

A Biblical Theology About the Church's Call to Witness to the Poor

Kevin Stallone

Introduction

The intent of this paper is to answer the question: What are the features or characteristics of the holistic approach or model that enables the church's call to witness to and care for the poor. Through reflection and analysis of the biblical evidence from both the OT and NT, as well as key points along with biblical evidence and information and observations from Myer's work on Poverty-Global Dictionary of Theologyⁱ, a biblical theology about the church's call and witness to the poor will be synthesized and discussed.

What are the features or characteristics of the holistic approach that enables the church to witness to and care for the poor?

Reflecting on and analyzing the scriptures from Creation through the Consummation, a biblical theology can be developed about the church's call to witness to and care for the poor.

Creation-The Poor are Made in the Image of God (Gen 1:27)

The Book of Genesis states, "So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Because the poor are made in the image of God, God loves the poor. God's greatest command is that we love God and love people. Therefore, if we love God, we should love all God's Creation including the poor. We should do everything we can to help equip and enable the poor so they can procure and maintain a good job, good quality healthcare and a better lifestyle.

Fall-The Fall of Mankind has Resulted in Injustices and Oppression with the Poor and the Poor to Fall into Sin (Ps 140:12; Prov 29:7; Isa 25:4; Deut 15:7-8; Lev 19:9-10; Lev 25:3; Deut 15:11; Isa 41:17; Prov 14:31; Prov 28:27; Prov 21:13; Ezek 16:49; Prov 22:22-23; Lev 19:15; Prov 31:8-9; Ps 12:5; Ps 35:10; Isa 58:67)

Poor people experience injustices and oppression caused by social systems which contributes to their poverty. Also, because poor people fall into sin they are separated from God and, as a consequence of their sinful behavior, they do not obey God's law and commandments. They often, do not do the right thing and do not serve others in the community.

Redemption-God Loves the Poor and Will Save Them and Deliver Them from Oppression, Injustice, and Captivity (Eph 4:28; Jas 4:28; Matt 5:42; Luke 6:38; Matt 25:40; Mark 14:7; 1Jn 3:17-18; Matt 19:21; Jer 22:16; 1 Sam 2:8; Luke 12:33-34; Luke 3:11; Isa 6:1)

It is through the precious blood and broken body of Jesus that the poor are saved from their sins, experience eternal life, and are set free from captivity from the social and political systems that hold them in bondage to poverty for the benefit of the powers. The poor seek justice and freedom from the social systems, powers and principalities.

Consummation-Blessed are the Poor for They Will Inherit the Kingdom of God (Acts 20:35; Prov 22:9; Prov 19:17; Js 2:5; 2 Cor 8:9; Luke 6:20-21; Luke 14:12-14; Gal 2:10; Matt 25:31-46)

Poor people have low self-esteem and feel little motivation to do anything. They feel discouraged and may find no reason to go on living. Worse yet, the poor cannot place their hope or trust in social or political systems. These systems and structures have held them in bondage to poverty and broken their spirits. In the moments of desperation and loss, only the Kingdom of God provides hope for restoration, healing, joy and blessing. To receive the Kingdom of God, the poor have to recognize their need for Jesus.

What is Myers's Biblical Theology about the Church's Call and Witness to the Poor?

In addition to the biblical theology that was synthesized above, Myers provides a holistic understanding of povertyⁱ. Two major summary statements are synthesized after he reflects and analyzes and combines the learnings from Chambers, Friedman, Christian, and Jayakaran and a theological and biblical perspective. The two statements that Myers asserts are: (1) Poverty is fundamentally relational in nature, and (2) The fundamental cause of poverty is spiritualⁱ.

The focus of the relational understanding of poverty is the notion of the poor not knowing their identity and the purpose they were createdⁱ. People's identity of themselves becomes distorted when people come to believe that they are anything less than what God created them to be. Also, when people believe they cannot contribute to society their understanding of their vocation deteriorates as well. With distorted identities and a deteriorated vocation, the poor cannot have a proper relationship with God, themselves or others.

What is the cause of our relationships to be distorted and unjust? Myers states that sin is what distorts these relationshipsⁱ. It is what separates man from God, from ourselves, and from each other. If sin is the fundamental cause of our lack of peace and shalom, then both good news and bad news existsⁱ. The good news is that Jesus is the answer to sin. He is the mediator that restores our broken relationship with God. He is the agent of transformation. If we choose, however, to not have faith in Jesus, then we are held captive to sin.

ⁱ B.L. Myers, Poverty-Global Dictionary of Theology