

# **The Missionary and the Poor**

**By Dr. Robert A. Morey**

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When a Western missionary goes to a Third World country, one of the first things that creates an enormous cultural shock is the visible presence of the poor. Robert Kreider relates his experience.

We visited the Bihari refugee camp on the edge of Dacca, Bangladesh. Three hundred refugees live together in an area no larger than a small basketball court. As we entered the area, dozens of thin, but bright-eyed, curious children crowded around to see, to touch, to hear. Adults came up and angrily tried to chase them away. Approached by beggars on the ferry boat, in the street, literally everywhere, we were haunted by the admonition of our Lord: "Give to him That asketh." The hundreds of people sleeping on the concrete floor of Hawrath Railroad Station in Calcutta evoked the image of the Son of Man having no place to lay His head. We saw people carrying enormous loads on their heads and backs and heard the Scriptural Injunction: "Bear ye one another's burdens." And in noting others carrying heavy loads from a yoke borne on the shoulders, we remembered Christ's words: "Take my yoke upon you."<sup>1</sup>

The sadness at seeing the poor and the sick everywhere is soon overwhelmed by a sense of utter helplessness. What can one missionary do to help the poor and the sick? Should he spend his time organizing relief programs? Should he petition the national government to redistribute the wealth in that society? Should he give away his own food and clothing? What should he do?

The obvious but hard answer is that Christ did not call him or her to fight poverty per se, but to preach the Gospel. One person cannot solve all the problems of the poor. As soon as he has met the needs of a few, the many come looking for what has already been given away. To put it bluntly, there are too many poor for poverty to vanish from the face of the earth. Did not Jesus say, "Ye have the poor always with you" ([Matt. 26:11](#))?

The utopian dream of a world free of hunger, poverty and injustice is one of humanism's optimistic leaps into the dark. The Bible tells us that poverty and injustice will continue as long as sinners live on earth. Only at the Second Coming of Christ shall a new earth be created where there will be no place for sorrow, death or pain.

Even though biblical Christians do not entertain vain utopian hope and dreams, they have done more to erase poverty, hunger and injustice than any other force in history. Those nations which embraced biblical Christianity during the Reformation have developed the highest living standards and the freest societies on earth. The sociological benefits of having a Reformation basis or

background have been pointed out by Dr. Lorraine Boettner.<sup>2</sup> He demonstrates that a nation's religion will affect its standard of living.

India's problems are not rooted in having too many people. Other countries, such as Holland, have more people per square mile than India! India's problems are rooted in its false religion. Its poverty and starvation flow out its Hinduism. Her religion is the greatest hindrance to her prosperity.

The same can be said for Latin America's ignorance and poverty. Such things flow out of Roman Catholicism. A nation's theology will directly affect its living standard.

This is why those who are concerned with the poverty and injustice on the mission field feel that the greatest need in the Third World is a massive turning to Reformation Christianity. Only upon this base could these nations overcome poverty and injustice, as did the Western Protestant nations. Without a Christian basis, a Third World country may be doomed to international panhandling (i.e. foreign aid).

Thus, the Gospel missionary who feels with the poor will realize that salvation is what Third World people need most of all. The Gospel will do more for the poor than bread, clothing or bullets. Did not Jesus say that He came to "preach the Gospel to the poor" (Lk. 4:18)?

Jesus did not build houses for the homeless or overthrow governments by violence. He knew that the root of injustice could be cured only by the preaching of the Gospel; for wherever the Gospel is received, there follows godliness, cleanliness and prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

Even though a religious and moral explanation of the Third World's poverty is obvious, the non-Christian world (including the World Council of Churches) is furious at even the slightest suggestion that biblical Christianity produces a superior lifestyle and standard of living. In an age in which the World Council of Churches is trying to convince everyone that all religions are one, the superiority of Christianity over the pagan religions is absolutely rejected as not even being a consideration.

The non-Christian community, in league with the World Council of Churches and Marxist ideology, has sought to place the full blame of the world's poverty and injustice on the Western countries and, in particular, the United States. The Marxists reject religion and morals as being the explanation of the ills of this world and, instead, point to world economics. One non-communist but Marxist influenced church leader put it this way: 10,000 persons died today because of inadequate food. One billion people (more than one fourth of all persons living today) are mentally or physically retarded because of poor diet. The problem, of course, is that the world's resources are not evenly distributed. We in the West are an affluent island amid a sea of starving humanity. North America, Europe and Australia have only one fourth of the world's population, but they greedily consume one half of the world's available food. The average income per person in India is about \$70 per year; in the U.S. about \$4,000. We now have almost 60 times as much as our brothers over there and the difference will continue to widen.<sup>4</sup>

Such people evidently assume that a “redistribution of wealth” is the answer to poverty. This is an old Marxist theory that has never worked even in communist countries. It is interesting to note that those people who talk about “redistributing wealth” never distribute their wealth. They always want us to give away what we worked hard for while they continue to be the idle rich. Jane Fonda, the Kennedys and many other idle rich come readily to mind as an example. Until they “redistribute” all their wealth, their words are hollow.

Harold B. Kuhn points out the Marxist thinking behind much of the “liberation theology” being developed in Latin America.

Latin liberation theology appeals largely to Marxist models. This accounts for its simplistic assumption that all human ills grow out of the misdoings of one class, which is regarded as the bearer of all evil. In the radical form of this theology, North American capitalism is seen as the sole cause of injustice cause of injustice and misery in Latin America. Its advocates can thus easily adopt the myopic stances of the United Nations World Population Conference in Bucharest and the World Food Conference in Rome, both held in 1974, and close their eyes to the problems raised by burgeoning populations and tradition-hindered ways of agriculture. This is a source of great confusion.<sup>5</sup>

Anyone who understands the doctrine of total depravity or human psychology knows that if all the wealth of the world was redistributed, within one year there would once again exist the poor, the middle class and the rich. Some people will not work and are addicted to poverty. Others are unscrupulous and will heap dishonest wealth to themselves. Others will prosper through honest toil.

Of course, when Marxist-influenced missiologists, theologians and politicians began screaming about “the American fascist capitalist pigs” who are single-handedly responsible for the poverty and injustice in this world, they completely ignore the fact that communism generates immense poverty and injustice through its totalitarian denial of basic human rights.<sup>6</sup>

Are we then to do nothing for the poor? No, we are not saying that. Just because the Gospel gets to the heart of the problem because it deals with the hearts of the people is no excuse for individual Christians and churches not to do what they can to help the poor, heal the sick and feed the hungry.<sup>7</sup> The Gospel has the first place but not the only place.

Ministering to the poor in material things is a handmaid to the Gospel. Missionaries have always done what they could to raise the living standard and lengthen the life-expectancy of the people to whom they ministered. Even though they have been accused of being “culture-busters,” they have done for the Third World what it could not do for itself. In the past, missionaries have helped people climb out of their poverty by teaching them better agricultural techniques. Mission hospitals and schools were built to deal with body and mind. Even things like concrete factories or exporting of native art objects have been developed by concerned missionaries. The half has yet to be told of all the wonderful and tremendous things which fundamental Bible-believing missionaries have done to

raise the living standards of the poor for the cause of Jesus Christ. The love and compassion of Jesus moved missionaries in the past and will move them in the future to take pity on the poor and the oppressed.

What definite steps have missionaries taken to deal with the poor?

Step No. 1: They have won disciples to Jesus Christ and planted local national churches. As Glasser put it: "There is but one acid test that should be applied to all activities that claim to represent obedience in mission. Do they or do they not produce disciples of Jesus Christ?"<sup>8</sup>

Step No. 2: They have worked with these disciples in developing proper attitudes and skills which will help them become self-supporting. Why work with Christians and not just non-Christians at large? The Bible tells us to do good "especially to those of the household of faith" ([Gal. 6:10](#)).

Biblical Christians reject the present popular doctrine of universalism, which is the motivation of most of the World Council of Churches projects. Some have assumed that the poor and the oppressed belong to the church or that all men are the children of God.<sup>9</sup>

Kuhn points out:

One peril that shows through the literature of liberation theology is an uncritical use of the biblical models. The major model currently in vogue is that of the Exodus. Rather too easily, in my opinion, Latin American theologians assume that today's oppressed people are the heirs of God's Exodus—that they are the present-day counterparts of the Israelitish people in Egypt. Attempts to domesticate God have not been particularly successful in the past and there is little reason to suppose that this current form will be any more effective. It is precisely this form of idolatry that emerges as any group assumes for itself a "people of God" role. It is disturbing that liberation theologians do not give more attention to building a set of common values and adequate symbols among their peoples. Without these, any liberation by violence will probably lead only to a change of oppressors. Mere oppression neither makes any people to be "the people of God" nor guarantees that a victory by force will produce lasting liberation. A second peril grows out of the first. Some liberation theologians suggest that the Exodus is a model by which all oppressed peoples, regardless of their plight, find deliverance from their miseries. It may be questioned whether the Bible can be used indiscriminately to justify all political and economic struggles.

A third peril lies hidden in the rationale advanced for this position. Hugo Assmann, who Gustavo Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo, may be regarded as a spokesman for Latin liberation theology, highlights this aspect of the problem. In his *Theology for a Nomad Church*, Assmann makes clear the movement's assumption that the purely "Salvationist" understanding of the Christian mission

has been rendered obsolete by what Guitierrez calls “the unvarnished affirmation of the possibility of universal salvation.”<sup>10</sup>

Step No. 3: Once the national church becomes self-supporting and self-ruling, it can begin its own deaconate ministry in which it will attempt to meet the needs of its own community. The nationals can become involved in political appeal and in the struggle to overcome injustice. The missionaries should be a moral force only and not political activists.

Poverty can be overcome, not by theft, which is the true meaning of the “redistribution of wealth,” but by Third World people becoming evangelical Christians.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kreider, “To Give But to Receive,” pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, Presbyterian Reformed Publishing Co., Philadelphia, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> The difference between the Hindu and Christian sections of India are like night and day. The Christian sections of India are clean and prosperous, while the Hindu sections are filled with filth and poverty.

<sup>4</sup> Ron Sider, “The Graduated Tithe,” *Partners in Mission*.

<sup>5</sup> Harold B. Kuhn, “The Evangelical’s Duty to the Latin American Poor,” *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 1977, pp. 537-538.

<sup>6</sup> Kuhn, *ibid.*, p. 537.

<sup>7</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wine-Skins*, InterVarsity Press, Downer Grove, Ill., 1977, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur F. Glasser, *Mission Trends*, No. 1, editors Gerald H. Anderson, Thomas F. Stransky, Paulist/Eerdmans, 1974

<sup>9</sup> One example of the heresy of universalism is found in *Feeding the Hungry: Mission by Congressional District* (Bread for the World, Christian Citizens’ Movement).

<sup>10</sup> Kuhn, *ibid.*, p. 538.

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