

Global Poverty: Beyond Utopian Visions

BY THOMAS E. PHILLIPS

The crisis of poverty in the world's largest cities, which is growing exponentially worse in the new era of globalization, should overwhelm us. However, it should not paralyze us. Scripture may not offer an easy answer, but it does provide a consistent moral imperative.

Each Friday I meet with a group of colleagues for a free lunch supplied by the university where I teach. Our lunchtime agenda is to bring our collective wisdom and expertise to bear on the social issues of our day. The room is populated by a score of PhDs in the social sciences, humanities, and arts. I am the lone biblical scholar.

Recently, we read Mike Davis's depressing book, *Planet of Slums*. Davis defines a slum as an urban area "characterized by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure." He reports that the United Nations estimates that one third of the world's urban population lives within such slum conditions.¹ That is over a billion people who do not have access to clean water, sanitation, and stable housing in the midst of the world's largest cities!

After reading Davis' forlorn chronicle of urban poverty across nearly every point on the map, we — all professors at a Christian university — looked around the table for some word of hope. Ultimately, I felt as if all eyes were turned toward me. "Surely," my colleagues must have been thinking, "the Bible has the answer. Why doesn't Tom say something?"

I'm not new to reflection upon issues of wealth and poverty. I have published a dissertation and several scholarly articles on issues of wealth and poverty in early Christianity.² Yet when faced with the brute fact that just twenty miles south of my comfortable San Diego home nearly one mil-

lion people live in the poverty-ridden slums of Tijuana, my scholarly sensibilities become overwhelmed. And, according to Davis, the problem of urban poverty – the problem of slums – is growing exponentially worse in the new era of globalization. Sitting at lunch with my colleagues, I longed for some biblical elixir to heal the planet of slums.

UTOPIAN VISIONS

In a temporary flight to a long-discarded biblical naiveté, the nobler impulses of my Christian commitments would like to flee to the Bible and retrieve a simple and permanent solution to the crisis of global poverty. It would be nice if Scripture provided a clear and compelling answer in a verse or two.

Indeed, from time to time various Christians have claimed to find just such an answer in the book of Acts. After all, such voices eagerly remind us, the earliest Christians created a community with “not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). Well-meaning and pious sentiments have often prompted modern Christians to long for the creation of a similar community today. The pattern for eliminating need appears so clear in Acts. Wealthy believers – those who owned “lands or houses” (in the plural) – sold their excess holdings and donated the proceeds to the poor. Perhaps, we infer, contemporary Christians should follow that pattern.

I myself have sometimes temporarily caught the pious enthusiasm of such visions and have wondered what would happen in the Church and in the world if we Christians would be of one accord as the early Christians were, and if we would “share all things in common” and “give to each as any had need” (Acts 4:32-37). What would happen, I wonder, if none of us “claimed private ownership” of our possessions and if we modern believers would begin selling houses and lands and giving the proceeds to the poor? We, like the early church, could create a community in which there was no need.

Of course, such utopian flights of fancy do not last long. In reality, I know that this idealized account of early Christianity is exceptional even within the narrative of Acts. Within the subsequent narrative space of a single chapter, a husband and wife were lying dead at the feet of the Apostle Peter. According to the narrative, God had slain them for having attempted to cheat this system of extraordinary benevolence (Acts 5:1-11). And after only a few more chapters of narrative time, the entire Christian community in Jerusalem and the surrounding area were so impoverished that they required assistance from the Christian communities outside of Judea (Acts 11:27-30). Apparently the one-time benefactors within the Jerusalem community had reduced themselves to beggars. Their efforts to reduce the ranks of the needy had the ironic effect of adding these former benefactors to the ranks of the needy. Their generosity had produced even more of the very thing – need – that they had sought to eliminate.

By recording such an unflattering aftermath for the Jerusalem church's generosity, the author of Acts may well have been denouncing this communitarian project in the early Christian community. In Luke's eyes, the entire Jerusalem project was likely viewed as a well-intentioned failure. Such extraordinary generosity provided relief in the short term, but also planted the seeds for a longer-term disaster.

We intuitively understand that any such divestment scheme is bound to fail. Inevitably, one of two results must occur. Either the economy collapses because no one any longer owns and manages any resources or else the economy falls under the domination of the world's most selfish persons because all of the truly benevolent persons have divested themselves of all wealth. Neither scenario offers much long-term hope.

Some Marxist interpreters of Scripture have noted these problems and have sought to circumvent the problematic outcomes of divestment by adding modern Marxism to the ancient Jerusalem vision of community. According to such interpreters, the Jerusalem believers were stumbling in the right direction, but they were not positioned to fully exploit the redemptive, need-fighting power of their ideas. The early Christians sold their property to other private owners, resulting in a shift of private assets from the hands of Christians to the hands of non-Christians. What was needed, according to Marxist interpreters, was a more complete shift of all assets from the taint of private ownership. According to such interpreters, the early Christians were wise to reject private ownership for themselves, but they did not go far enough. They should have rejected all private ownership.

Such Marxist expansion of the communitarian impulses in Acts not only overlooks the distressing

history of Marxist states in the twentieth century, but it also argues against the clearly stated presuppositions in the text. Before the Spirit dispatched the deceptive Ananias, Peter reminded Ananias that both his property and the proceeds from the sale of his property remained his own (Acts 5:4).

It seems, therefore, that Acts rejected mandatory collectivism even within the Christian community – to say nothing of state-imposed collectivism.

In Luke's eyes, the entire Jerusalem project of extraordinary generosity was likely viewed as a well-intentioned failure. It provided relief in the short term, but also planted the seeds for a longer-term disaster.

LUKAN OPTIONS

Fortunately, to conclude that neither the so-called "community of goods" in Acts nor a Marxist appropriation of those traditions offers a clear and compelling solution to the problem of poverty is not to conclude

that Luke, the premier historian of early Christianity, was uninterested in Christian involvement in issues of wealth and poverty. In fact, Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts have long been recognized as one of the most important resources within the Scriptures for developing a Christian ethic of stewardship, justice, and benevolence.

Luke-Acts abounds with narratives and discourse that bear upon issues of wealth and poverty. While sitting at lunch with those well-intentioned but dismayed colleagues, as a scholar of Luke-Acts, I began composing a mental list of the Lukan options for an ethic of wealth and poverty.

Perhaps it's time to check out of the whole capitalist system of acquisition entirely and adopt a literalistic interpretation of Jesus' warning that "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:33). Of course, a literal adoption of this text would put a swift end to our work as Christian intellectuals and teachers. Scholars and teachers need buildings, books, and the occasional piece of chalk. Because we like to believe that our service as professors is of some value to the Church and the world, we are reluctant to take Jesus at his word on this particular point. Still, we are forced to admit that maybe possessions are an inherent threat to genuine Christian commitment.

Perhaps rather than taking the initiative and abandoning our possessions, we should be willing to give our resources to the needy when we are called upon to do so. Jesus' Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49) seems to advocate this approach. After all, only those who have ongoing access to possessions could possibly follow Jesus' instructions to "give to everyone who begs from you" (Luke 6:30). Maybe the Christian ethos is really about being generous when one is presented with the opportunity.

Perhaps we should follow the example of the tax-collector-turned-benefactor and give away half of our possessions in order to help the poor. Jesus seemed satisfied with this man's performance because he announced that Zacchaeus was a true child of Abraham and that salvation had come to his house (Luke 19:1-9). Maybe it's about learning to cultivate a spirit of ongoing concern for the poor.

Perhaps we should simply follow the advice of John the Baptist and learn to be content with our wages and to put away all schemes either to collect more than is due us or to extort more money from those around us (Luke 3:12-14). Maybe the real problem has nothing to do with possession; maybe the real problem is greed.

Perhaps all these approaches are too individualistic and we should think in grander, more universal terms. After all, we are called to participate in the Kingdom and the Kingdom calls for the creation of a world in which the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up, in which the rich are sent away empty and the hungry are filled with good things, and in which the thoughts of the proud are scattered to the wind (Luke 1:51-53). Maybe the liberation theologians are correct and we need

to think in terms of a violent overthrow of the structures of political and economic domination in our world.

Or perhaps we should emulate the Pauline model in Acts and work hard within the existing economic structures and try to get ahead financially so that we can acquire resources both to take care of our own needs and the needs of others (Acts 20:34-35). Maybe it's a capitalist world and our job is to follow John Wesley's often-quoted advice to "gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."³

The reality is that as a scholar of Luke-Acts who is deeply concerned with issues of wealth and poverty, I am inundated by a flood of competing and conflicting answers to the problems of wealth and poverty in these two biblical books.

I am often amused when people ask if Luke-Acts offers a solution to the problem of poverty. "Sure, it does," I think. "It offers all kinds of solutions. Take your pick. There's one to justify every preconceived idea."

The situation would be humorous if it were not so deadly serious. People in our world are literally starving to death. Surely, as people who revere the Christian Scriptures, we can find some guidance there. And, hopefully, we can find something more than a convenient verse or two to support our preexisting political and economic inclinations.

A CONSISTENT SCRIPTURAL IMPERATIVE

Sadly, the very diversity of resources in Luke-Acts (to say nothing of the broader Christian canon) has often enabled the Church to evade a deeper truth. While it is true that the Bible does not offer any comprehensive program for a Christian economic system, Scripture does leave us with one consistent moral imperative: the

integrity of the people of God, as the people of God, is dependent upon their sustained and concerned effort to eliminate the affront of poverty from the goodness of God's good creation.

On that particular Friday, while eating my free lunch and discussing the plight of the billion or so

people who live in urban slums, I sat silently. I offered few words of wisdom and provided very little expert analysis for my colleagues' consideration. In my defense, I did ask a few questions of the sociologists – as if they could solve the conundrum that had confounded the biblical scholars. In retrospect, however, I wish that I said a few things that I have learned from my time in the company of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

The Bible leaves us with a consistent imperative: the integrity of the people of God is dependent upon their sustained and concerned effort to eliminate poverty from the goodness of God's good creation.

First, the Church cannot evade the moral imperative of alleviating poverty.

However we slice it, the Christian Scriptures share one thing in common. With one voice they call for love of the other—and such love is consistently defined in terms of our tangible commitment to ensuring that all of God's people be freed from the privations of hunger, homelessness, nakedness, and economic exploitation. Scripture may not provide a precise formula for

Scripture calls for God's people to be freed from hunger, homelessness, nakedness, and economic exploitation. For those who would hear the Bible, ignorance about and disregard for the poor are not options.

meeting these needs, but it does speak with one voice about the moral imperative of doing so. For those who would hear the Bible, ignorance about and disregard for the plight of the world's poor are not options.

Second, talk may be cheap, but it's better than nothing.

I have to admit that often I have observed the irony of one slightly overweight

academic sitting down to lunch talking with a bunch of other often slightly overweight academics talking about hunger. The experience leaves me—as it would any person of conscience—feeling disingenuous (or perhaps even downright hypocritical!). In spite of my own discomfort, I remain convinced that our words have power. In the language of the social constructionists, language forms consciousness. Or with a nod to the Gospel of John, God knew what God was doing when God sent the Word into the world. To speak about poverty and the moral challenge that it presents is the first step—though admittedly only the first step—toward addressing poverty. Oppression and despair feed on a diet of silence and neglect.

Third, wealth is not the problem; poverty is. Fifteen years ago when I began my PhD program and what was to become a lifetime commitment to sustained reflection upon issues of wealth and poverty from a biblical perspective, I naively believed the biblical answer to poverty would be a condemnation of the wealthy. Perhaps my own lower-middle class rust belt and populist roots were shading my expectations of Scripture or perhaps my current upper-middle class and coastal perspective is now shading my reading of Scripture. In any case, and in spite of the truism that we always read Scripture from our own social location, I have become convinced that the intrinsic goodness of God's creation and our own privilege of participating in the maintenance of creation make the production of wealth a pleasing activity in the eyes of God. This I take to be the point of the wisdom tradition's frequent emphasis upon wealth as a mark of divine blessing for a life well lived. Ill-gotten gain undoubtedly is sin, but not all gain is ill-gotten.

Finally, alleviation of poverty is about helping those in need, not about developing the virtue of the wealthy. I am not desperately poor; I have never been desperately poor; and it is unlikely that I will ever be desperately poor. When I think about issues of wealth and poverty, I do so from the position of relative privilege. Granted, Robin Leach is not likely to profile me on “The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” but neither am I likely to receive “charity” from anyone. Most people who reflect upon issues of wealth and poverty enjoy a similar position of relative privilege. Not surprisingly (but neither inevitably), when the affluent (like me) think about non-affluence, we tend to speak about what we ought to do in order to fulfill our calling as the people of God. Unfortunately, this discourse often degenerates into a discussion of what “we” must do in order to help “them.” The poor become an object of our good will—and we begin thinking about how we can develop even greater virtue by helping “them.” In this condescending system, “they” possess no virtue—and could not possibly develop any virtue—because virtue comes from helping “them” and they are in no position to help themselves. The rich exploit this system to develop virtue—but their virtue is completely self-regarding. They fight poverty, not the sake of helping the poor, but for the sake of their own virtue. The poor become the most convenient grinding wheel for sharpening the virtue of the rich—and the poor (that is, the real people with lives and loves, with real hearts and minds) get lost in shuffle. Even the very good practice of helping the poor can become an act of paternalistic self-regard, focusing upon the privilege and responsibilities of the rich rather than upon the lives and needs of the poor.

Looking back on that Friday lunch, I am glad I was overwhelmed by a fresh look at poverty. I hope that I never cease to be overwhelmed by the plight of the poor. The problem of poverty should overwhelm us. However, it should not paralyze us. Scripture may not provide an easy answer, but it does provide a moral imperative.

NOTES

1 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 22-23.

2 Thomas E. Phillips, *Reading Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 48 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).

3 John Wesley’s sermon 50, “The Use of Money,” has been reprinted often. It is available online at new.ghgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/50/ (accessed May 16, 2007).



THOMAS E. PHILLIPS

is Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, California.