

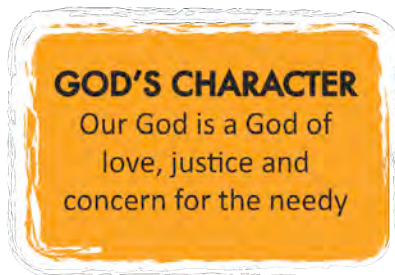
Almost all Christians would agree that we should respond to poverty – we have an innate sense that it is part of the calling of God's people. However, not many Christians are well thought out as to the theological reasons underlying that position. Often it seems like the only motivations are proof texts and vague allusions to poverty and justice having something to do with God's Heart – so in 2011, the Micah Challenge Theology Working Group is exploring these foundational questions:

- Is poverty a problem for God (and therefore for God's people)?
- Should Christians bother trying to reduce/eradicate poverty? Why?

We are seeking to answer these questions by using the following framework, developed by Andrew Cameron, one of the members of the Theology Working Group.

Christians form a "Jesus-shaped community" living in the world that was created by a relational God whose characteristics of love, justice and care for the needy has been fleshed out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Jesus-shaped community is a sign of the new creation that will come in which poverty, injustice and evil will be eradicated. It does this by living out God's commands through the power of the Holy Spirit, which include working against injustice in all forms in order to participate with God in the building of the Kingdom that will become fully manifest in a new future brought about by God for all of creation.

**God's Character** presides over and shapes all parts of this framework.



One of the most important claims that we can make about the God revealed in the Scriptures is that God is *relational*. God's creation has built into it the need for companionship, between humans and the non-human world and especially between humans. Being made, in all our diversity, in the image of God, the intention from the beginning was that all human beings will work in partnership to tend creation.

A central theme of the Biblical witness is the divine-human relationship that is expressed through covenant. Through election and covenant God binds himself to humanity in promise and partnership. We are told that God chose a particular people and promised to care and provide for them. The chosen people were asked to respond in faith and gratitude by living as the people of God.

We begin to gain the picture of God's character in the Old Testament. From the beginning of the story of the chosen people we hear of a God who responds to the cries of the needy and rescues those in oppression. The codes of behaviour that the covenant required included frequent admonitions to care for the poor and disadvantaged. As well as being concerned about religious practice, the prophets characteristically stood up against injustice and exploitation on social and economic issues. Indeed, as commissioned spokespersons of God, the prophets' message was that God was more interested in behaviour than sacrifice and empty worship. Across the Old Testament we hear of the character of the covenant God in the phrase "a God who is slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love," despite the people's continual failure to live up to their part of the covenant.

The unique witness of the New Testament is that this God is made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the climax of the covenant, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has appeared in his words, deeds, healings and signs. Through the incarnated life of Jesus we see that God continues to be passionately involved with creation. But the scandalous nature of the incarnation is seen in that, through Jesus, God was willing to identify with the least of humanity. Thus we see in the story of Jesus that his own experience included poverty, refugeeism, rejection and torture. He related to people of all backgrounds, and specifically to those who were considered irrelevant by worldly standards: women, children, the diseased, and the disabled, those whose professions were despised. He identified so fully with the human experience that he was willing to face death. Through the incarnation God entered into a full relationship with humanity. Through Jesus' death on the cross, God's judgement on those individuals and systems that deny humanity was made manifest. Through the resurrection, God's grace was offered to transform our world with hope.

The New Testament also witnesses to the role of the Spirit of God as the one through whom God's character, including compassion, a sense of justice and solidarity with the needy, can become rooted in our own lives. Through the Holy Spirit we continue to be bound in relationship to God: a covenant written on our hearts. In the Biblical story, then, we are shown the character of God: one who is committed to love, justice and transformation.

The middle line of the framework traces the story of Scripture from its beginning in Genesis to its expected culmination expressed in Revelation.



The story begins with **Creation**, affirming that the God known to us in Jesus and via the Spirit is the same God who created all things. The affirmation in Genesis that God viewed all of creation as “good” reminds us that the whole world is the subject of the loving purposes of God. The creation of animals and the desire on God’s part to find a suitable partner for ‘Adam, the first human, suggests it was God’s original intention that humans should flourish in all respects. The fruitful garden given as a home to humankind further implies

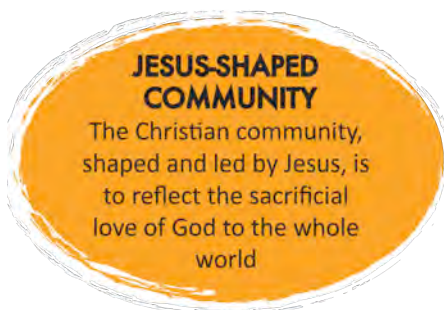
that the original intention was that the needs of all humans should be provided for.

The original creation was marred by the entry of sin: the possibility of working against the creator, each other and the world that comes with God’s granting of freedom to humanity. The Biblical story goes on to describe violence, idolatry and exploitation that resulted from sin. Poverty is another manifestation of sin as it frustrates the possibility for humans to flourish as God intended.

Nonetheless, creation strives towards a new creation which is often expressed in the Bible in very similar terminology to the original creation story. Thus, while there is continuity, there is a forward movement implied: God has a goal for human beings and the created world that all of creation will be renewed.



There will be some differences in the **new future** to our present reality. Evil will be vanquished. Suffering and poverty will not be known in this new creation. The material world will still be the focus of God’s renewal, but the distorted relationships that govern this world will be done away with. Lion will lie down with lamb; leaders of all nations will join together, not in opposition to each other, but in mutual worship of God.



At the centre of this framework is the **Jesus-shaped community**. Community is sustained by creation, in that we live our lives of faith in this created world, but it also strives towards the new future promised by God. As the model expresses it, the human community at the centre of our framework is “shaped” by Jesus.

It is empowered by the truth of Jesus’ resurrection: the first sign of the new creation. Through this empowerment, the people of God are asked to live in the light of the new future, as a sign and agent of God’s kingdom. Living this way means promoting God’s activity, mirroring God’s character, and working for liberation from evil in all its forms as a foretaste of the new future to which we strive. We are to take seriously that Jesus announced “good news for the poor” (Mt

11:5, Lk 4:18) and criticised (directly and through parables) the oppressive religious, political and economic situation of the Jewish people under the Romans and their collaborators. In line with the work of Jesus the people of God are called to live in accordance with the purposes of God and to work for the common good of humanity. Despite the tendency for sin (our weakness of flesh) to sabotage this work, we have the promise of the Spirit of Christ who can continue to shape us to follow him.

Following Jesus means being partners in transforming the world so that it comes closer to the future God intends. It means speaking truth about injustice and grieving with those who suffer. It means being people of hope, embodying this in our lives through committed action. And it means being humble, acknowledging our complicity in injustice and the way we have benefited from the unequal distribution of resources from God's good creation.

The lives we live in this world empowered and shaped by the Spirit, committed to love, justice and faithfulness are a response to God's grace in Christ and an act of worship. In a world characterised by exploitation, competition, division and economic disparity; being a Jesus-shaped community means being committed to conservation, cooperation, harmony and a fair distribution of goods. It means recognising each person's dignity; encouraging solidarity, commitment and service of others neighbour; building peace and justice. A Jesus-shaped community will be characterised by the qualities we have seen in God, incarnated through Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.

The Jesus-shaped community is in the middle of this paradigm because it embodies the tension between present realities and the promises of God. We have the responsibility of working both individually and communally to respond to the needs around us, both in the present and by organising and structuring society for the future. We know that we are not solely capable of achieving God's kingdom on earth. But we also know that in this in-between time it is we who represent the body of Christ to a needy world. In Jesus' words: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:35-36, NRSV).



God's **Commands** naturally flow from this framework. Scriptural commands are a central part of the story of the relationship between God and humanity. They form the bulk of the expectations arising from the covenant. For the Old Testament community *Torah* ("The Law") is always understood as a gift, not a burden. If the gracious instigator of liberation is committed to freedom and justice for enslaved people, then this principle should remain paramount for the community of faith who observe the laws of that God.

The commands show what sort of God they have agreed to follow. They show a God of mercy, righteousness and justice who has a special concern for the vulnerable. They show that every aspect of life, to the smallest detail, is important to God. Whilst not all of the commands remain binding on us, the commands reflect the principle that all of life, including relationships, business transactions, financial dealings, worship, moral issues, judicial and governance issues should be conducted in the way God commanded. The Biblical commands thus inform each of the other sections in the framework. They are not arbitrary, but have been shaped by God's

character and God's purpose for creation that will be fulfilled at the culmination of history when we reach our new future. They reflect the covenantal relationship between God and humanity. Commands can hold a light up to our actions, revealing where we forget to live out God's ways and instead perpetuate conditions of oppression or neglect that creates and sustains poverty. They can also have the function of teaching us how to care for the world God created, including caring for the poor.

In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus embodied the "new commandment" that fulfils the entire Torah: that of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The Jesus-shaped community is asked to reflect this love to each other and to the entire world, and in doing so to live out the way God commands us to, in anticipation of God's new future.

*Material drawn from the following authors:*

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