

# THE MYTH OF THE CULPABLE POOR

## WHY WE MUST RECOVER THE BIBLICAL CONCEPTS OF OPPRESSION AND INJUSTICE IF WE WANT TO UNDERSTAND AND ALLEVIATE POVERTY

BY TODD LAKE

**T**he myth of the culpable poor requires that the underclass be viewed as creators of their own misery; the Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and poor whites that make up the underclass must be considered the cause of their own socio-economic problems. Middle- and upper-class whites are encouraged to help others not because they are complicit in the plight of the poor but rather out of disinterested, charitable motives. Self-sacrificial works of mercy may result from this, but widespread acceptance of the myth of the culpable poor relegates efforts to transform oppressive laws and economic systems to the margins of Christian life, thought, and action.

In the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, oppression and injustice stand out as the key concepts used by various writers to grapple with the causes of poverty. The first two chapters of Genesis portray an idyllic world of abundance. Sin enters the world, and with it economic hardship. The 50 chapters of Genesis put the reader face to face with a myriad of economic issues: struggles over scarce arable land and potable water among the Patriarchs, famine throughout large areas of the Middle East, employers defrauding employees of their wages, and the prelude to the enslavement of Israelite workers in Egypt. But Genesis does not take a dispassionate approach to economic realities. On the contrary, as the narrative unfolds, God sides with those who suffer from inadequate resources

with which to make a living, gives wisdom to government officials to avert the effects of a famine, and takes up the cause of the misused worker against his employer.

As the book of Exodus begins, God expresses the divine attitude toward the poverty of the Israelites: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians. . . . So come, I will send [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Exod. 3:7-8, 10). God does not place the blame for the economic condition of the Israelites on the Israelites but instead on the "taskmasters" who extract labor from them without just compensation. It is on account of oppression that the Israelites are poor. God therefore intervenes through Moses to radically change the economic system. It is not amelioration, but liberation, that God provides.

Once free, the Israelites are admonished again and again in the book of Deuteronomy not to forget that they were once slaves in Egypt. Instead of oppressing the most vulnerable among them, they are to treat the alien, stranger, widow, orphan, and the poor in their midst with compassion. These various classes of people are viewed as victims or potential victims of larger economic forces rather than being seen as culpable for their fragile economic condition. The causes of poverty may vary, but they are usually external. Poverty may

be caused by direct government oppression or by governmental inaction; it may be the result of unjust employer/employee relations as sanctioned by custom or law; or it may be that circumstances such as immigration or change in family circumstances plunge individuals and subgroups into poverty. The radical nature of this analysis of poverty cannot be overstressed. In the ancient Near East, it was assumed by the nations surrounding Israel that those in positions of power and wealth in society deserved to hold whatever influence and economic might they possessed. Religious texts produced by these societies yielded ample justification for the wealth of the wealthy and the poverty of the poor. Charity toward the poor was occasionally commended, but the existing economic order was viewed as divinely ordained.

Only in Israel was there a consistent and wholesale critique of prevailing economic relations. In the book of Amos, for example, the evil of surrounding nations is used by the prophet to get his hearers to agree that God's judgment rightly falls on the wicked denizens of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom and Moab. Once he has his readers' assent to God's righteous anger, he turns the tables on them. Amos 2:6-7 reveals God's anger at Israel itself, "because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way." Economic injustice anywhere calls down God's wrath. In Ezekiel, it is again stressed that a nation is not judged by how well the well-off are doing but by how those on the bottom are faring. Ezekiel 16:49 states, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." It is the apathy of those with economic resources, not the moral failing of the poor, which the prophets denounce consistently.

The biblical approach to alleviating poverty centers on systemic economic issues. Charity is, however, the appropriate response to immediate needs that present themselves and is a noble part of the Jewish and Christian tradition. The well-known story of Lazarus and the rich man in the New Testament illustrates the essential nature of charity. A rich man finds a beggar at his doorstep, ignores him, dies soon thereafter, and finds himself in torment. The only sin he is guilty of is a lack of charity toward Lazarus. God wants people to exercise charity toward the needy in their midst. In the modern era a shining positive example of charity is found in the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She served the poor of India and the world through founding the Sisters of Charity. They share life with the poorest of the poor and show God's love through concrete actions.

However, the worldwide embrace of Mother Teresa as

the Christian response to the poor should give us pause. While the world would benefit greatly from many more women and men following in Mother Teresa's footsteps, would that reduce the number of those suffering in poverty? The answer is clearly no, because her work by definition begins once someone is already impoverished. Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil observed that when he served the poor directly people called him a saint, but when he asked why they were poor they called him a communist. The same was true of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was martyred in 1980 as a result of calling for systemic economic change to benefit the poor of his country.<sup>1</sup> The biblical approach to poverty begins with an accurate analysis of the problem, which may invite the wrath of those in power.

Isaiah 58:6-7, 10 is typical of passages in the Bible that call for God's people to work against systemic economic oppression: "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?...if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." The verbs in verses 6-7 are all active: "break," "loose," "let...go free," "undo." The poor are not portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures as creators of their own plight. On the contrary, they are portrayed as the victims of those who have power over them.

Job pointed out that he was a voice for the voiceless in his society as he sat among the rulers: "When I went out to the gate of the city, when I took my seat in the square...I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper...I was a father to the needy and I championed the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth" (Job 29:7, 12, 16-17). Job did indeed exercise charity, as other verses show in chapters 29 and 31, but here Job is speaking of his advocacy for the poor against the wealthy in the legal and judicial realm. Those in power, it is assumed, would have devoured the poor had Job not intervened on their behalf. Once again, the poor are not presented as a social problem to be solved. They are shown to be the voiceless who need someone to "champion" their cause.

The overarching theme regarding the underclass in the

1. Liberation theology has placed the issue of systemic oppression of the poor on the table as a relevant theological concern. Both bishops mentioned were the beneficiaries of the insightful work of Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez. This Peruvian priest worked in the slums of his homeland and also studied theology in Europe. He realized that European theology did not speak to the needs of his people but that Scripture did. His signal work is *A Theology of Liberation*, translated by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Orbis Books, 1973). It should be required reading for every business major studying at any college that claims to be Christian.

Bible is that poverty is not primarily a problem of social pathology but rather one of economic injustice. Nevertheless, Scripture is not blind to the fact that the moral failings of some individuals are a sufficient explanation for their poverty. The book of Proverbs warns about laziness and drunkenness leading to poverty. Likewise, St. Paul can state curtly in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." There is no doubt that some people are poor because they are slothful or have vices that impoverish them. However, this note is sounded in only a few places in Scripture. It is not intended to drown out the symphony of voices from Genesis to Revelation that bear witness to the fact that the poor are made or kept that way by an economic system that benefits the wealthy at their expense. James 2:5-6 states, "But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?" And then, turning to the employers, he writes in James 5:4, "Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." Hard work and clean living are no match for economic exploitation.

When people begin to see the world through the lens of biblical truth, they discern that injustice and oppression are the major causes of poverty. Since their analysis is correct,

their efforts to effect change meet with a measure of success. On the other hand, when an unbiblical overemphasis on the failings of the poor predominates, efforts to alleviate poverty are usually ineffective. Moral improvement of the poor, while good as far as it goes, will never overcome the oppression and injustice that trap the poor in their poverty. Consequently, economists, business and religious leaders, politicians, and intellectuals must reclaim injustice and oppression as the key concepts for understanding and alleviating poverty and must abandon the myth of the culpable poor. Instead of focusing most of their attention on the personal failings of the victims, policymakers must address the systemic causes of poverty. Such a biblical understanding of poverty would require Christian citizens and churches to work toward significant changes in the legal and economic systems that perpetuate an underclass. ■

(Watch for the second part of this essay, "From Charity to Justice," a look at how the fight for change has been embodied in faith-fueled public leaders over the last few centuries, in the March/April 2005 issue of *PRISM*.)

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