

# THE VILLARS STATEMENT ON RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT

## PREAMBLE

In the spring of 1987, a group of forty evangelical Christians from around the world gathered in Villars, Switzerland, to examine the topic of “Biblical Mandates for Relief and Development.” For five days, we engaged in intense discussion, debate, and private reflection, our energies focused by a number of prepared study papers. As a result of our consultation, we who gathered at Villars have the concerns enumerated below. We encourage other believers to consider these issues in light of the Scriptures and their relevance for implementing Biblical relief and development.

## A WORLD IN NEED

The extent of hunger and deprivation around the world is a reality haunting modern times. Confronted with disaster, disease, and chronic poverty, relief and development agencies have provided massive material assistance. Yet for all the resources expended, hunger and deprivation appear to be increasing. The sad reality is that so much effort has produced little in long-term results.

This reality calls us as Christians to reassess the work of relief and development in light of God’s Holy Word. It is our conclusion that the consistent application of Biblical teaching will require a reorientation of relief and development practices, and that this may involve a change in our understanding of human need and in strategies to relieve suffering.

“Relief and development” is an expression that recognizes two Biblical principles. *Relief* refers to the insistence in both Testaments that the people of God must help the hungry and oppressed. *Development* stems from the Biblical vision of a people exercising their proper stewardship of God’s gifts—of societies that are productive, healthy, and governed justly. Together, relief and development envision substantial improvement in economic and human well being.

We acknowledge our own sinfulness and fallibility, and we recognize that other committed Christians may not agree with all our convictions. Nevertheless, we are compelled by God’s Word and by the reality of human suffering to share our convictions with Christians and others. We do not claim to have spoken the final word. Thus, we offer the following conclusions of the Villars consultation for the research, dialogue, and open debate among all who claim Christ as Lord.

## ISSUES OF CONCERN

With this as our goal, we raise our concerns over the following issues:

1. The failure to operate from a distinctively Biblical perspective in both methods and goals.
2. The tendency to focus on meeting material needs without sufficient emphasis on spiritual needs.
3. The attempt to synthesize Marxist categories and Christian concepts, to equate economic liberation with salvation, and to use the Marxist critique, without

recognizing the basic conflict between these views and the Biblical perspective.

4. The emphasis on redistribution of wealth as the answer to poverty and deprivation without recognizing the value of incentive, opportunity, creativity, and economic and political freedom.
5. The attraction to centrally controlled economics and coercive solutions despite the failures of such economies and their consistent violation of the rights of the poor.
6. A disproportionate emphasis on changing structures without recognizing the frequency with which this only exchanges one oppressive structure for another.
7. The danger of utopian and ideological entrapment, whether from the left or the right.
8. Neglecting to denounce oppression when it comes from one end or the other of the political spectrum.
9. Focusing on *external* causes of poverty in exploitation and oppression without confronting those *internal* causes that are rooted in patterns of belief and behavior within a given culture.
10. The need to make conversion and discipleship an essential component of Christian relief and development work, and to carry this out in conjunction with the local church.
11. The need to apply the teaching of the Bible as a whole in the areas of personal life, family, and work, but equally in the shaping of the culture and social life.
12. The need to reaffirm the Biblical support for the family as the basic social and economic unit and its right to own and control property, and to stand against any ideology that would diminish the family's proper role in any of these areas.
13. The need to oppose a false understanding of poverty which makes poverty itself a virtue, or which sanctifies those who are poor on the basis of their poverty.

### **BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

In response to these issues we draw attention to the following Biblical teaching and its implications for relief and development:

1. God created mankind in His own image, endowing man with freedom, creativity, significance, and moral discernment. Moreover, prior to the Fall, man lived in harmony with all of God's creation, free from pain, suffering, and death.
2. The devastating reality of sin and evil, hunger, oppression, deprivation, disease, death, and separation from God is the result of man's rebellion against God, which began at the Fall and continues through history.
3. The causes of hunger and deprivation, therefore, are spiritual as well as material and can only be dealt with adequately insofar as the spiritual dimension is taken into account.
4. Man's rebellion against God affects every aspect of human existence. The Fall resulted

in God's curse on creation and in destructive patterns of thought, culture, and relationships, which keep men and women in bondage to poverty and deprivation.

5. The work of Christian relief and development, therefore, must involve spiritual transformation, setting people free from destructive attitudes, beliefs, values, and patterns of culture. The proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples, then, is an unavoidable dimension of relief and development work—not only for eternal salvation, but also for the transformation of culture and economic life.
6. When people were held in bondage to hunger and deprivation by unjust social structures, the Bible consistently denounced those who perpetuated such oppression and demanded obedience to God's law. The Biblical emphasis, then, is not on "sinful structures," but rather on sinful human choices that perpetuate suffering and injustice.
7. God's ultimate answer for suffering and deprivation is the gift of His only Son, Jesus Christ, who broke the power of sin and death by His own death and resurrection. The decisive victory was won on the cross in the atoning death of Christ for all who would believe Him. The final victory will be accomplished when Christ returns in power and glory to reign with His people. Until that time, all who claim Jesus as their Lord are called to care for those in need as the Holy Spirit enables them, and to share the only message of true hope for a broken world.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, in light of the issues raised and the Biblical perspective outlined here, we encourage research, dialogue, and debate among all who claim Christ as Lord, so that we may serve Him more faithfully and work together more effectively.

We encourage you to send your response and your concerns to:

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*Names of organizations are for identification only and are not meant to imply organizational commitment to the statement.*

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