

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY & HELPING THE POOR

Why are People Poor? What are the Causes of Poverty? What keeps the Poor poor?

If we are going to help the poor, who are the poor? What are their problems? What is it that makes them poor and causes them to remain poor? We cannot help them unless we first understand what their problems are and then ask what is it that will really help them out of poverty?

What are the experiences of the Poor?

Often, people think of poverty only as the lack of material things. Those who work with the poor know that poverty involves more than that. Here are some ways to describe the poor :

- The poor are **materially poor** – few assets, housing and sanitation inadequate, no land, livestock or wealth.
- The poor are **physically weak** – poor health and inadequate nutrition. Many in the household are women, the very young and the very old
- The poor are **isolated** – household lacks access to services and information, often remote – far from main roads, water lines and electricity. No access to markets, capital, credit and information.
- The poor are **vulnerable** – lack of choices and options, cannot save, vulnerable to cultural demands, sicknesses, accidents, child bearing, disasters.
- The poor are **powerless** – lack of ability and knowledge to influence the life around them and the social systems in which they live, lack of social organization and access to political process, exploitation by the powerful – exorbitant interest rates, trickery and deception, intimidation, blackmail (produce of poor bought at far below market value at distress sales), violence, lack recourse to justice (corrupt local authorities), fear of offending patrons and local moneylenders (possibility of lack of credit facility in the future)
- The poor are **spiritually poor** – broken and dysfunctional relationships with God, each other, the community and creation, suffer from spiritual oppression – fear of demons, spirits, ancestors, unable to believe that change is possible.

Forces that Keep the Poor poor

Poverty goes deeper than just the lack of things or knowledge and skills. Behind needs are issues such as ownership and behind these issues there are structures such as caste and behind structures there are groups in positions of power that keep the poor enslaved and behind these groups are principalities and powers in the spiritual realm. (Bryant Myers)

The poor find themselves trapped inside a system of disempowerment made up of interacting systems – personal, social, spiritual/religious, cultural. The poor are captive to the god-complexes of the non-poor, under deception by the principalities and powers, have a distorted worldview and suffer from a marred identity. (Bryant Myers, p 72, see fig 3.5 Walking With the Poor)

What are these god-complexes of the non-poor? The non-poor understand themselves as superior, necessary and anointed to rule. They succumb to the temptation to play god in the lives of the poor, using religious systems, mass media, the law, government policies, and people occupying positions of power. They create structures and systems that justify and rationalize their privileged position. (Bryant Myers)

This captivity has many levels. The local police, landowners and religious leaders are at the lowest level of this disempowering system. They, in turn, are linked to and usually subservient to business, political and judicial leaders at the regional and national levels.

These are embedded in global systems represented by transnational corporations, international financial institutions, etc who also play god in the lives of the poor, albeit from a far distance. Finally, all these levels exist within a cosmic system in which the principalities and powers work out their rebellion against God and God's intentions for human life in creation. (Bryant Myers)

This captivity becomes internalized as the poor acquiesce to what appears to be normal and unchangeable. A lifetime of suffering, deception and exclusion is internalized by the poor in a way that results in the poor no longer knowing who they truly are or why they were created. This is the deepest and most profound expression of poverty. The poor come to believe that they are and were always meant to be without value and without gifts. People who are poor no longer know who they are (being) nor do they believe that they have a vocation of any value (doing). (Bryant Myers)

When the poor accept their marred identity and their distorted sense of vocation as normal and unchangeable, their poverty is complete. It is also permanent unless this issue is addressed and they are helped to recover their identity as children of God, made in God's image, and their true vocation as productive stewards in the world God made for them. (Bryant Myers). How can we do that?

How do we deal with Poverty?

The way we understand poverty and what causes poverty is very important, because it tends to determine how we respond to poverty. If poverty is defined only in terms of lack – lack of food, money, housing, clean water, land for cultivation, access to water for irrigation, adequate roads, schooling and education, knowledge and skills, etc., then we will proceed on the basis that providing the missing things and the needed education will solve the problem and the poor will no longer be poor. (Bryant Myers). This of course is not true because it does not deal with the root causes of poverty.

If we think about it, a lot of how anyone views and understands poverty comes out of their worldview. In fact the reason why people are poor and remain poor has a lot to do with their worldview. And the reason why those of us who seek to help the poor out of their poverty may not have many success stories either may be largely due to our limited understanding of the roots of poverty based upon our dominant worldview. Those of us who have not grown up in poverty have little understanding of the experiences and worldview of the poor. If poverty in fact begins in the mind, then we will not get very far in efforts to help the poor without understanding the poverty mindset.

Worldview Determines Outcomes

A worldview is a set of assumptions held consciously or unconsciously in faith about the basic makeup of the world and how the world works. What is real? What is true? Is there a God? Is there truth? What and how can we know? Is there right and wrong? Is there good and evil? How do we determine what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil? One author adds "A worldview interprets, explains and defines the world for us. It is a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe, and by which we interpret and judge reality." The way people and societies answer these questions determines the types of cultures and societies they create. They may lead to poverty and barbarism or to development and civilization. (Darrow Miller). See the diagrams attached from Darrow Miller's "Discipling Nations".

There are three prevailing worldviews: Biblical theism, Secularism and Animism. Each worldview creates different cultural stories and produces different values. Ideas produce behaviors and lifestyles that affect people, cultures, nations and history. What is our worldview? (Darrow Miller)

Animism's Answer to Poverty – Just Endure It

To the animist, the causes of hunger and poverty lie outside the physical world. Animists believe in millions of gods who are capricious and unpredictable. Floods and earthquakes, droughts and diseases are the physical manifestations of ultimately irrational forces. Bad things happen when the gods are angry or inattentive to man's needs. The solution is to constantly appease the gods. Other than that nothing can be done. People are trapped. In this worldview, man must live in harmony with the gods (Chinese – feng shui). Ultimately, the world we see is illusion. Man's goal is to survive the endless cycle of existence and escape the world. The physical is only transitory. Suffering is fated and the way for one to work out his karma. Therefore there is no rationale for why people should be helped since enduring suffering would be regarded as a virtue that is valued for the purposes of moving upwards towards nirvana. Any effort expended in helping the poor is done only for the selfish purposes of eventually attaining nirvana. There are no lasting solutions to poverty, so why try?

Secularism

Secularism sees reality as ultimately physical. The physical and the material is all there is. The secular world operates in a closed system where resources are limited - for one person to gain, another must lose. On the premise that resources are limited, the fear is not having enough for oneself and thus the overriding concern is to conserve for oneself. Because everything is limited, the prevalent attitude then is to conserve for our personal survival. Self preservation becomes the primary importance and motivation for living. Based on this approach, trust and love of neighbor are absent. (Darrow Miller). We pity the poor and give only what we think we can afford without too much cost to ourselves.

When we approach the problems and issues in this world from a secular outlook and worldview, then everything is defined in material terms. Hunger and poverty are seen primarily in physical terms: in nature, in the environment, in circumstances. The usual blame is either too many people or too few natural resources or the result of oppression through complex, unjust social and economic structures. The cause of man's problems is external. People are poor and hungry because of things totally outside their control. Based on this understanding, people are encouraged not to bear responsibility for their poverty and they adopt a helpless and impotent attitude towards their plight and thus become dependent on others for their survival. Moreover, if the problem is defined in material terms, the solution will be framed in material terms. (Darrow Miller)

Further, if we understand and look at poverty only from the secular outlook and worldview, then we do not see how a person's worldview, beliefs and values rooted in fatalism, karma, demon spirits, etc. have anything to do with poverty and we do not go to the root causes in the fight against poverty.

Secularism's Answer to Poverty is Material and Limited

By far, the worldview that has affected and continues to influence modern Christianity the most is secularism. When we take this approach, and when we confine ourselves to this approach, we are acting out modernity's dichotomy between the spiritual realm and the physical / material realm. We are saying that the causes of poverty are in the physical realm and therefore the solution, if any, is a physical solution. God is left out of the equation.

From our limited understanding of the gospel, God and salvation is brought into the picture only to save the poor for eternity. Since the spiritual realm is confined to the inner invisible life, the gospel as we know it has little to do with the material condition of the poor nor can it provide adequate solutions for the present. Again, in our limited understanding, since the

gospel's focus is on eternity, there is no vision for a better present; instead, the Christian hope waits for the return of the Lord when He will be the final equalizer, where He will wipe away every tear from the eyes of the poor. For the present, social work and love for the poor means we help them where we can to fill their material lack. There are no, nor can there be lasting solutions. (Bryant Myers)

Many Christians are sincere and want to help the poor, but they are still locked into the secular worldview and paradigm. Because we have not understood and embraced the true Biblical worldview, we work just like secular agencies do to alleviate poverty, following developmental programs and approaches that help but do not tackle the root causes of poverty.

The Biblical Worldview

The Biblical worldview however does not define the world or the universe as a closed system. It is open to God's purpose and intervention. Because God exists and He is almighty and present and He cares, everything is possible and there are no limits. We are only limited by our understanding of who He is and what His purposes and intentions are. The one who gives gets more in return. Matter is not all there is. Creativity takes what there is and makes it many times more than what it was. (Darrow Miller)

The Biblical perspective of poverty takes into account the worldview of the poor and the forces (political, social, economic, religious, spiritual) that reinforce their image of themselves / their poverty mentality that binds them to poverty.

The Biblical worldview also takes into account the forces of evil working out their intentions in the lives of people to kill, steal and destroy. It also explains how these forces are working out their deception and bondage in the hearts and minds of people through their beliefs and culture and how poverty is perpetuated.

Biblical Theism's Answer to Poverty – the Gospel

Biblical theism holds that hunger and poverty begin inside of man. Physical poverty is rooted in a culture of poverty, a set of ideas held corporately that produce certain behaviors which in turn yield poverty. (Darrow Miller). The solution to poverty must involve a transformation of the mind and spirit of a person as well as dealing with all the forces that operate in the physical or material realm that keep the poor in bondage. The answer is the Gospel. The Gospel is God's power for salvation not only for eternity but also for the present. Indeed the Gospel, understood correctly seeks to address not only the hereafter but seeks to bring about transformation of the present.

For example, an old man worked as a scavenger among the city's dumps and lived in little cardboard shack by a river in a slum in Indonesia. After a developer's bulldozer came without any warning and bulldozed his cardboard shack by the riverside into the river, in tears he said, "Even the rubbish have a place, but I have no place." The next day, he was found dead curled up by the riverside. When the poor have no understanding why they exist or why they were even created in the first place, when they see that even the rubbish have more value than they do, when they cannot believe that they are capable of effecting any change in their lives, what would bringing the Gospel to him be?

Bringing the Gospel to the Poor

How can the poor be helped "to recover their identity as children of God, made in God's image, and their true vocation as productive stewards in the world God made for them"? It should be nothing short of total transformation (internal and external) of individuals, peoples and communities. We need to love the poor in such a way that will restore in their

own image of themselves the understanding that they are precious and valuable to God, that they are children of the Most High God and that they have been gifted and they are capable and can be empowered to cause change in their lives and communities. Besides bringing them food, water, shelter, electricity, education, employment, access and opportunities (e.g. micro-credit programs), such love must involve how we sit and talk with them, how we look into their eyes with love and respect, how we smile and appreciate them and how we embrace them and include them into our friendships, without imposing our ideas on them.

Empowerment must involve several things: helping them see where they are at, helping them have a vision for the future, encouraging, giving and letting them make decisions and taking ownership and responsibility over projects, and indeed over their lives (See “Foundations for Community Health Evangelism” and “Holistic Church Planting through CHE”).

But first we need to repent. Before we seek to impact and influence people, we first need to examine our own personal worldview (which is usually derived from our nation’s dominant culture or our own minority’s subculture) and the worldview of the people we seek to influence. If we are to hope for any change, we first need to repent of our false views of reality and embrace God’s reality. (Darrow Miller). Then we need to do more than just telling the poor that God loves them and giving them what we think we can afford. We need to model to them what it means to believe in an unlimited and loving God and to live in an open system where God can intervene and delights to do so and everything is possible.

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References:

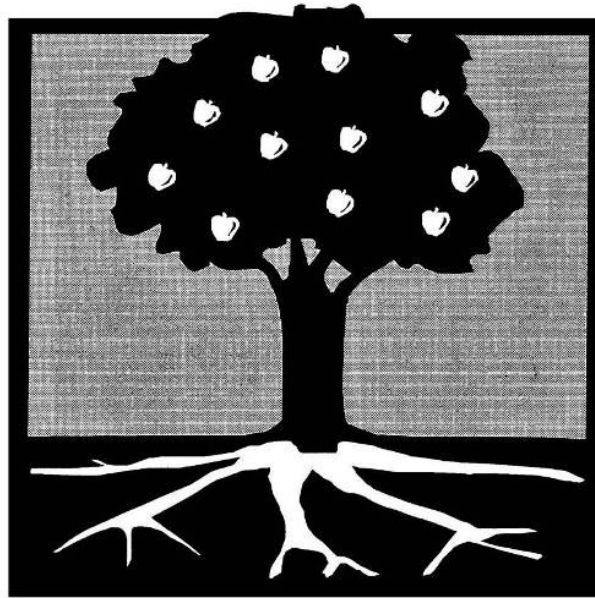
Darrow Miller, Discipling Nations
Bryant Myers, Walking With the Poor

Diagrams from ‘Discipling Nations’:

What do you see? Often what we see is not what there is to be seen. Instead what we see is determined by our predisposition to see things in a certain way.




Ideas Have Consequences



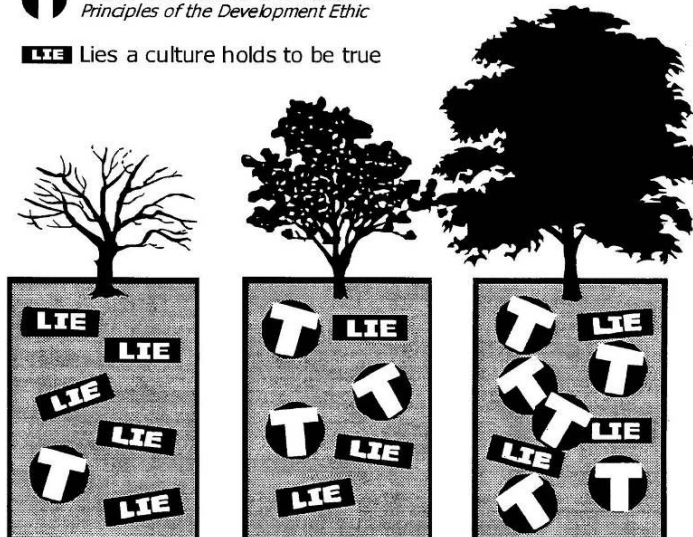
FRUIT
BRANCHES
TRUNK
ROOTS

Consequences
Behavior
Values
Beliefs

Growing Healthy Cultures

 Truth the culture embraces.
Principles of the Development Ethic

LIE Lies a culture holds to be true



Diagrams from 'Walking With the Poor':

