

Spiritual Hope

Part 1: Theology of Poverty

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I remember with some discomfort the shallow theology of poverty embraced by the North American church as it was waved before delegates at a conference I attended. A gathering of six hundred Christian student workers had assembled in Korea. There were only about forty or fifty North Americans in attendance. Sri Lankan theologian and missiologist Vinoth Ramachandra was addressing the delegates. Taking a popular Bible dictionary produced by an American publisher, he opened to the word pottery. "Three pages," he announced, "have been devoted to the entry on pottery." Turning the page, he said, "But under the entry on poverty, I find only a column and a half! Does the Bible really say more about pottery than poverty?"

The rebuke was stinging only because it was so true. The North American church, perhaps the entire church of the West, is bankrupt when it comes to a theology of poverty. We have waxed eloquent over the archeological shards of the ancient world, discussing them at length in the comfort of our seminaries and universities. All the while we have conveniently ignored Scripture's emphasis that the poor and broken people of the world are vital in the eyes of God. We have not sat long enough at the feet of the church of the poor in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. After all, the church is predominantly made up of the poor in these parts of the world.¹

Melba Maggay is a Filipina theologian who does not have the luxury of avoiding the poverty so ubiquitous in the developing world. She cannot drive across town without encountering squatter communities or begging children. She says, "Truly, the Gospel is more than a set of things to believe about Christ. It is a radical call to come under the discipline of the Kingdom, bidding a rich young man to sell all that he has to give to the poor, or a corrupt tax collector to go and repay all he had robbed." Yet even in her native Philippines the church battles the tendency to divide the spiritual and physical in an attempt to define a theology of poverty. "We must always remember that we are not talking to disembodied spirits." She states. The first section of her book *Transforming Society* is wonderfully instructive to a church that has been so quick to relegate social concern to the realm of the temporal and therefore declare it irrelevant to the eternal. The personal piety that for so long has defined Christianity in the West must recover the social leavening power inherent in the good news about the Kingdom.

While it is important to look into the mirror which brothers and sisters in the developing world would hold up to us, it is also important to listen to the voice of North Americans who have sojourned with the poor and can speak as a Westerner to the church of the West. Bryant Meyers, in his book *Walking with the Poor*, lays out a

number of theological frameworks from which we can more adequately hang a theology of poverty. He introduces us to the notion of the kingdom of God and the idea of shalom – two, all-encompassing theological structures that easily handle the weight of the whole gospel. Meyers helps us gain a new perspective by which to understand all facets of global transformation, using the light of the person of Christ and the redemptive stories of the Bible.

If our understanding of creation, redemption, and the role of the church does not plant us face to face with the poor, then we have embraced a theology that is not supported by the Scripture. Our first duty is to understand the metanarrative of God and the oppressed which has been woven throughout the Bible before we go on to the question of how to transform a broken and dying world.

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Notes

1. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).