

RESPONSE TO POVERTY AND AID TO THE POOR BY LAWRENCE BELCHER

Clive Beed

Lawrence Belcher has written a comprehensive overview of the difference between the Biblical and current secular approaches to identifying causes of, and policies for, mitigating poverty in the United States. This response offers suggestions for how it might be more focused.

Moore is cited as identifying “the two predominant poverty causes in Scripture as ‘oppression’ and ‘sluggardliness.’” I would suggest that more weight be put on oppression. This judgement is made through investigating whether there are “recurring themes, underlying patterns, or issues running across the[se] different sections of the Bible when read together as a single cannon” (Barrera, 2013, xiv). Hoppe (2004), for example, used this method to establish the importance of exploitation in monarchical Israel and beyond as the major cause of poverty in the Bible. Although verses can be cited from Proverbs, and 1 Thess. 3:6-15 identifying some poor with laziness, more telling is to use the Barrera methodology.

As Belcher recognises, retaining the unity of the family is an important biblical factor in forestalling poverty. Poverty in scripture is examined, although most emphasis is put on the gleaning laws. The Mosaic Law can be analysed more extensively as an integrated whole designed to forestall the emergence of poverty among the Israelites. While the Jubilee and Sabbath years are mentioned, their importance justifies more discussion and emphasis. It is possible to derive an interrelated amalgam of laws in the Mosaic Law that sought to create an egalitarian society (Beed and Beed, 2009). If this paradigm were followed, there would not be poor and needy people in the premonarchical Old Testament faith community.

For the New Testament, one statement by Jesus is given (p. 12), Mk 14:7, as “the poor you will always have with you” (NIV). Most Bible translations, other than the NIV, do not include the word “will.” An alternative meaning of the text is Jesus talking about the poor of his time, that they are all around Jesus, exist everywhere and can be helped anytime, not that the poor will always

exist. Given the importance of poverty in Jesus’ sayings, more needed to be made of this in Belcher’s treatment of the New Testament. An alternative study of poverty in the New Testament is Beed and Beed (2011) that discusses a greater range of Jesus’ sayings.

As Belcher notes, the main means of ameliorating poverty today is through creating jobs in the private sector of the economy. He discusses this issue in his section, “Where Can Business Fit In,” and illustrates with examples: Cascade Plastics, the Nashville Neighbor Project and Sew for Hope. Churches and wealthy Christians could play even more important roles in fostering firm start-ups to reduce the burden of welfare payments. Such firm start-ups could exhibit qualities intrinsic to Christian work patterns, of which a number exist, such as workers owning the capital with which they work (Beed and Beed, 2010, p. 25). The types of employment in question include the self-employed, partnerships, and worker cooperatives.

The importance of the informal, underground, black or hidden enterprise economy in the developed economy suggests that the poor may not lack the entrepreneurial skills to start their own businesses. Balkin (1989), for example, showed that with sufficient capital at their disposal, homeless men were able to organize themselves into self owned/self managed work. What the poor do lack is capital to start their businesses. Partly, this arises because the distribution of wealth in the U.S. is so unequal. The poor need items like “a sewing machine in good working order, catering equipment, roofing tools, exterminating equipment, a home that meets code requirements and can be used for an in-home day-care facility, a car or truck, a lawn mower and a pair of hedge clippers, and a forty-foot ladder” (Edin, 2001, 217). Organizing, funding and distributing this type of aid may be within the capacity of churches and well-off Christians. Rich Christians probably exist among the top 1% US households of whom 74% run a business.

An employment pattern like that suggested in the Mosaic Law would be facilitated. Conservative evan-

gelical economist, Griffiths (1984, 57) argues that the Law was “directed to a broad-based self-ownership and self-management in production. He contends that if the Law had been followed (which it was not), “it would have been impossible for ‘labour’ to be in conflict with ‘capital.’” This differed from the situation Marx addressed, “where capital was owned by a few, but the majority were without access to that capital... This was precisely the situation which the property laws of the Pentateuch were designed to prevent.” Griffiths maintains “this approach to property was never stated by Jesus; but it was assumed throughout his teaching.”

It is not a sufficient solution to just slot workers into the existing workforce, as with TANF. Not only are Christian values not met in the workforce, but the worker becomes subject to insecurity, and the mores and qualities of the work into which the worker is slotted. Biblical values stand more chance of realization if churches and wealthy Christians sought to create jobs expressing biblical values. This happens occasionally in the corporate sector run by Christians, like Herman Miller, a large manufacturer of office furniture, that enjoys excellent employer-employee relations with “the most productive workforce in its industry”, having “egalitarian wage and salary structures” (Hill, 1997, 156). Christian credit unions, Jobs for Life, Good Sa-

maritan Ministries, Christian Development Corporations and churches could play a more decisive role in fostering such industries. They would have to research to determine the types of jobs that could be relevant to poor people, make contact with them, and shepherd enterprise start-ups.

More examples of the desirable approach occur in the developing world than in the developed. Cases where this has been done include the San Toliman Mission in Guatemala in buying agricultural land, and making it freely available to landless peasants. Sections of the Catholic Church have assisted the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil to farm underutilized land owned by wealthy estates. The background of this process has been that 3% of the Brazilian population owns 90% of arable land. Microenterprise is another source of employment encouraged in the developing world, via numerous Christian aid agency NGOs, like World Vision and the Mennonite Development Associates.

In sum, Belcher has hit the nub of the antithesis between biblical approaches to explaining and developing policies for alleviating poverty compared with secular approaches. This response has suggested that the matters can be taken further. The suggestions here indicate that more detail sympathetic to Belcher’s approach can be integrated into his model.

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Dr Clive Beed is a retired Senior Lecturer in Economics, University of Melbourne. Clive and his wife Cara, (also a retired academic) are joint writers on topics decided through shared Bible study, prayer, literature research and study, and discussion. They have published in a variety of academic journals on the relation between theology and economics, and in 1997 were awarded a Templeton Prize. A number of their earlier papers were consolidated into a book in 2006, titled *Alternatives to Economics: Christian Socio-Economic Perspectives*, published by the University Press of America.