational view of flourishing boils down to is actually a simple idea: home. Whether in the Garden of Eden, the social vision of Israel or the Early Church, people flourish when all have a home within an interconnected community of homes. In fact, the new creation portrayed at the end of the Bible will also be God's home (Revelation 21:3). Therefore the idea of home is deeply theological, revealing something of the nature of God.

This biblical social vision of home also shapes employer-worker relations. When the goal of work is building home, it is not a burden or an imposition but an expression of freedom.

God created people to cultivate the world and individuals to cultivate their own homes, hence Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They worked freely towards this goal until they sacrificed it all for a false idea of freedom, i.e. independence from God. As a result, they lost their home (Genesis 3:22–24) and slavery resulted from the curse of sin.

We see the opposite movement from slavery to freedom in the release of Israel from Egypt. From forced labour in a foreign land (Exodus 5:1–21) via four decades of homelessness (Numbers 32:13), they were given a place in which every household had a home to cultivate in freedom (Leviticus 25:1–17). Maintaining this condition has always involved fighting against the dominant political and economic forces of the day, both internally and externally. But the New Testament reiterates the end goal of working in freedom. Revelation broadens out the vision of Genesis where all are serving God in a shared home (22:1–5). This is a home with God to which the path is Jesus (John 14:1–6), but this future hope does not make work irrelevant. Paul is a self-employed worker (2 Thessalonians 3:7–9) and for him, freely doing a decent day’s work benefits the community and is an advert for Christian love (1 Thessalonians 4:9–12).

2.3 Key principles for employer-worker relations

The Bible gives us a social vision that is inseparable from the gospel message of Jesus, though it is spelled out in the Old Testament. Each family or household has a home in an interconnected network of homes that undergird the political structure of local community, nation and international society. Generally, therefore, the employer-worker relationship should tend towards this vision. In terms of the work itself, we are assuming for the sake of argument that the products or services of a given business contribute beneficially to society as a whole (although this can sometimes be a question in itself). But in addition to this, the result of the work for those employed should be their own flourishing through enabling them to cultivate home.

There are five key biblical principles at play here, which will help bring out the importance of what is at stake in the employer-worker relationship.

Human dignity: people are people, not units

A worker is a person. That may sound obvious, but it becomes crucial when we recognise God’s purposes for people. Whatever the differences in role and responsibility between various actors in a business, the starting point for all is a basic equality of dignity. All are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) and Jesus died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–2). Human dignity demands that a person is treated as one created for the range of relationships and experiences that constitute flourishing. They cannot be objectified as a unit whose only function is to provide the means for others to flourish.

Agency: flourishing within work and outside it

A more specific theme connected to the idea of human dignity is that of agency. Not every job involves the same level of responsibility. But given God’s purposes for people, the development of agency is an important theme. If there is no freedom to make decisions about how work is done, then this runs counter to these purposes. The importance of agency comes out clearest in the contrast between the life of Israel in Egypt and the life given to them in the promised land. They went from being prescribed repetitive

monotonous tasks for no personal benefit to being given land on which to creatively develop their own resources as households and communities (Deuteronomy 8:6–9).

Agency is not only about what happens within a job. It is also about building physical, social, economic and even political capacity for life outside of work. If a worker's job makes him or her less able to build home and participate in wider society, then an enterprise is failing in part of its social purpose. On this basis, there should be boundaries around the time and energy that work takes up and, more positively, businesses should build life-giving cultures that provide opportunities for personal development.

You reap what you sow

Evangelicals have emphasised the priority of grace in Christianity, and that is definitely the starting point of the gospel. But the principle of reaping what you sow exists alongside the New Testament's message of justification by faith, even if the apparent tension between the two is theologically challenging. Right from the beginning, the logic of cause and effect is written into the natural processes of creation (Genesis 2:5–6). In line with the agricultural origins of all work, Scripture always assumes that work is appropriately rewarded. Thus talk about reaping and sowing (cf. 2 Timothy 2:6) is not just an abstract ideal. There is no exact formula dictating the relationship between work and reward. Yet the relationship should be appropriate, so that hard work yields a decent living. This connection between someone's labour and what they receive in return is generally affirmed in the New Testament (Matthew 25:21; Romans 2:6; Galatians 6:9) and specifically applied to work by Paul (2 Thessalonians 3:6–13).

Beyond contract to covenant

The usual basis for relating to each other in economic life is contractual: you agree to do something for me, I agree to do something for you, and we record the agreement formally. There is nothing unreasonable about mutual expectation, and formalising such expectations is vital for the security of all parties concerned. But if business interactions remain at the level of 'contract', it implies that there is no deeper relationship between two parties, who remain essentially separate individuals. What 'relationship' there is only goes as far as the delivery of specific goods or services.

From a biblical perspective, human identity is irreducibly relational; one is who one is in relation to family, local community, nation and universal humanity. To be 'human' means to belong to a collective and ultimately the body of Christ to which all are called (Colossians 1:15–20). Economic relationships are embedded in these overlapping networks; they cannot happen outside them and the 'market' is not a sealed off system of its own. Because of this, business relationships involve a bond that is covenantal. In fact, there are no mere 'contracts' in the Bible; even political or economic dealings are sealed with a 'covenant', implying a more fundamental relational commitment. Of course, even covenantal relationships can become distorted. But the starting point should be a commitment by an employer to a worker that goes beyond the minimum legal obligations.

Power comes with responsibility

A lot of public life, especially in business, operates on the assumption that if you can legally do something, then there is no reason why you should not. Higher ranking economic actors have far more power than lower ranking ones, and they are encouraged by 'the rules of the

game’ to use this power to their advantage. However, biblical power does not work like this. The great leaders of God’s people stand out for the level of responsibility they take over those whom they lead. Specifically in relation to business dealings, figures like Job, Boaz and Nehemiah use their economic power for the benefit of the weak, whilst the ideal woman of Proverbs uses business to provide for others (31:10–31). Jesus is the supreme example of this; he had the power of an invincible angel army at his disposal (Matthew 26:53). But instead of ‘winning the game’ and defeating his opponents, he chose to serve those under him by accepting (short-term) defeat. Because of Jesus’ death, all can experience home in relationship to God; Jesus took power as the responsibility for others’ wellbeing.

2.4 Two ethical fundamentals

A whole-Bible understanding of the gospel together with these five principles yield serious implications for employer-worker relations. These can be summed up in two ethical fundamentals.

Love does justice in the face of injustice

The first fundamental rounds off this section by showing how these five principles connect to the overall mandate of love, which we have already seen to be central.

Each of the principles is about giving people what they are due, and not just adding something extra. God means for every person to participate in cultivating home, and to participate in this is a recognition of what is right according to what has been given in the divine gift of creation. At the same time, Jesus says that the law and the prophets (i.e. the Old Testament) can be summed up in the commands to love. Therefore, we have to understand love holistically; to love others means to help them experience home. Nobody would dispute this in the context of private family life. But every relationship should be judged by the extent to which it tends towards this social vision, including employer-worker relationships. This might come as a surprise to those who put public life in a separate box with its own rules. But the Bible never suggests that Christian love is restricted to private or social relationships. It works out in the economic and political sphere of which business is a key part.

If love in its biblical sense is about giving people their due, then it is not a matter of offering charity but of doing justice. Another separation often made by society (including Christians) is between charitable causes and economic aims, but this is a false dichotomy. Purpose-driven enterprise tends towards a God-given social vision constituted by right relationships that are about love and justice simultaneously. The whole biblical basis given here is well summed up in these verses:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? (1 John 3:16–17).

If love dictates that we ‘owe’ it to a poorer community member to use our wealth for their wellbeing, then there are obviously implications for employer-worker relationships.

There can be no ‘free market’ for labour

The second idea is a structural implication of ‘love your neighbour’: human labour is not just another commodity. Debate continues between ‘free market’ enthusiasts and those who want more state regulation. Nearly everything we find in reality is a combination of the two, but often this is arranged on pragmatic grounds. A biblical perspective gives us a coherent rationale: free markets are for goods and services, but not for the factors of production (land, labour and capital). This has been unpacked in previous Jubilee Centre publications, but the key point here is about labour.⁹ Its value is bound to human dignity; there must be ‘protection of the waged labourer’ who is not a mere commodity.¹⁰

With the prevalence of slavery in the Ancient Near East and the Roman Empire, labourers could straightforwardly be bought and sold. But Israel was to be distinctive in having an economy based on universal land ownership, to which all could return and cultivate. Although Israelites were not banned from buying and selling people who were already slaves, but could not sell themselves or make community members slaves. If people did sell themselves into bonded labour, they had to be given a fair living and released to their homes in the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:1–17).

Connection to land was profoundly humanising; since everyone had a physical place, they commanded respect in society as persons and not just objects of other people’s ambition. Workers were never supposed to be reduced to their productive capacity but were *human* labour, whose treatment must allow that humanity to flourish. Unfortunately, both in ancient societies and today, we see a common tendency to exploit those in weaker positions (whether or not this is always labelled as ‘slavery’). But we are given a better way: it is about ‘having the grace to relate to them as people with agency who are made in the image of God, rather than just units of labour’.¹¹ This already begins to imply specific behaviours around wages, which brings us to our next section.

3 Behaviours to tackle working poverty

To move towards a biblical social vision, principles and fundamentals must yield concrete behaviours. John puts it best in the same passage already quoted: ‘Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth’ (1 John 3:18). With this in mind, what does an employer owe his or her worker?

A person’s needs and one’s means of addressing them comes into sharp focus when relational responsibility is accepted. For this reason, Scripture majors on the overall story of God’s dealing with people and the core truths of the gospel’s ethical fundamentals rather than giving detailed prescriptions for how every relationship should be conducted. Even the most densely prescriptive material in the Torah does not provide a comprehensive set of employment rules. An employer who applies the law of love to his or her worker will be able to respond to need even when there is not necessarily a specific written policy formally requiring it.

However, it is good to be as explicit as we can, both to help us evaluate employer-worker relationships and to codify best practice. The basic practice is that workers should be given what they need to build their homes. There are three specific behaviours that can ensure this general aim for workers’ provision is achieved.

3.1 Pay a living wage

For a worker to be able to cultivate home, the most obvious practice concerns remuneration. All the biblical material that we have examined so far points to the necessity of workers receiving payment that is sufficient for the standard of life deemed as acceptable within a given society. This is the rationale behind the Living Wage Campaign, which has strong Christian heritage through Catholic thought.¹² Because it is based on principles that apply to people as people and calculated according to a basic standard of life, a ‘living wage’ should apply equally across the board to everyone, regardless of gender, age or any other social characteristic. It is only a starting point, however, and obviously does not preclude higher pay for certain roles.

Paying the right amount

Jesus sums up the worker’s due in a simple saying:

For the worker is worthy of his wages (Luke 10:7)

Labour deserves payment that is appropriate to needs, specifically shelter and food, which the version of the saying in Matthew 10:10 makes explicit. But the context of the third appearance of the saying in 1 Timothy makes it clear that this is a matter of honour (5:17), and not just the bare minimum for survival. Earning a decent living is a matter of dignity, a means to social participation and not just material subsistence.

Each of these occurrences of the saying comes in the context that directly concern Christian workers, whether missionaries or pastors. But elsewhere Paul connects this specific issue to more general regulations in the Torah about appropriate pay (1 Corinthians 9:9–14).

This alerts us to the fact the economic aspect of the Old Testament still has relevance with regards to this issue of pay. In fact it is there that we find some of the strongest exhortations about the responsibility of an employer:

¹⁴ Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns.

¹⁵ Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin. (Deuteronomy 24:14–15)

The dependence of the worker on their employer entails a responsibility to pay properly. Although the explicit issue here is timing rather than amount of wages, the fact that a person depends on their remuneration means that it must be sufficient to live on. Given that the norm was for a man to do paid work on behalf of his whole family, a decent wage covered the requirements of a household and not just an isolated individual. So, a wage that is enough for a household to live on can be construed as a ‘living wage’.

We can get a sharper sense of the right thing to do from looking at what was wrong. A common temptation then was (and still is) to abuse positions of power and ignore workers’ needs. This was the problem in Egypt, where Israel were treated as slaves, apparently being paid nothing (Exodus 5). God’s people were warned that if they adopted a monarchy, a centralisation of power like the Egyptian model, the temptations of power would be too great and workers’ needs would be ignored (Deuteronomy 17; 1 Samuel 8).

This dire prediction is exactly what happened with Israel’s kings, starting with Solomon’s use of exploitative labour that led to a split in the kingdom (1 Kings 12). The prophets rail against this kind of thing and it’s worth hearing one of them at length to get the force of what is being said, which hardly needs elaborating:

¹³ Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labour.¹⁴ He says, “I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.” So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red.¹⁵ “Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him.¹⁶ He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the Lord. ¹⁷ “But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion.” (Jeremiah 22:13–17)

Jeremiah makes explicit what comes out in many of the passages mentioned already: greed comes with carelessness about others. Such kings abused political, social and economic power. In the biblical times, the necessity for a living wage is implied by the fact that bonded labourers (whether slaves or what we would call servants) would be solely dependent on their masters for daily needs (e.g. Colossians 4:1). Contemporary employers in the UK have a more restricted role than ‘masters’ or kings. But, as we saw in Deuteronomy, the responsibility for hired workers’ economic needs is no less. This must say something to companies whose highest earners live in luxury whilst those at the bottom of the ladder struggle for a living. Otherwise we would have the bizarre situation that modern

employment entails less obligations towards workers than masters had for slaves, or kings had for subjects.

Where things go wrong is when workers are seen as a means to an end rather than people to be cared for and even loved. Hence the commands in Torah summed up by ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18) sums up social and economic teaching. This includes the mandates to leave the gleanings of the harvest (19:9), deal with financial integrity (19:13) and act justly with the poor (19:15) and, most relevantly for us, the directive ‘do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight’ (19:13).

This relational mandate does not disappear in the New Testament. Jesus’ own brother emphasises the importance of paying workers properly with words reminiscent of the prophets (James 5:1–6). There we have the same combination of the requirement to heed the needs of workers and the temptation and seriousness of greed:

⁴ Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. (James 5:4–5)

Paul adds theological depth to this by reiterating the Old Testament priority, reminding us that love is the right response and not just the bare act of giving higher pay (1 Corinthians 13:3). And this brings us back to the fact that paying a living wage is part of how an employer loves his or her neighbour (in this case his or her worker). If this involves a reduction in the wages of higher-ranking positions or a smaller profit for shareholders, then such love becomes courageous and sacrificial but not foolish (2 Corinthians 8:7–15).¹³ If paying a living wage is still difficult to achieve, then creative ways of compensating workers can still be pursued (such as reduced hours for the same pay).¹⁴

Paying according to schedule

The concept of a living wage already includes a time dimension; it is a wage that is sufficient for a household’s needs for a certain period. So, the natural assumption is that a worker must be paid the right amount at the right frequency for them to be able to maintain their livelihood – i.e., paid the correct amount, on time. Another way to put this is that cashflow is an aspect of sufficiency.

There are several biblical passages that condemn the practice of delayed wages, as we have seen (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:15). Employers were probably tempted to delay payment in order to use the money for other purposes in the meantime or as a means of retaining tighter control of their workers by keeping them in a state of need. Whatever the motivation for doing the wrong thing, the right thing is clear: wages must be paid on time. This should include a certain amount of flexibility on the part of the employer to negotiate the best wage payment schedule; payment each day, as was the practice in ancient Israel, may not be in everybody’s best interests today. The principle is that both the level and rate of pay should take into account the worker’s needs.

Giving ‘living hours’ where possible

If the biblical principle is that conditions of employment should correspond to the needs of a worker’s wellbeing, sufficient hours would be part of the requirement. In practice, much working poverty comes from low hours rather than just low hourly pay. An employer’s

responsibility is proportionate to the extent to which the workers rely on them for their wellbeing. What this means is not only that there must be a living wage for employees but also that, where a worker is reliant on a sole source of income, reasonable effort should be made to at least offer ‘living hours’ where possible. It is not always practical for one employer to provide ‘living hours’ to all of its employees and not all workers want them – for some, part-time working is a choice. However, a responsible employer will need to take into account that many workers depend on a certain number of hours of work.

Sufficient hours must be consistent to be effective. There must be some guarantee that the number of hours will not fluctuate in a way that leaves a worker in a precarious situation. Even if zero-hours contract arrangements sometimes seem to be enough for a worker, precarity is a constant threat for those on low incomes. Such contracts are diametrically opposed to the principle of covenantal relationship that lies at the heart of a biblical employer-worker relationship. Offering workers the security of regular, sufficient hours is part of the same broad principle of a living wage.

3.2 Dignified work

Fair expectations

It is little good paying a worker well if their job comes with unrealistic expectations that force people to quit, cause health problems or damage relationships at home, all of which exacerbate the problem of poverty. The required tasks and the breaks between them must be appropriate to what a worker can reasonably manage.

One of the behaviours that God’s people were to avoid was overworking. In Egypt, the people were given an unreasonable workload in harsh conditions (Exodus 5). Likewise, Solomon’s forced labour, reinforced by his son Rehoboam, made the working relationship unsustainable and led to political disaster (1 Kings 12).

This goes against the principle of Sabbath and festival days, where rest was built into a sustainable rhythm that kept God at the centre and prevented work (or bosses) from having god-like authority. Jesus reinforces this role for Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28) whilst Paul tells masters to treat those who work for them as equals under God (Ephesians 6:9).

Setting sustainable work expectations touches on four of the main principles we have brought out. It maintains the dignity and agency of workers, keeps a reasonable relationship between work and reward, and is part of an employer’s duty to use power responsibly.

Developing agency

The end-goal of employment is the common good – of employer, worker and society at large. What this means for the worker is that she or he should be given the chance to develop. Developing the capacity of workers through training, skills and experience should be part of reasonable work and not an optional extra. It costs, but the benefit is a happier, more capable, and ultimately more productive team who bring these benefits into society.

Increasing workers’ agency goes back to the biblical narrative that runs from slavery to freedom. Employers had to offer release to bonded labourers (e.g. Deuteronomy 15:12–18; – cf. Exodus 12:45, Leviticus 22:10) and send them off to cultivate their own homes again, with sufficient resources to do so (Leviticus 25:39–43). Sometimes such love developed that

a bonded labourer would stay with a master (Exodus 21:5), but this was a freely taken decision (paradoxical as it may sound).

It also recognises the fundamental equality of all as created by God and redeemed by Christ. Paul calls Philemon to take Onesimus as a brother and not a slave (Philemon v. 16), although nothing is said about how this would impact on his work. Jesus radicalises this idea of equality and freedom as he proclaims himself master over the disciples but then washes their feet like a slave and demands that they do the same (John 13:1–15). The point is that, under Christ, nobody has any ultimate ownership over anyone else. All workers should have conditions that allow them to enjoy sufficient independence to cultivate home.

The more capacity and agency a person develops, the more able they are to participate actively in a company and in society more broadly, starting with their own households. ‘When work is dignified within companies it can eventually help safeguard the agency of society in general’.¹⁵ Employers should actively pursue workers’ development.

3.3 Fair provision

In the usual biblical employer-worker situations, this relationship provided the sole means of support for the worker. Naturally, provision would have to be made for sick workers (e.g. Luke 7:1–10), if only because of their financial value. But a biblical approach moves beyond slavery to see how labour is more than just another commodity. A person cannot be treated like another good and the work they offer as a team-member goes beyond service. The employer-worker agreement is undergirded by a covenant implied by their common membership of society. More specifically, all relational interactions are premised on bonds of local community, family, and basic humanity (hence solidarity with the immigrant in biblical law). These can also be expressed in shared causes in civil society organisations (such as sports clubs or residents’ associations), and, not least, church congregations.

All this puts employer and worker in a covenantal rather than a contractual relationship, meaning that it goes beyond the minimal idea of payment for labour. A worker’s place in society needs to be maintained, not only for their own good but for that of the employer too. Once a person comes into employment, the worker can expect that the job provides their reasonable needs in times of sickness, bereavement or maternity. Of course, other bodies (such as family and state) also have a role to play in these situations. But where the primary source of income is a business, that business bears a key responsibility for financial provision, even when a worker is unable to work.

4 Conclusion

Working poverty is an urgent issue to which Christians must respond. Taking a biblical approach to it yields principles and behaviours that are readily translatable to contemporary employment practice.

This work is already underway. Civil society campaigning for a ‘real Living Wage’ – in which many churches have been central – has already built a national movement for change in the UK, with significant impact. But there is clearly much further to go.

The perspective we have offered here gives biblical grounding to a broad agenda which, if pursued, would not only address in-work poverty but also help many employers take up their rightful responsibilities as powerful agents of social change.

Change begins with hearts and minds. The case we have put forward puts love at the centre. Love, as biblically understood, is a powerful force that has concrete implications for employer-worker responsibilities. These include the following behaviours:

1. Paying a genuine living wage
2. Paying wages according to the agreed amount and time schedule
3. Providing regular and sufficient hours of work where possible
4. Providing work which is reasonable in scope and has fair boundaries
5. Giving workers sufficient agency for their work to contribute to their development
6. Paying a fair amount when workers are sick, bereaved or have pressing childcare responsibilities

The Church can and should lead the way in promoting these behaviours to combat working poverty. It should do so first of all by example, modelling the employer-worker relationships that it wants society to develop. But the Church also has a special role in listening to the voices of those who are often unheard (including workers) and bringing them to the same table as those who hold more economic power. This way change can be worked out and pursued *together* rather through repeated cycles of conflict where the strongest win. This is where transformative power lies (Philippians 4:2–3).

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Responsibility for the final content remains, of course, with the writer.

Notes

1 Taken from Peter Townsend's definition (<https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/what-poverty>" <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/what-poverty>, accessed 23.8.22)

2 Data for 2019-20 drawn from C. McNeil & H. Parkes with K. Garthwaite & R. Patrick (2021) *No Longer 'Managing': The rise of working poverty and fixing Britain's broken settlement*, IPPR

3 The statistic is drawn from Cominetti, N., McCurdy, C., & Slaughter, H. (2021) *Low Pay Britain 2021*, Resolution Foundation. Low pay is defined here as 'less than two-thirds of median hourly pay'. The Living Wage is calculated each year by the Resolution Foundation on behalf of the Living Wage Foundation, which is an independent national charity, and full details are available from them as to the methodology used.

4 Data for 2018 drawn from Judge, L. & Stansbury, A. (2020) *Under the Wage Floor*, Resolution Foundation.

5 Statistics drawn from (in order) Richardson, J (2021) *Living Hours Index* Living Wage Foundation; Florisson, R. (2022) *The Insecure Work Index: Two decades of insecurity*, Work Foundation, Lancaster University.

6 Richardson, J. (2022) *Life on Low Pay 2022*, Living Wage Foundation

7 Trussell Trust (2021) *State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution and food insecurity in the UK*

8 For example, BBC's April 2022 "Panorama" documentary (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0016kws/panorama-surviving-the-cost-of-living-crisis>" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0016kws/panorama-surviving-the-cost-of-living-crisis>, accessed 23.8.22).

9 Mills, P. & Schluter, M. (2012) *After Capitalism*, Jubilee Centre, p. 13. Several of the essays in this book explain the rationale and implications of this distinction.

10 This idea has a long history in Catholic Social Teaching (the quotation is from the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, section 83). See also Mills, "The Divine Economy" in *After Capitalism*, p. 97.

11 Samuelson, C. (2019) *Just Pay*, Jubilee Centre, p. 23

12 This goes back at least as far as the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (see sections 43–46). See also the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (sections 250, 302).

13 The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty makes the same recommendation about the living wage in its report on in-work poverty (<http://www.appgpoverty.org.uk/business/in-work-poverty/>, accessed 23.8.22).

14 My thanks to Dr Erica Mongé-Greer for this point, who also pointed out a lived example of such commitment: <https://www.inc.com/magazine/201511/paul-keegan/does-more-pay-mean-more-growth.html> (accessed 23.8.22)

15 Samuelson, *Just Pay*, p. 38

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