

POVERTY AND HUNGER AS DISABLERS: A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE.

Devison Telen Banda⁴⁵

ABSTRACT

This paper is a combination of reflection and inquiry into the effects of poverty and hunger on disability. Insights are drawn from theology, particularly the New Testament, and Political Science *both of which condition the author's eyes to see what is visible. Experiences of poverty either directly or through personal interactions with people living in abject poverty, form another premise from which to view, understand and tackle poverty and hunger.* Although the paper embraces the analysis of how poverty and hunger affects society generally, special focus is one people with disability. The searching questions include: Has poverty and hunger come to stay forever? How does and should theology respond to poverty and hunger? Does Theology offer any potential to be a tool with which to mitigate poverty and hunger in order to uplift the lives of people with disability? Taking these questions with all the deserving seriousness, it is hypothesized that: Poverty is not a creation of God to last forever, but a creation of society that can be defeated. Theology has potential to be one of the key tools in alleviating or mitigating poverty, particularly if theology overcomes its other potential to perpetuate poverty and hunger as divinely ordained. Within the given limitations, the paper ends with propositions through which theology can serve as a tool in the fight against poverty and hunger. The propositions are not in any sense clusters of exclusive dogma, but rather, an invitation to serious reflection and conversation towards poverty and hunger alleviation. The undergirding conviction of this paper is that society often exploits people with disabilities and, unless the fight against poverty and hunger is won, efforts towards inclusivity of people with disabilities will only receive lip attention. For this reason, more emphasis in this paper will fall on poverty.

1. Introduction

If there are enemies of humanity that require to be confronted with concerted effort to safeguard humans, poverty that breeds hunger is one of them. Humans have come of age and are capable of inventing so many things such as electronic devices, air, sea and land transportation, yet in the face of poverty, humans, particularly people with disabilities are as vulnerable as any other creature. The prosperity and social gospels that render devastating effects on the Church and society in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Africa in particular, feed on the poverty of our people. In the face of poverty and hunger, the noblest of humans stand so vulnerably that they can do anything. As such, good theology, can no longer watch from the gallery and justify lip service towards fighting poverty, hunger and evil. The author has always struggled with issues of poverty and asking if at all Christian Theology can be a relevant tool or weapon in the fight against poverty and hunger. This paper argues that theology has potentials to be one of the key tools with which to overcome poverty and hunger, particularly if theology overcomes its other potential to perpetuate poverty by taking sides with the rich and powerful. The pages below engage the subject matter in some deserving detail.

2. Perspectives on Poverty and theories

Poverty is a multi-faceted problem that cannot be overcome from a single front. It is a problem that involves all interested and well-meaning parties to detect and understand it as an evil which breeds

⁴⁵ Justo Mwale University lecturer in New Testament, Introduction to New Testament Greek, and Worship. He has interests in hermeneutics, governance, leadership and church polity.

other evils like hunger, disease, dehumanization and death. To peep into the complex issue of poverty, in a limited way though, theology, understood as a human response to divine revelation attested in scripture, (first and second testaments hereinafter retained as old and new testaments), is brought into an interaction with the context where poverty and hunger are realities that cannot be ignored. Marginalized members of society such as people with disabilities suffer a double tragedy of being poor and exploited in society, while at the same time reached or approached by the gospel. The two horizons of the human living context on the one hand, and its biblical counterpart context on the other hand, speak about poverty and hunger.

In the entire Sub-Saharan region, if not the entire African continent, political mileage is achieved by promises to confront and defeat poverty and hunger when a particular political candidate and her or his party are voted into power. Election in, and election out, songs of promises to alleviate poverty, hunger and disease are sung in this African context. This context is important for understanding the problem and devising possible solutions. The New Testament writings as contextual writings themselves, remain impotent and barren when treated out of the biblical and social contexts. The contexts of biblical authors is thus as important as the context of the readers of today. The belief undergirding this section is that as pointed out, both contexts deserve to be recognized and seriously addressed. This is the reason why soon after examining poverty issues in the New Testament, the third world context to which Africa belongs with all her regions, is treated. The author is aware that even at a very basic level, there is some unresolved debate about whether the Bible should precede and supplant the context, or actually that the context sends the reader to the Bible with the pre-understanding of contextual issues. The question of supplanting should not arise. Neither the biblical context nor the contemporary context is superior over the other. In this paper, the author has taken liberty to start with some undergirding thoughts on poverty as discerned in scripture which, for the purposes of time and resource limitation, has been limited to the New Testament with a few references from the Old Testament.

2.1 Poverty Issues in the New Testament

While observing the semantic domain and complexity of poverty in the New Testament, it can be stated without hesitation that poverty is depicted as a vice, an immorality or an evil that cripples humanity and should never be glorified, but rather addressed radically. The core connotation of poverty is that it creates the involuntary categorisation of one class known as the poor on the one hand, and another category of the rich or wealthy on the other hand. The poor are often victims and in a slave or servant position while the rich or wealthy are in positions of ownership, masterly and control. Poverty does not respect age. Even in the African context where age is valued and associated with wisdom and experience, a poor old woman or man approaches and addresses a rich youth in terms that depict respect. The youth is a bwana based on possessions. Poverty is not glorified as God's providence in the Bible, never. All biblical authors confront poverty as an enemy of humanity to the extent that part of the eschatological or end time judgement will be about the usage of wealth. The hermeneutic thrust of Matthew 25:31-46 is that life in the eschaton or eternity is based on the practical wisdom to use the wealth of this world, to meet the needs of the poor, whereas, withholding services that meet the needs of the poor, leads to expulsion from eternity. The view of poverty as an evil that must be confronted as it is an enemy of humanity, can also be discerned in the Old Testament texts. The wise preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes laments that:

There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works around it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man (9:14-15).

Poverty robs off humans of what is deservedly theirs. The man in this text was a hero, he saved the city by his wisdom, but, because of poverty, he was ignored and nobody remembered him. The address to poverty which places people in a position where they are exploited, is always anti-gospel and therefore, cannot be a divine blessing. The only indication of poverty as a virtue is in the first beatitude where Jesus as a superior teacher who teaches with authority, declared that: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3).

This gospel recording presents poverty in a great reversal whereas poverty of the spirit leads to inheriting the kingdom of heaven. The ancient text has an emphasis on *‘theirs’* which brings out a sense of exclusion: *those not poor in spirit are not in the kingdom’*. It is interesting to note that Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount does not include *‘spirit’*. According to Luke, Jesus declared that: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God (6:20)

This contrast signifies that those who are poor and hungry and so crushed in the spirit as a result of poverty that they cry out to heaven, are blessed because not only does God take their side, but that *‘theirs’* is the kingdom of heaven (Bruner 1987). The poverty under discussion in this paper is certainly of the different type from the poverty of the kingdom ethic above. Here especially with Luke’s perspective, the in-breaking of the kingdom has created the great reversal. The great reversal is the application of the Jesus manifesto:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim *the year of the Lord’s favour* (Luke 4:18-19).

This mission and vision statement or manifesto as it is called, demonstrates Jesus’ resolve to confront poverty among other issues. Put differently, the true message of the kingdom does not tolerate, nurse or render lip service to poverty. Jesus addressed issues of poverty and wealth distribution more than he did on any other subject. There are more parables surrounding wealth and poverty than on any other single subject in the New Testament, particularly the Gospels. In all these parables and teachings on wealth, the essential point is that wealth is only good if it is used in the services of God and humanity (Mat 10:26, Mk 9:41f, Lk 16:1-13). This thought line is continued by other New Testament writers who adopt a critical view on wealth if it is not used in the services of God and humanity, particularly the poor. A clear demonstration of this view is proclaimed by James who charges that:

Listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay workers who mowed your fields are crying against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you (5:1-6).

By charging thus, the author focuses on the usage of wealth. *‘Gold and silver are corroded’* and *‘their corrosion will testify’* against the rich and will eat their flesh like fire. One expository question to ask is: why and how did gold and silver gather corrosion? The text suggests that wealth gathered corrosion because instead of sharing gold and silver by using them to serve God and society through uplifting the living standards of poor, the rich people kept gold and silver in storage for a long time. Storage of what people need to survive is an act of selfishness which nurtures evil.

To sum up the view of the New Testament on poverty, it can be stated that poverty is a vice, an immorality or an evil that must be confronted because it dehumanizes people, particularly the majority poor and people with disabilities due to their vulnerability to various forms of exploitation. As afore-mentioned, treating of scripture in the quest to discover how theology can serve as a tool with which to overcome poverty and hunger, is only one side. The other equally important side is the context itself as treated below.

2.2 Poverty as a Third World Reality

Although poverty is a global issue, severe effects of its reality are more experienced in the third world. The realities of poverty in Sub-Saharan regions cannot be ignored. According to the World Bank report (2014:73-78), Sub-Saharan Africa is among regions with people living on less than \$1.25 a day, with an approximate \$ 0.205. Other regions in similar predicament include South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific regions.

This poverty in the third world affects both religious and secular people including people with disability. The irony in the third world is that poverty is growing alongside the Christian faith in particular and religion in general. Philip Jenkins (2002:2) claim that:

Christianity is flourishing among the poor and persecuted,
Christianity atrophies among the rich and secure

The above views suggest that as faith is growing in the Southern hemisphere, poverty is growing too. This view is held not only by the above, but also by the discovery of the World Christian Database⁴⁶ made as far back as 2005 when it was contended that:

North = Northern America, Europe and Asia
1900 Christian population 31%
2005 Christian population 23%
South = Africa, Southern America and Oceania
1900 Christian population 14%
2005 Christian population 46%

Taking the above data as essential insight, raises a number of critical questions such as: how best can the Church in Africa and the Third world care for the flourishing faith? Can the Church do something to address poverty within her ranks and in the wider society? If generally faith is on the increase in the global South, does the increase include or exclude people with disability?

To address these questions and those raised earlier on, it is important to understand that complex as poverty is, understanding it as a deficiency in basic needs and services, leads to an understanding that it is a social construction. Poverty creates humiliation, frustration and bondage to powerlessness which in turn creates dehumanization and vulnerability. Under poverty, people across ages become desperate and become vulnerable to manipulation and many evils. This is because desperate people do desperate things. A story is told of a young woman in the rural district of Chadiza, Eastern province of Zambia, whose name is disguised as Magi. Magi was less than thirty (30) years old when she discovered that her husband was promiscuous. Having heard from HIV/Aids prevention adverts, she began to demand that they have protected sex. This move angered Magi's husband who resorted to physical beatings. The husband further threatened to divorce her if she insisted on using condoms during sex, but would reward her with money if she continued to have unprotected sex. She argued that protected sex was to him like eating sweets which were still wrapped in plastic. Although Magi was well aware of the dangers involved, she had no way out but give in to the unprotected sex

⁴⁶ World Christian Database 2005

demand. Not long after, Magi got both pregnant and HIV/Aids infection. When the HIV/Aids status was confirmed, the husband deserted her, and never came back to her even when parents attempted intervention. Although she gave birth to a bouncing baby boy, she went into full-blown Aids, depression and died leaving two boys aged 3 years and 11 months respectively. In this story which is in no way unique to the Zambian Magi, what killed Magi? The submission of this writing is that at the core, Magi was killed by the threat of poverty and hunger. Now, if the life of Magi ended in such a tragedy, what if she had been with a disability? Couldn't it have been worse?

To sum up, the author insists that the poverty evolution as a social phenomenon creates classes of the 'rich and the poor', 'the haves and the have nots.' Poverty is an enemy of equitable creation and distribution of goods and services which affect the governance and functioning of trade, market system and access to justice. The rich and powerful become more equal than the poor and people with all manner of disabilities. Indeed, as the proverbial statement goes:

"The strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they have to accept" (Viotti and Kauppi 2010:79).

Unlike theology that functions through appeals and persuasion, governance in the context where theology is misapplied or not applied at all, functions through manipulation and cohesion of the people who are poor, hungry, without shelter and with disability. However, in the past 50 years change has affected global and domestic structures and systems in ways that provide opportunities for theology. Anna-Marie Slaughter addressing the global system on the subject of international relations argues that:

In a world of global markets, global travel, and global information networks, of weapons of mass destruction, and looming environmental disasters of global magnitude, governments must have global reach. In a world in which their ability to use their hard power is often limited, governments must be able to exploit the uses of soft power: the power of persuasion and information (2004:17).

Put differently, the global context has changed in such a way that governments which are expected to address contextual evils of society including poverty and hunger are changing strategies of functioning. It is no longer cohesive hard power, but persuasive soft power which counts. The argument of this writing is that what governments do out of change processes and in some circumstances, out of duress, church and theology do naturally. By its very nature, theology is an art of persuasion in the hand of the church as an organization of soft power. In this regard, church and theology possess opportunities to address pertinent issues such as poverty and hunger and disease as disablers of humanity. The worst disability is a life of poverty, hunger and disease leading to dehumanization.

3.0 Findings and Concluding Propositions

This paper sought to discuss theology in relation to poverty, hunger and disease in relation to how they disable humanity, and doubly burden people with disability. Theology has been treated as a human contextual response to divine revelation attested in scripture, while poverty has been understood as a complex reality which can be described in many ways and understood by people while retaining its negative connotation. Some of the definitions present poverty as a multi-faceted and multi-sector condition of living. Poverty and hunger as disablers, respect no age, creed or colour. Basically, poverty means deficiency or lack of basic needs of life; no access to basic services; not able to afford to eat, lack of identity recognition. Poverty and wealth can also be described as inclusive of a mind-set, perception given by the community or power structures. For example, one driving a car, one married to several women and making many children may be considered rich, whereas, failure to own a car, monogamy, childlessness may be attributed to poverty. The mind set and perceptions are so powerful that they overlook other equally important realities such as care and

functionality.

Poverty is such a reality that cannot be completely hidden even in its complexity. The manifestations thereof include malnourished; poor housing; and dehumanizing or no income; people dressed in rags; street children and adults. It must be pointed out that poverty ought not to be conceptualized narrowly but recognized as a factor that affects humanity at several levels, though, as argued, it hits the poor and people with disability, the hardest.

This exploration was undergirded by the daunting questions: Has poverty and hunger come to stay forever? How does and should theology respond to poverty and hunger? Does theology offer any potential to be a tool with which to mitigate poverty and hunger in order to uplift the lives of people with disability? Taking this question with all the deserving seriousness, it was hypothesized that: Poverty is not a creation of God to last forever, but a creation of society that can be defeated. Theology has potential to be one of the key tools in alleviating or mitigating poverty, particularly if theology overcomes its other potential to perpetuate poverty and hunger as divinely ordained.

The findings discussed above, lead to a number of critical propositions which are submitted for purposes of further reflection and/or in-depth research:

- Poverty is too multi-faceted and too complex to be overcome by any single entity such as theology or a democratically elected government.
- Poverty is a vice or an immorality confronted by biblical authors and the teachings of Jesus that in particular revealed that the kingdom confronts poverty in the great reversal brought about by the in-breaking of the kingdom. Thus, Jesus' statement: –The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me in Matthew, was not a legitimization of poverty as divinely ordained, but rather an acknowledgement of its presence (26:11) (Bruner 1990). The Church and her Christian theology cannot afford to sing and jubilate in seclusion while poverty and hunger take congregants hostage, especially people with disability.
- Poverty is a social construction and mind-set conditioned. One is poor within a given cultural and social settings. The resolve to say enough is enough to poverty, by all concerned stakeholders and committing resources to good use can overcome poverty.
- Theology cannot afford to ignore poverty because poverty distorts the message of the kingdom and negatively affects the Christian witness to the our Lord Christ Jesus. Any Church theology that ignores the fight against poverty risks to be disabled, bankrupt and a mouth piece of a false gospel that misleads congregants into living as if they were so heavenly wired that living on earth is a mistake.
- Where theology does not side with the selfish rich and promote unjust systems and structures as divinely ordained, she can be an effective tool with which to overcome poverty and hunger by calling for responsible stewardship (Schumaker 2008).
- To overcome poverty, theology can engage players in order to create a flat arena (Friedman 2005), and advocate equitable creation and distribution of wealth, goods and services. Put differently, a courageous theology of disability should not seek special care for people with disabilities, but remove barriers and thus, create conducive conditions where all people including people with disabilities can live full lives without marginalization.

- Theology can use soft power to lobby for fair laws governing wealth creation, property ownership, distribution and combat trade, market system injustice etc, that do not segregate against people with disability.
 - People with disability experience a double tragedy of being abused and misused and tools of fundraising. Actually, it is those people with disability without income who are more disabled and marked as disabled unlike their income earning counterparts.
 - The Church as a street level bureaucrat, or an entity at the grassroots, can create conditions in which only theology has a unique opportunity to address evils such as corruption, nepotism and all forms of self-interest. This is due to the fact that good theology promotes love and responsible stewardship in collaboration with other key stakeholders at the grassroots' level. Further, the Church through good theology can nurture citizens with _human hearts and minds'(C S. Lewis, 1944) needed to view people as people and not as machines and tools for profiteering no matter whether or not such people are people with disabilities. Therefore, unless poverty and hunger are overcome as disablers, the fight for inclusivity or people with disability in all manner of life shall remain in vain and a chasing after the wind.
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