

A Theology of Development



Baptist World Aid Australia is a Christian aid and development organisation. Our practises are informed by our reading of the Christian Scriptures and by current developmental theory. In this document we outline our theology of development.

Our Understanding Of Development

The Biblical storyline gives expression to a remarkable vision of ‘development’. As described in the creation narratives, God’s intentions are for the emergence of a world filled with healthy, vibrant creatures living in safe, just, participatory, welcoming and equitable communities and lovingly engaged with God.

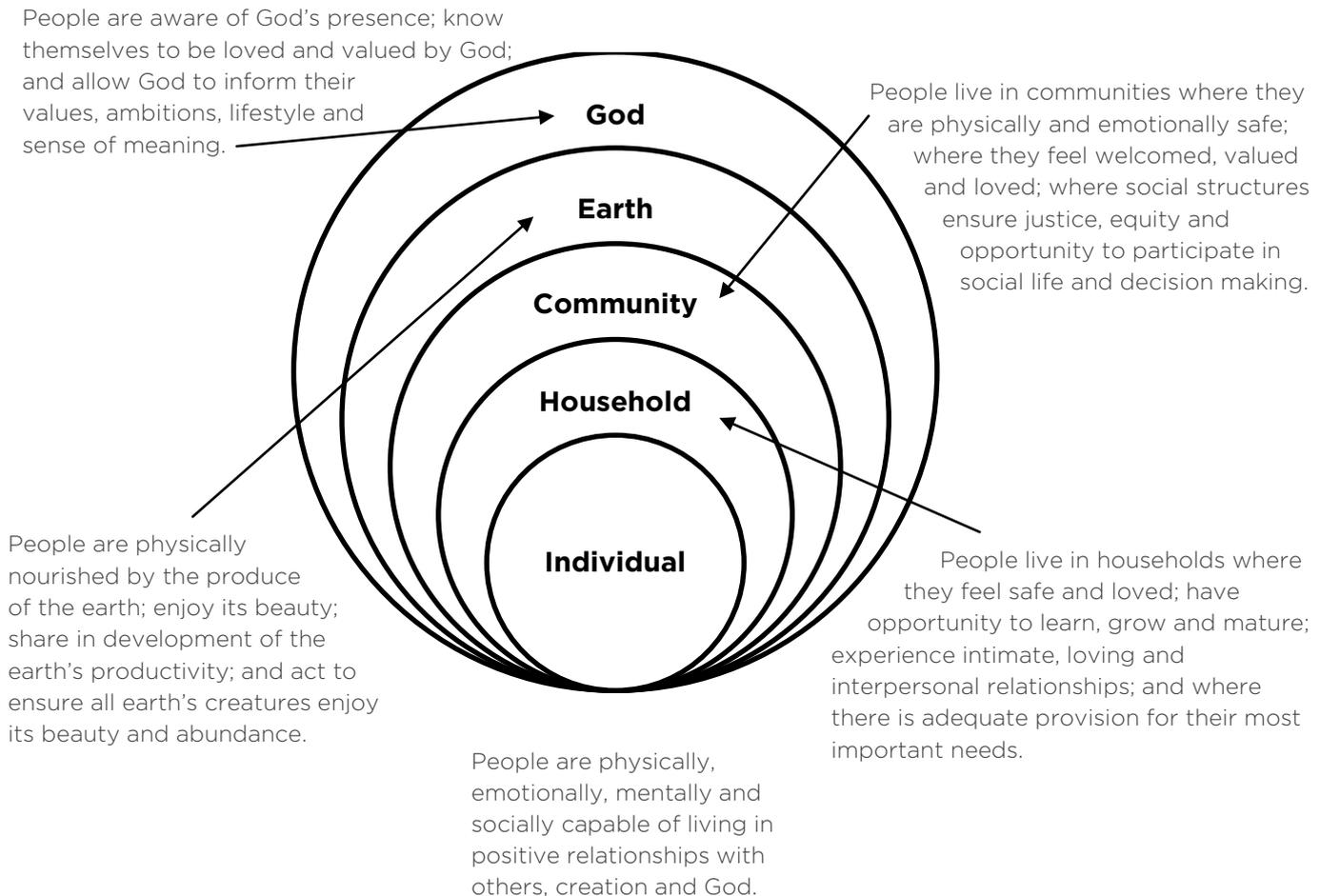
Central to the realisation of this vision is the role of humankind. Created ‘in God’s image’, human beings are to function as God’s representatives, sharing equitably in the earth’s abundance and the construction of their communities and stewarding the earth and its resources in such a way that God’s purposes are fulfilled.

Sadly, humankind fails to live as called, resulting in the fracturing of relationships with God, within communities and with the earth. Violence, poverty, exclusion, oppression, injustice, greed and false worship become part of the human experience.

God however does not abandon creation but sets about redeeming and restoring it. In many and various ways, but most completely and definitively through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God sets about overturning injustice, violence, poverty and exclusion and creates communities of faith, justice, inclusion, hope and peace. This work of re-establishing *shalom*, begun now, will be finally and fully realised upon Christ’s return.

This provides a rich concept of development as **the process by which people are able to realise right relationships with God, one another and the earth.** This constitutes life in all its fullness.

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Development and Poverty

*Poverty is pronounced deprivation in well-being. But what precisely is deprivation? The voices of poor people bear eloquent testimony to its meaning... To be poor is to be hungry, to lack shelter and clothing, to be sick and not cared for, to be illiterate and not schooled. But for poor people, living in poverty is more than this. Poor people are particularly vulnerable to adverse events outside their control. They are often treated badly by the institutions of state and society and excluded from voice and power in those institutions (World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/2001*)¹.*

Poverty, as defined above, stands in stark contrast to the developmental vision of Scripture.

At the heart of the Biblical discussion of poverty is the conviction that poverty has its origins in humankind's failure to properly image God. That is, poverty is not a natural state but is the product of a breakdown in social relations.

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Consistent with the affirmation that a good God created a good world, Scripture does not ascribe poverty to a failing on the part of God or the earth. The earth is “cursed” in Genesis 3, which makes its productivity more difficult to harness (Genesis 3.17-19), but it never ceases to be good, that is, it never ceases to be fit for the purpose of sustaining the earth’s creatures (Genesis 8.22; Psalm 104; Matthew 5.43-48; 1 Timothy 4.4; Acts 14.17).ⁱⁱ

The fundamental driver of poverty is that, unlike God and the earth, people have ceased to be good. On occasion it may be that the failure lies with those who fall into poverty (eg Proverbs 10.4; 20.13; 21.17; 23.21). This however is a very minor note in the Biblical witness. The dominant note is that people become poor and stay poor as a result of neglect, oppression and exploitation at the hands of those who are more powerful (eg 1 Samuel 8.10-18; Proverbs 13.23; 22.16; 29.7; Isaiah 1.10-31; 58.1-14; Amos 1-2; 4.1-3; 5.11-12; James 5.1-5). Importantly, the rich are guilty both of sins of “commission” against the poor such as violence and withholding wages (eg James 5.1-5) and sins of omission such as neglecting to be generous to the poor (eg Matthew 25.31-46) and failing to create social and economic systems that are inclusive of the poor (eg Leviticus 25). This represents a violation of the rights of the poor (Proverbs 31.8-9). As a result, it is the responsibility of all, but particularly those with wealth and power, to ensure all people have access to the resources they need to sustain their well-being. This is why Biblical justice demands both personal attention to the plight of those living in poverty *and* the construction of social, political and economic systems that serve the interests of the poor.

Development and the Church

Scripture reveals that God’s mission is to bring wholeness to all creation, which includes bringing human beings into right relationship with God, one another and the creation. While the restoration of right relationship between God and humankind is achieved through the life, death and resurrection of Christ to which the church bears witness, God’s wider mission to communities and creation is accomplished through a variety of agents, such as the earth itself, government, households, individuals, and the church (eg Genesis 8.21-22; Psalm 104; Matthew 5.45; Acts 14.17; Romans 13; Proverbs 31.1-9).

In promoting development, the church should never surrender its unique role as witness to Christ and the centrality of this role in the restoration of right relationship between God and human beings. No other agent can fulfil this role. Nor should the church forget that when pursuing the wider developmental vision of Scripture (right relationships within communities and with the creation) the church is but one of many agents God uses. The church’s knowledge of God allows it to champion a vision of an inclusive, equitable, just and peaceful world, while the reality that it is one of many agents for bringing such a world into being should see it partnering with individuals, households, communities and governments to realise that vision.

Working It Out

Baptist World Aid Australia sees human development as people and communities moving toward right relationship with God, one another and the earth. We believe any view of development that neglects any of these dimensions falls short of the full Biblical witness.

We also affirm that development is a multifaceted process that incorporates every dimension of life and involves civil society, business and government. This means it is impossible for any

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organisation to assume responsibility for the entire development process. Rather, groups must specialise. Baptist World Aid Australia chooses to specialise in helping communities lift themselves out of poverty.

Both development theory and Biblical teaching suggest people normally live in poverty because they live in social, political and economic systems that deny them access to the resources they need to improve their well-being. This has significant implications for how we work with poor communities.

First, we recognise that people are rarely poor because they lack faith in God. Indeed Scripture commonly identifies as the poor as righteous (eg Psalm 37.14, 40.17, Mark 12.42-43, Romans 15.26, 2 Corinthians 8.9, James 2.5). People live in poverty primarily as a result of dysfunctional and unjust relationships within their communities and the wider human community. While those living in poverty need the gospel as much as any other human being, as an agency dedicated to relieving poverty, Baptist World Aid Australia's focus is not evangelism per se but the drivers of poverty.

Second, we believe that while evangelism is not normally integral to alleviating poverty it is an integral part of Biblically framed development and an inevitable and welcome outcome of healthy development practise by our Christian partners. As a church based organisation committed to a Biblical view of development we consider it important that our work complement other dimensions of the mission of the church, including its task of evangelism. We do this by working with Christian partners, thereby strengthening their capacity to demonstrate the love of God to people living in poverty and building relationships across which faith may be shared.

Third, because poverty is far more complex than a simple lack of material things, our work focuses on community development. That is, we do not simply provide people living in poverty with material goods they lack but work to help people living in poverty transform the systems in which they live so that they are able to access and utilise the resources they need to lift themselves out of poverty.

Finally, because Australians participate in global social, political and economic systems that contribute to poverty, Baptist World Aid Australia considers pro-poor development among its domestic support base an integral part of its development work. We seek to engage our supporters in a Biblically shaped, developmentally informed, whole-of-life engagement with the poor that includes framing poverty as a justice issue, giving generously to promote greater global equity, consuming ethically, advocating for just government, international and business practices, and praying regularly for justice for the poor.

ⁱ These descriptions of poverty summarise findings from the World Bank's *Consultations with the Poor* project in which Participatory Poverty Assessments were conducted extensively across 23 countries.

ⁱⁱ The Old Testament does speak of God bringing disaster as an act of judgment (eg Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28), but these actions are also seen as extraordinary and exceptional. The normal pattern is to affirm the earth's productivity.