

POVERTY AND AID TO THE POOR-RESPONSE TO BOSE

Dr. Larry Belcher

First, thanks go to Professor Feler Bose for taking the time to go through the paper and offer suggestions as to how the paper might be improved as well as areas in which the paper may not have captured all of the nuances of the topic. I will respond to these comments based on what the paper was trying to accomplish.

In terms of poverty alleviation, Dr. Bose is indeed correct that I did not explore all of the Old Testament means by which poverty could be addressed (leasing, loans, servitude). My main objective was to contrast two strengths that I see in the Biblical approach (relational and restorative) versus the approach of modern developed countries, particularly the U.S., to poverty alleviation which is to do it through impersonal government entitlements. This government-based approach, as mounting evidence shows, creates dependency rather than independence and suppresses the natural, God-given benefits of work. The gleaning laws involved the community (and persons of means) in the restorative process but it was still incumbent on individuals to gather their own food. I would agree with Dr. Bose that these might work better in other countries than developed ones because the idea of “workfare” has fallen out of favor in developed countries. Another theme in the paper was that some of the OT poor were dispossessed and cut off from property ownership, which would prevent them from leveraging those assets to help improve their situation.

As instructive as Dr. Bose’s comments about loans and servitude are, again, I think that in developed countries like the U.S., these would not be met with great acceptance because of either legal restrictions or feelings that such policies would “exploit” the poor. Our current economic climate is also contributing negatively to poverty improvement, as sluggish growth and the imposition of policies such as drastically higher minimum wages have not improved the employment possibilities of those at lower wage levels. This is shown by

declining levels of labor force participation and increasing consumption of government benefits in the U.S. This has generated a massive productivity loss to the US economy as well as increasing a feeling of hopelessness amongst many people who would like to work and support their families but simply can’t.

In terms of Kuyper, there are still elements of his thesis on government, particularly minimizing its influence that would apply to developing countries. Relief organizations send millions of dollars of aid in the form of money and supplies to developing nations every year that vanish through government corruption and theft, never reaching their intended people. From a humanitarian standpoint, this alone would be a strong argument for keeping government in a more limited sphere in such cases. In addition, as Dr. Bose points out, the poor in these countries more closely fit the Biblical concept of no food or cloak, rather than the more economically prosperous “poor” in the developed world. Getting aid to them is a matter of life and death, and evidence suggests that theft and corruption have not only increased misery but mortality as well. Transparency International (www.transparency.org) details the costs of corruption to the world’s poor and needy in the distribution channels of international aid. As one, who like Dr. Bose, has taken students to live and study in a developing country and seen it first-hand, poverty in the developing world bears little semblance to poor in developed countries.

The common conclusion that we both reach is that there is no “one size fits all” approach to tackling one of the great tragedies of our time. My main point as the paper was developed was to encourage Christians to find ways to help “the least of these.” The Biblical model of strong families, being conscious of the needs of our neighbors and utilizing our resources with a long-term perspective was placed in Scripture for a reason—it works!

POVERTY AND AID TO THE POOR-RESPONSE TO BEED

Dr. Larry Belcher

Many thanks to Professor Clive Beed for his comments on the work done in this paper. His work over the years in writing on this topic is extensive. I greatly valued his insights on the analysis that was done in the paper.

In terms of the paper's scope, it was indeed limited. This is such a broad and complex topic that to adequately cover it would take many times over the brief space that was used in the paper. It was shortened several times from editorial suggestions to make it as manageable as it was!

In terms of Professor Beed's comments, there was indeed a well-developed legal system in the OT to prevent poverty and assist the poor, of which gleaning was a part. This was extensive and involved a variety of measures. My focus was on the specific aspects of gleaning and the role of the community in contrast to a modern "no-work", impersonal government-driven alleviation mechanism in which aid workers are told to **not** be relational in their dealings with the poor. Focus was also on the Old Testament rather than on New Testament, as Beed notes. I had read the Beed and Beed (2011) analysis of NT teaching and found it compelling but also consistent with the Mark verse quoted that the "poor will always be with you." Poverty has always existed and will continue to do so in a fallen world. Beed's exegesis of NT parables centers on a consistent message to Christians: "If I gain wealth, Jesus asks me to share a part of it with the poor" (2011, page 29). Beed correctly notes in his comments on the paper that the "distribution of wealth in the U.S. is so unequal" and that this runs counter to Jesus' teachings on wealth, contentment and helping "the least of these."

This income and wealth inequality represents both challenge as well as opportunity. In the Old Testament, the family structure was both tribal and patriarchal. Much of the wealth of a family was derived from land (fields, herds, vineyards) and so there was a strong connection of both the family as well as land to prosperity. Birthright customs as well as inheritance influenced family prosperity over time, but family values and work ethic were a strong contributor to prosperity. This

would agree with Beed's comments about poverty aid not only providing work opportunities to the poor, but Christian values in the workplace as well. He argues that Christians of means have a unique opportunity to create employment possibilities that would not only provide work but work that is done in an environment of Christian values. This is the opportunity aspect of income inequality, where wealthy Christians could align with groups that provide these kinds of jobs and contribute both financial as well as human capital resources to their work. Many organizations focus on developing positive worker behaviors that many poor people lack—dress, punctuality, communication, financial management and others that would be consistent with Biblical values. The Acts 4:32 illustration showed that believers did not claim that possessions were their own and were willing to give them up, but also "were in one heart and mind" (v.32) about making sure that there were no needy among them. Positive worker behaviors, basic life skills as well as entrepreneurial skills are all areas in which a person's trajectory could be permanently altered to make them less "poverty-prone" in the future by people who have sufficient means to fund these types of programs. As Beed points out, credit unions, worker co-ops or other Christian business models could facilitate this, funded by donations from other Christian individuals, businesses or foundations. What would separate these from secular agencies would be the personal, relational aspects of their work which would follow the basic Biblical blueprint for aid, that it is relational and restorative.

This points out one of the challenges demonstrated by income inequality, particularly in the U.S. As we move forward in our economic transition, more of a premium is being paid to knowledge. Less skilled labor is seeing flat wage growth or replacement of some tasks by automation. This makes it harder to lift someone out of poverty if they have no education or access to education. Combine this "knowledge gap" with an array of government benefits that represent the so-called "welfare cliff" to overcome, and it becomes hard to not only motivate some to work but create a path toward

long-term economic viability. This challenge has not been met with standard “training program” approaches to poverty alleviation, which are often expensive, unwieldy, impersonal and have low completion rates. As the examples cited in the paper indicate, businesses both large and small have adopted this philosophy of providing life and business skills to those in need to great success.

This may be the most feasible answer to a vexing social and human problem, that of poverty. Abundant social science research shows that there are many socio-economic factors that can influence poverty that are related to family (single motherhood, early pregnancies, substance abuse, family breakdowns) but also to basic education, skills and social integration. Education and training programs that are short-term and built around a foundation of Christian values combined with employment possibilities or seed capital for micro-enterprises could combine the best aspects of skills and work, and could be utilized across both the developed and developing worlds. This could close the knowledge gap somewhat as well as giving individuals the personal satisfaction of productive enterprise. It would also give Christians an opportunity either individually or collectively through churches or non-profits to get into the fight and help to improve the lives of those in need. I think that we both agree that these types of programs would benefit the poor and help them to be restored to a fuller measure of what God has in mind for their lives.

REFERENCES

- Beed, Clive and Clara Beed. (2011). God, Prosperity, and Poverty. *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 14 (1), Fall, pages 27-42.
- Holy Bible, New International Version by International Bible Society (1984). Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan.