

Common Evangelical Misconceptions of Poverty

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Steven R. Tracy
Phoenix Seminary

Abstract

Recent economic and political events evidence a great need for evangelical leaders to address the complex issue of poverty. Currently, more Americans are living below the poverty line than at any time in the past fifty years. At the same time, there is a great resurgence of conservative political ideology, strongly supported by white evangelicals, which is offering influential models regarding social justice issues. I argue that evangelicals often have erroneous beliefs regarding the nature and causes of poverty and the requisite biblical response, which is to prioritize care for the needy. This presentation will seek to identify and correct some of the most common misconceptions regarding poverty.

Introduction

The issue of global and domestic poverty is of utmost importance. Currently, more Americans are living below the poverty line than at any time in the past fifty years. In September of 2010 the US Census Bureau released a summary of findings related to poverty and health care in the 2009 US census.¹ It revealed that the number of people in poverty in 2009 is the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates are

¹ Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009," US Department of commerce, US Census Bureau, September 2010; available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p60-238.pdf>. The "poverty level" for a family of four was calculated as an annual income of less than \$21, 954. Those who consider \$22,000 well above poverty or who believe American poverty is primarily the result of individuals failing to be industrious would do well to read Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (New York: Owl Books, 2001).

available. The overall poverty rate climbed from 13.2% to 14.3%, resulting in 43.6 million Americans living in poverty in 2009. In my home state of Arizona, a 2009 study found that there are 25,000 homeless grade school and high school students in our state, which represents an 18% increase from the previous year.² Before the recession, local authorities estimated that there were 10,000 homeless people in Maricopa County, with roughly 2/3 of these being women and children.³ Experts estimate that 691,000 American children went hungry sometime in 2007, while close to one in eight Americans struggled to feed themselves adequately even before the sharp economic downturn in the latter part of the year.⁴

Globally, the situation is much more dire. The good news is that since 1980, for the first time in history world poverty has fallen and there have been some notable and dramatic reductions in poverty in countries such as Bangladesh and India.⁵ But the overall global picture remains one in which billions of people are suffering from the debilitating effects of poverty. This is particularly true of the “bottom billion”—the poorest in the world, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa and central Asia, who are stuck in “poverty traps” and currently have little prospect of anything other than greater and greater levels of economic misery.⁶ And almost half the world—nearly three billion people—live on less than two dollars a day.⁷ In developing world countries, one-third of all children under five are stunted in their growth due to malnutrition (178 million children). In much of sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia over 40% of children under five are stunted.⁸ Globally, 10% of children under five are “wasting away” i.e.,

² Megan Gordon, "25,000 Students in Arizona Now Homeless: Up 18% in Past Year," *The Arizona Republic*, July 4, 2009; available at: <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2009/07/04/20090704homeless0704.html>.

³ Statistic provided by Phoenix Councilwoman Peggy Bilsten.

⁴ "More American Kids Went Hungry Last Year, USDA," *The Associated Press*, Nov. 17, 2008. This was based on a study released by the US Department of Agriculture.

⁵ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done about It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), X.

⁶ *Ibid.* Based on extensive research, Collier, an economist at Oxford and former director of Developmental Research at the World Bank, identifies four “traps” keeping the bottom billion in poverty: violent, internal conflict; an abundance of natural resources; being landlocked with bad neighbors; having bad governance in a small country.

⁷ “Causes of Poverty,” <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp>.

⁸ World Health Organization, “World Health Statistics 2007.” This figure reflects the year 2005.

experiencing severe malnutrition.⁹ Every day around the world, 24,000 people die from hunger and hunger-related causes. Globally, other life necessities are in even greater scarcity than food. For instance, According to a 2006 United Nations Human Development Report on the global water crisis, around the world 1.2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water and 2.6 billion lack access to sanitation, resulting in the annual deaths of 1.8 million children (the equivalent of the combined populations of all children under age five in New York City and London).¹⁰ Thus, unclean drinking water is the world's second biggest killer of children.

When we look at the widespread, and in many instances abject poverty around us, and at the great material resources God has entrusted to us and lay these realities over the template of biblical teaching on poverty, it should be readily apparent that this is a critically important topic.

Before we look at specific evangelical misconceptions of poverty, two points should be noted. (1) Evangelical views of and responses to poverty are rapidly changing. Religious right leaders such as James Dobson, James D. Kennedy, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell, who have for several decades led the “religious right” in a politically conservative response to social issues are aging and passing away, while new younger leaders such as Rick Warren are taking a very different approach.¹¹ This shift is particularly acute among young evangelicals. For instance, 28% of young evangelicals voted for President Obama in 2008. This appears in large part due to Obama's emphasis on and approach to poverty and other social justice issues.¹² (2) There is much to affirm and celebrate. Research shows that evangelicals are far more generous than secularists or religious liberals. For instance, research by Arthur Books found that religious people

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kevin Watkins, et al., *Summary Human Development Report 2006. Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis* (New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme, 2006).

¹¹ Darryl Hart, “Leftward Christian Soldiers,” *The American Conservative*, January 29, 2007; available at: www.amconmag.com/article/2007/jan/29/00024; Michael Luo and Laurie Goodstein, “Emphasis Shifts for New Breed of Evangelicals,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2007; Timothy C. Morgan, “Purpose Driven in Rwanda: Rick Warren's Sweeping Plan to Defeat Poverty,” *Christianity Today*, October 2005, 32-36, 90-91.

¹² Laurie Goodstein, “Obama Made Gains Among Younger Evangelical Voters, Data Show,” *New York Times*, November 6, 2008; John Zogby, “Young Evangelicals Cheer Obama—For Now,” IBOPE Zogby International web site, January 23, 2009; available at www.forbes.com/opinions/2009/01/21/evangelicals-polls-obama-oped-cx_jz_0122zogby.html.

donated three-and-a-half times more money than secular people and volunteered twice as often.¹³ Of the four religious groups studied “religious conservatives” (largely composed of evangelicals) were the most likely to donate money to charitable causes, and were even found to be more likely to donate to secular charities than the general population.¹⁴

While there are some bright spots in the evangelical response to poverty, we still have a very long way to go and need to be disabused of several critical misconceptions. Some of these are no doubt the result of benign ignorance, while others are the result of our fleshly impulses. We do well to reflect on the astute observation attributed to Martin Luther—the last part of a man to be converted is his wallet.

I. MISUNDERSTANDINGS REGARDING PRIORITIZING THE NEEDS OF THE POOR

Virtually no evangelicals deny we should help the poor in some way, shape, or form, but this is often seen simply as one of many good actions to consider, not as a cardinal moral imperative to obey. There is much data indicating that evangelicals have some concern for the poor, but the needy often take a back seat to our own needs and interests.

For instance, in some of my previous research I’ve carefully surveyed the evangelical “religious right” and analyzed their chief moral concerns based on their books, web sites, and “family values” voters’ guides. I identified their chief moral concerns to include: limiting the influence and rights of homosexuals; promoting small government and lower taxes; protecting and promoting religious liberty, particularly for evangelicals; liaise fair capitalism; maintenance of a strong military.¹⁵ Without denying the validity of some of these moral concerns, I noted a glaring absence, particularly in the “voters’ guides” utilized by millions of American evangelicals. The questions used to develop these voters’ guides overwhelmingly fail to reflect:

¹³ Arthur C. Brooks, *Who Really Cares: America’s Charity Divide, Who Gives, Who Doesn’t, and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

¹⁵ Steven R. Tracy, “The Culture Wars Over “Family Values”: Are Evangelicals Fighting the Wrong Battles in the Wrong Way and Losing Badly?” *Africanus*, forthcoming.

concern for the rights of workers and their families, the rights and needs of the poor and their families, the right and needs of immigrants and their families, the right and needs of ethnic minority families, the potential for big business to take advantage of workers and their families, or the reality and impact of physical and sexual abuse on families.¹⁶

Thus, it strongly appears from the influential family values literature and voters' guides that "the rights and well-being of middle and upper class white Christians is a primary concern."¹⁷

We can also see that evangelicals often do not believe poverty is a pivotal issue which must be prioritized and addressed by noting a recent Barna Institute study which found that for evangelicals, domestic poverty was one of the least likely issues to impact their candidate selection—it was eleventh out of twelve issues listed.¹⁸ What is particularly revealing about this poll is that evangelicals were considerably *less* likely to make addressing poverty an election issue priority than nonevangelicals.¹⁹ And a 2011 Pew Research Study on budget priorities found that evangelicals were *more* likely than any other group to favor reductions in federal spending, particularly assistance to the globally needy and domestic assistance to the unemployed, yet evangelicals were not supportive of funding cuts for the military, terrorism, and energy—issues related to their *own* perceived needs.²⁰

One might minimize the significance of these studies by arguing that evangelicals actually do prioritize care for the poor but don't believe government can effectively help them; that is the church's job not the government's.²¹ But this response rings utterly

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Barna Group, "Survey: Voters Most Interested in Issues Concerning Security and Comfort, Least Interested in Moral Issues," Barna Group, April 5, 2011.

¹⁹ In fact, a mere 29% of evangelicals listed this as a voting impact issue. This was the same score given by skeptics and was the lowest score of the religious groups identified.

²⁰ Tobin Grant, "Polling Evangelicals: Cut Aid to World's Poor, Unemployed," *Christianity Today* (web-only version), February, 2011; available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/februaryweb-only/cutaidtoworldspoor.html>; accessed 9/15/2011.

²¹ The following two quotes by extremely influential evangelical leaders are representative of countless others who hold this same sentiment. In a discussion of how Jesus would have Christian vote when it comes to economic concerns such as social security and health care, James D. Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe argue "He would have the church care of the poor through voluntary means, not through the

hollow when we analyze hard data on evangelical giving and provision of social services in their communities.

In terms of the latter, a nation-wide study of 251 congregations found that when government cut social services in a given community, there was “no significant relationship between government retrenchment and congregational involvement” in social service programs churches provided for that community.²² Given the evangelical resistance to government funding for social services, this research finding is very problematic. We simply can’t have it both ways, insisting the government cut social service spending for the poor, but not making care for the poor a priority in our church programs and budgets. Yet that is exactly what most often happens. Some of the most detailed analysis of church giving has been done by John and Sylvia Ronsvalle.²³ In their most recent study, they trace giving trends among evangelicals and note dramatic drops in giving to the needy: “[P]er member contributions to Benevolences as a percent of income decreased from 0.66% in 1968 to 0.35% in 2008.”²⁴ The 2008 level of benevolent giving reflected a forty-year all-time low, and a decrease of 47% in benevolence giving from 1968-2008. Furthermore, of each additional inflation-adjusted dollar donated in 2008 compared to 1968, \$0.94 of every extra dollar went to “congregational finances” which has to do with the internal operations of the congregation rather than outside church assistance to the community or world at large.²⁵ What is perhaps most troubling is that based on inflation adjusted dollars, Americans’ disposable income more than

involuntary means of the government,” *How Would Jesus Vote: A Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 100. Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the house and seemingly a self-identified evangelical states, “Americans...have always been committed to helping those in need, but we must recognize that the government is not the best vehicle to render this assistance. Historically, the churches and other organizations...most effectively helped the poor.” *To Save America: Stopping Obama’s Secular-Socialist Machine* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2010), 273.

²² Ram A. Cnaan, *The Invisible Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 251.

²³ John L. and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 2008: Kudos to Wycliff Bible Translators and World Vision for Global At-Scale Goals, but Will Denominations Resist Jesus Christ and Not Spent \$1 to \$26 Per Member to Reach the Unreached When Jesus Says, “You Feed Them”?* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 2010).

²⁴ Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 2008*, 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

doubled in this forty-year period, and yet we proportionately continue to give less and less to the needy.²⁶

Finally, we should note that not only are evangelical churches failing to prioritize caring for the poor in the current expenditures, research shows that we would continue to do this if we found ourselves the recipients of an unexpected financial windfall. A Pew research study utilized a survey of 504 Protestant ministers and another survey of 1,184 Protestant church attenders. Among evangelical pastors, the number one priority for an unexpected gift was to build or renovate their church buildings (38% gave this response), *while only 2% said they would use this gift to spend more on social programs such as homelessness or education.* It should be noted that Mainline pastors surveyed put a much higher priority on social programs—13%.²⁷ *It is all but impossible to escape the conclusion that we evangelicals are consumed with serving ourselves and meeting our own needs, regardless of the glaring suffering around us.*

II. MISUNDERSTANDINGS REGARDING THE BIBLICAL MANDATE TO CARE FOR THE POOR.

This category of misunderstandings is directly related to the previous one—we don't see the need to prioritize poverty and the needs of the destitute because we often fail to understand or heed the exhaustive biblical teaching on this subject. Scripture makes care for the poor not simply a recommended activity but an inviolable moral imperative.²⁸ In fact, sacrificial care for the needy is one of the most foundational

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ "Protestant clergy and laity discuss priorities for spending church funds," available at: http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Spending_Priorities.htm; accessed 9/15/2011. This study was released in 2006. Some evangelical groups fared even worse in this survey. A Southern Baptist periodical noted that 43% of Southern Baptist pastors indicated they would use a windfall on new or better facilities, and only 1% of these pastors would use it for social programs, Ron Sellers, "New Improved Facilities Top Churches' Wish List for Unexpected Money," *Facts & Trends*, May/June 2006, 6-9.

²⁸ There is a solid body of literature on biblical teaching on wealth and poverty. These include: David L. Baker, *Tight Fist or Open Hands: Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009, reprint of 1984 edition); Donald E. Gowan, "Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament: The Case of the Widow, the Orphan, and the Sojourner," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 341-53; Warren Heard, "Luke's Attitude towards the Rich and the Poor," *Trinity Journal* 9 (1988): 47-80; Leslie J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Bruce W. Longenecker,

obligations and surest evidences of being part of God's covenant people. Peter Vogt's conclusion regarding social justice in Mosaic Law is applicable canon-wide. He states: "[C]are of the landless and poor is established in Deuteronomy as one of the most important measures of the effectiveness of the people of Israel in living out loyalty to Yahweh and, therefore, being the people of God."²⁹ Thus, "sharing with these groups was not meritorious, but was expected behavior on the part of the community."³⁰ Similarly, Craig Blomberg observes, "The key to evaluating any individual church or nation in terms of its use of material possessions (personally, collectively, or institutionally) is how well it takes care of the poor and powerless in its midst."³¹

Unfortunately, many influential evangelical leaders still believe that caring for the needy is good but not obligatory. Some go so far as to say that helping those suffering from poverty isn't necessarily the will of God. For instance, Charles Ryrie states "[t]he existence of poverty around us does not necessarily constitute a call to action to alleviate that poverty... The necessity, or even the worth, of a good deed [alleviating poverty] does not in and of itself determine which I should do it. I must know the specific will of God at that time."³² On the contrary, there are hundreds of biblical passages which demonstrate that care for the poor is unequivocally the will of God and is one of our greatest moral obligations as believers. We should not just have a general, occasional concern for poor but a particular, dominant concern.

One of the strongest statements regarding the believer's duty to care for the poor comes from the eighteenth century Puritan pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards. In his essay entitled "Christian Charity," he states,

Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Bruce Malina, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 354-67; Thomas E. Philips, "Reading Recent Readings of Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke and Acts," *Currents in Biblical Research* 1 (2003): 231-69; Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981); Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (5th ed.; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005); Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

²⁹ Peter T. Vogt, "Social Justice and the Vision of Deuteronomy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (2008): 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

³¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 84.

³² Charles C. Ryrie, *The Christian and Social Responsibility* (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008; reprint of 1982 edition), 40-41. Ryrie goes even farther, raising the possibility that sometimes "well-meaning Christians" who feed people made hungry/starving by a famine might actually be violating the will of God by "dulling the sword of God's judgment," *ibid.*, 22-23.

[I]t is the absolute and indispensable duty of the people of God, to give bountifully and willfully for supplying the wants of the needy... This is a duty to which God's people are under very strict obligations. It is not merely a commendable thing for a man to be kind and bountiful to the poor, but our bounded duty, as much a duty as it is to pray, or to attend public worship, or any thing else whatsoever; and the neglect of it brings great guilt upon any person.³³

The following principles summarize some of the great body of biblical teaching regarding our obligation to care for the poor and supports Edwards' strong conclusion.

1. God Cares for the Poor, Actively Works on their Behalf, and Shows a Particular Concern for Them.³⁴

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. Psalm 140:12³⁵ (cf. also Ps 113:5-9)

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free... The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow. Psalm 146:7, 9 (cf. also Deut 10:18-19; Ps 68:5; Luke 4:18-19)

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. Luke 1:52-53³⁶

The latter passage is particularly significant. Luke, drawing heavily on Isaiah 58 and 61, places great emphasis on God's concern for the poor. Preaching "good news to the poor" is a central theme in Luke. For instance: the message of the Messiah brought good news to the poor (4:18); the poor are blessed and inherit the kingdom but the

³³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 164.

³⁴ "Particular" concern for the poor is not a "bias" against the rich. The latter would violate biblical teaching such as Exod 23:3 and Lev 19:15. God is not partial in the sense of overlooking sin among the poor but has a special concern for their need for care and justice, cf. Sider, *Rich Christians*, 60-63.

³⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture citations are from the NIV.

³⁶ I. Howard Marshall notes that it "would be easy to over-spiritualize the meaning of these verses and ignore their literal interpretation," *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 8.

comfortable rich stand in danger of judgment (Luke 6:20, 24); the evidence of Jesus' Messiahship is that the poor hear the good news (7:18-23); the poor are invited to the feast, not the rich (14:13, 21).³⁷

2. Knowing and Loving God is Particularly Evidenced by Our Care for the Poor.

In other words, we cannot truly say we know and love God if we fail to care for the poor he created and loves. Care for the poor is one of the surest evidences of being a child of God. Caring for the poor is an act of love toward and worship of God himself.

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done. Proverbs 19:17 (cf. also Prov 14:31, 17:5)

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. 1John 3:14-18

We could point to dozens of other passages that inseparably link being a child of God and being godly with care for the poor, but will note just a few more. According to Jeremiah, justice and mercy for the poor and needy summarizes "what it means to know me [Yahweh]" (22:16). According to James, "pure religion" is "to look after widows and orphans in their distress" (1:27). According to Matthew 25:31-46, care for materially needy believers is the singular basis for the final judgment. Furthermore, this passage asserts that when we tangibly care for the needy it is as if we are feeding, clothing, and visiting Christ. The only request the apostles in Jerusalem gave to Paul, summarizing

³⁷ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 72-80.

their ministry guidance, was that he “continue to remember the poor.” Paul, in turn, said that this was the very thing he had been “eager to do” all along (Gal 2:10).³⁸

In the face of repetitive accusations that his sufferings were caused by his own hidden sin, one of the primary evidences Job gives of his godliness was his persistent material care for and defense of the poor and vulnerable. In fact, he argues that had he not done so, he would indeed stand under God’s judgment:

If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless—but from my youth I reared them as a father would, and from my birth I guided the widow—if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or the needy without garments, and their hearts did not bless me for warming them with the fleece from my sheep...then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high. Job 31:16-20, 28³⁹

3. Profound Blessings are Given to Those Who Care for the Poor.

Some of the most extensive blessings are offered to those to care for the poor. The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor. Proverbs 22:9 (cp. Ps 41:1-2)

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: “Here am I.” If you do away

³⁸ Longenecker argues in detailed and convincing fashion that care for the poor was integral to Paul’s gospel and practice, *Remember the Poor*, 157-206, 299-300. He sees Gal 2:10 as a critical piece of this evidence and shows that it is a robust command which “demarcates caring for the poor without geographical restriction or specificity,” 182.

³⁹ Cf. also Job 24:5-22; 29:11-17; 30:25; 31:13-22; cp. Job 20:19.

with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Isaiah 58:6-11

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Luke 14:12-14

4. Profound Judgment Falls On Those Who “Merely” Ignore the Poor.⁴⁰

In other words, when it comes to the poor, there is no such thing as benign neglect. To fail to listen to, respond to, or care for the poor will incur God’s displeasure and precipitate divine judgment. This is perhaps the biblical teaching on poverty which evangelicals are most unaware of. Given our rich material blessings and the great domestic and global needs around us, it is perhaps also the biblical principal which most condemns us. We cannot rest smugly content with the mere confidence that we have not defrauded the poor. If we have material blessings we are obligated to share them with the needy. Several of the passages we have already cited plainly teach this. As the fourth century church father John Chrysostom stated, “this also is theft not to share one’s possessions, for our money is the Lord’s, however we have gathered it.”⁴¹ 1 John 3:14-18 asserts that we do not have the love of God in us if we see a believer in material need and do not share with them to alleviate their physical suffering. Matthew 25:31-45 makes the

⁴⁰ This is in addition to the overwhelming biblical emphasis on God’s judgment which will fall on those who actively oppress the poor and vulnerable. For instance, see Ex 22:22-24; Job 20:19-29; Isa 3:14-26; 10:1-4; Jer 2:34-37; Ezek 22:12-15, 29-31; Amos 2:6-7; 8:4-14; Zech 7:10-14; Mal 3:5-6; Jas 5:1-5.

⁴¹ St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 49.

final judgment contingent not on whether or not one has oppressed the poor but simply on whether or not one impassively ignores their needs.⁴² In the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-25), nothing in the text indicates the rich man who experienced eternal judgment when he died had abused or oppressed the poor while he lived. The text simply tells us that he was daily “living in luxury” while ignoring, and hence demonstrating indifference to, the suffering caused by Lazarus’ poverty.⁴³ Job’s defense wasn’t simply that he didn’t defraud the poor but that he never failed to ignore their plight. He went so far as to say that if he had denied the desire of the poor, kept his bread for himself and not shared with the needy, or if he had seen anyone perishing for lack of warm clothing and not supplied them with garments, that God should judge him severely. Specifically, if he had been indifferent toward the poor and needy, he adjures: “let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint” (Job 31:16-17, 22). God makes it very clear that once we are aware of material needs and resultant suffering, we have an intractable moral obligation to act. Pleading ignorance is no defense. “Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered” (Prov 21:13; cp. Prov 28:27). One of the strongest biblical passages which teaches that profound judgment falls on those who “merely” ignore the poor is Ezekiel 16:49. This is also one of the least understood by evangelicals, though it is quite straightforward. The prophet Ezekiel identifies the sin of Sodom, and it is not what evangelicals expect—homosexuality— but passive indifference toward the poor: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy."⁴⁴ Ezekiel’s warning to Israel is a very serious warning to American Christians in light of the excess material blessings we enjoy while billions in the world suffer great need. For instance, the dollar value of the food North Americans

⁴² Tim Keller draws from Jonathan Edward’s insightful comments in Edward’s essay “Christian Charity,” showing that Matt 25:31-45 (very similar to James 2:2-18) teaches that “ministry to the poor is a crucial sign that we believe the gospel.” In essence, Jesus in Matt 25:31-45 is saying that “God on judgment day can tell what a person’s heart attitude is to him by what the person’s heart attitude is to the poor. If there is a hardness, indifference, or superiority, it betrays the self-righteousness of a heart that has not truly embraced the truth that he or she is a lost sinner saved only by free yet costly grace,” Tim Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” *Themelios* 33 (2008): 12, 13.

⁴³ Warren Heard summarizes, “[T]his Lukan parable stands as a clear warning about the neglect of the literal poor,” “Luke’s Attitude toward the Rich and the Poor,” *Trinity Journal* 9 (1988): 65.

⁴⁴ On the misapplication of the sin of Sodom by the religious right, see Steven Tracy, “The Culture Wars Over ‘Family Values.’”

throw into the garbage each year equals about one-fifth of the total annual income of all the Christians in Africa.⁴⁵ In developing world countries one-third of all children under age five are so malnourished that their growth is stunted while in the US two-thirds of all adults are overweight or obese.⁴⁶

III. MISUNDERSTANDINGS REGARDING THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

1. Poverty and the Character of the Poor

One of the challenges of understanding poverty accurately and responding to it properly is that it is surprisingly complex.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, conservative evangelicals often approach poverty simplistically, particularly singling out laziness and other forms of character flaws as primary causes, while minimizing or remaining completely mute on other factors leading to poverty, particularly oppression and injustice. The tendency of many evangelicals to place the primary causes of poverty on the poor most likely helps to explain our behavioral indifference toward their plight. If much or most poverty is ultimately the fault of the poor themselves, then one might reason that they, and not we, are responsible for ameliorating their condition. In other words, the evangelical tendency to attribute poverty to laziness and vice, combined with the tendency to see one's wealth as primarily the result of good character, seriously undermines compassion and sacrificial care for the poor. This tendency is not unique to modern evangelicals, as is evidence by Job's three "comforters" several millennia ago. In fact, some social scientists have studied this phenomenon for several decades and argue that there is an innate human need to see victims of misfortune as deserving recipients of their suffering. This has been termed the "just world hypothesis." Considerable research supports this model, which argues that "people have a strong desire or need to believe that the world is an orderly, predictable, and just place" and thus in spite of the evidence will intuitively or simplistically conclude that those who suffer somehow brought their misfortune on

⁴⁵ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 87. This is based on calculations from the mid-1970s. Since then the number of Christians in Africa has grown dramatically as has the affluence of North Americans and hence the percentage of food we throw away is no doubt a much higher percentage of the annual income of all African Christians.

⁴⁶ This figure is given by the Centers for Disease Control, Jeff Lancashire, "Number of Obese Adult and Overweight Children not Falling in the USA," *Medical News Today*, 2004.

⁴⁷ Ron Sider has given a most helpful survey of the individual and societal (structural) causes of poverty, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 119-77.

themselves.⁴⁸ Other sociological researchers have carefully analyzed whether “merit,” (hard work and virtue) or lack thereof, primarily explain the huge economic disparities in American society. Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller, for instance, have carefully marshaled research to show that that meritocracy is a myth—the idea that societal resources are distributed exclusively or primarily on the basis of individual merit. They show how the effects of non-merit factors such as inheritance (one’s social and economic starting point at birth), cultural advantages, unequal educational opportunity, discrimination, and luck all play huge roles in one’s economic attainment.⁴⁹ For instance, studies of income distribution in the US have found that if your parents’ income is in the top 20% of family incomes, you have a 42.3% chance of also ending up in the top bracket, yet only a 6.3% chance of ending up in the bottom 20% bracket. On the other hand, if your parents’ income is in the bottom 20%, you have only a 7.3% chance of ending up in the top 20 percent.⁵⁰

In spite of these social science findings, examples of evangelical focus on laziness or other character flaws as the root causes of poverty abound. For instance, in their book *How Would Jesus Vote?*, James D. Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe devote an entire chapter to economic concerns and focus their discussion around the theme of “private property and work.” They place great emphasis on laziness as the cause of poverty, arguing that “loafers” shouldn’t eat, while having little to say about other causes of poverty.⁵¹ Similarly, in a Focus on the Family Truth Project Community blog discussion entitled “the poor you will have with you always,” one blogger pointedly articulated this view of poverty: “[p]overty will be eased when the root causes of poverty (ignorance, sloth, greed, personal responsibility, and immorality) are addressed.⁵² Again, the root causes of poverty are all seen as matters of defective character. Even among intellectually

⁴⁸ Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez, “The Just World Theory,” *Issues in Ethics Journal* 3 (1990); available at: <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/iie/v3n2/justworld.html>.

⁴⁹ Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth* (2nd ed.; New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

⁵⁰ See Alan B. Kruege, “The Apple Falls Close to the Tree, Even in the Land of Opportunity,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2002.

⁵¹ D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?: A Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2008), 102-3.

⁵² Focus on the Family, The Truth Project Community blog, entry dated September 9, 2008; available at: <http://www.focusonlinecommunities.com/thread/12357>; accessed 7/25/2011. The blogger attributed this quote to Rev. Robert A. Sirico, president and co-founder of the Acton Institute.

respected, biblically precise evangelicals who admit that poverty is sometimes caused by other external factors, it still appears to be described as primarily the result of the poor themselves. For instance, in a discussion of wealth and poverty Wayne Grudem argues that “[i]n a free society, with no government confiscation of wealth, the amount of money that people earn will vary widely. This is because people have different abilities, different interests, and different levels of economic ambition.”⁵³ Grudem then immediately gives a hypothetical illustration warning against the danger of government taking from the wealthy—those who have been “most frugal and most productive” and have good character traits of “hard work, productivity, and frugality” and giving their money to those who are the “least productive” or who have “simply wasted their money” and demonstrate “bad [character] habits.”⁵⁴ At the end of the day, it appears the poor and the rich have only themselves to blame (or applaud) for their economic success or failure.

Marvin Olasky goes even further in focusing on the character flaws of the poor as the basis for severely limiting our care for them. He asserts that Matthew 25:40 (“I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”) is “the most misused verse of the Bible.” While never indicating what Jesus did mean when he said the King would send people to eternal punishment based on whether or not they had fed the hungry or clothed the naked, in seeking to argue against extensive care for the poor, especially if it is paid for through tax dollars, Olasky appeals to Proverbs 10:4 –“lazy hands make for poverty,” and 2 Thessalonians 3:10—“[t]he one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, he argues that the biblical compassion for the poor enjoined in Matthew 25:40 is tempered by the rest of Scripture. He argues the Bible teaches we are to have compassion for the poor only if and when they repent. For Olasky, the poor are primarily to blame for their situation and we dare not help them until they repent of their sin and destructive vices.⁵⁶ In fact, elsewhere he

⁵³ Wayne Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 281.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁵⁵ Marvin Olasky, “The Bible’s Most Misused Verse,” available at: <http://www.torenewamerica.com/the-bibles-most-misused-verse>.

⁵⁶ This thesis is worked out fully in Olasky’s most well-known work, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992). For a negative critique of this book, see Kurt C. Schaefer, “The Privatizing of Compassion: A Critical Engagement with Marvin Olasky,” in *Toward a Just*

says it is good for the immoral poor to suffer and thus it is not compassionate to help them.⁵⁷ We must help only the “worthy” poor, those who have repented.⁵⁸ This harsh approach to the poor reflects a seriously flawed view of poverty and the requisite biblical response. Jonathan Edwards responded to very similar objections toward generous material care for those who do not deserve help—the poor who are ill tempered, evil, ungrateful, and those whose sinful habits have led to their poverty. Edwards deconstructs these arguments against helping the “unworthy poor” by noting that: (1) we are commanded to love by materially caring for the needy around us, even if they are our enemy (Prov 25:21-22; Luke 10:25-37); (2) we are commanded to love others as God loved us—relieving our distress even while we were sinners who hated him (John 13:34; Rom 5:8; Eph 2:1-8); (3) we are to share our material resources with those who lack the natural faculties to prosper economically because God is the one who sovereignly bestows gifts (cf. Deut 8:18; 1 Cor 4:7); (4) we must not refuse to help those who have brought material distress upon themselves by their own foolishness because the gospel calls us to forgive others sins, pity, and assist them as Jesus did for us when he “relieved us of our own misery which we brought on ourselves by our own folly and wickedness”; (5) we must help families whose material distress is caused by the husband’s continuance in destructive sin because the consequences of his sin shouldn’t be charged to the innocent family members (cf. Deut 24:16; Ezek 18:14-18).⁵⁹

Clearly, for many evangelicals there is strong biblical basis for emphasizing the role of laziness and other character flaws in creating poverty. Actually, however, three out of four American adults living below the poverty line are working. Half of the poor work full time and only a quarter are not employed at all.⁶⁰

Biblically, the book of Proverbs does cite laziness and other character vices as causes for poverty.⁶¹ At the same time, the poor are also described in Proverbs as victims

and Caring Society: Christian Responses to Poverty in America, ed. David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 144-61 and Steven Tracy, “The Culture Wars Over ‘Family Values.’”

⁵⁷ Olasky, *Tragedy of American Compassion*, 8-11, 230.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 104-13, 217-19.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 170-72.

⁶⁰ Charles Blow, “For Jobs, It’s War,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2011.

⁶¹ On laziness as a cause of poverty, see Prov 6:6-11; 10:4; 14:23; 24:30-34. Other negative character causes of poverty identified in Proverbs include gluttony and drunkenness (23:20-21), rejection of correction (13:18), impetuosity (21:5; 28:19), and hedonism (21:17).

of people and forces beyond their control, particularly injustice, which nullifies their hard work, leaving them impoverished.⁶² For instance, Proverbs 13:23 states that a “poor man’s field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away.” Evangelicals often fail to recognize that the poor are often described in Proverbs as morally sound while the rich are often described as ungodly.⁶³

In addition to the warnings given in Proverbs connecting poverty with laziness and vice, in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul does cite the proverb “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” But the context of this statement clearly shows that Paul is not giving an etiology of poverty. This is an occasionally generated admonition given in light of specific individuals in Thessalonica who, possibly due to an over-realized eschatology (cf. 2 Thess 2:2), had decided that they no longer needed to labor in light of Christ’s coming.

Beyond these few passages noted above, the rest of Scripture, cannon-wide, does not place primary responsibility for poverty on the poor. And as Edwards reminds us, even when the poor are largely responsible for their condition, we are not relieved of a duty to care. In summary, the common evangelical fixation on the sins of the poor as justification for withholding care is inaccurate and unbiblical.

2. Poverty and Injustice

Scripture overwhelmingly attributes poverty to external factors, particularly oppression. Christopher J. H. Wright notes that oppression is “by far the major recognized cause of poverty” in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Old Testament “poverty is caused. And the primary cause is the exploitation of others by those whose own selfish interests are served by keeping others poor.”⁶⁴ Thomas D. Hanks surveys 164 biblical

⁶² The poor are also identified as people oppressed by those with superior economic and social power (Prov 13:23; 14:31; 22:16, 22; 28:3; 29:7; 30:14). For a good overview of the causes of poverty given in Proverbs, see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs,” *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 25-36.

⁶³ In several verses in Proverbs the writer indicates the superiority of being poor and having character with not being poor (or being wealthy) and lacking character (15:16; 19:1, 22; 28:6, 11). While the rich are not uniformly condemned in Proverbs, they are frequently indicted for their sin, particularly the sins of greed, pride, oppression, and lack of compassion for the needy (11:16, 28; 18:10-12, 23; 22:16; 28:6, 8, 11).

⁶⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) 170.

texts and ten Hebrew root words to support the same thesis: “in biblical theology oppression is viewed as the basic cause of poverty.”⁶⁵ The most common term for the poor in the OT (80 occurrences) is *ʾānî*, and it connotes economic oppression, unjust legal treatment, and victimization by means of deception.⁶⁶ BDB gives the following as the two most common meanings of *ʾānî*: *poor, needy; poor and weak*—oppressed by the rich and powerful.⁶⁷ Similarly, another common term for the poor in the OT is *dāl* (48 occurrences). This noun refers to those who are poor, weak, or inferior, and often refers to the “beleaguered peasant farmers.”⁶⁸ Waltke notes that the poor (*dāl*) because of their economic and social vulnerability “are a tempting target for the sharp practices and blatant injustices of their rich and powerful neighbors.”⁶⁹

In our fallen world injustice and resultant suffering exist in every culture and in every generation, including our own. The reality of universal human oppression and suffering is so great that Qoheleth suggests it would be better never to be born (Eccl 4:1-4). Scripture gives various ways in which those with greater social, physical, or economic power exploit those with less power, resulting in poverty. This includes stealing property and land (Job 24:1-4; Ezek 45:8-9; Micah 2:2), manipulating the legal system, particularly through bribery (Isa 1:23; 5:23; Js 2:6), oppressing workers and failing to pay them fairly or promptly (Deut 24:14-15; Isa 58:3; Jas 5:1-6), enjoying luxury and riches on the backs of the poor (Amos 4:1-2; 5:11), and employing deceptive business practices (Hosea 12:7-8; Amos 8:5-6). Some of the most graphic metaphors of the oppression of the poor describe the powerful grinding the faces of the poor into the dirt (Isa 3:13-15; Amos 2:6-7).

It is difficult for evangelicals, particularly white suburbanites, to realize how commonly the weak are exploited resulting in poverty, domestically and globally.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ *God So Loved the Third World: The Biblical Vocabulary of Oppression* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 38.

⁶⁶ J. David Pleins, “Poor, Poverty,” *ABD*, 408.

⁶⁷ BDB, s.v., *אָנִי*. Cf. Job 24:4; Isa 11:4; 29:19, 32:7; Amos 2:7; 8:4.

⁶⁸ Pleins, “Poor, Poverty,” *ABD*, 405.

⁶⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 230. For instance, cf. Prov 10:15; 22:22; Isa 10:2; Amos 5:11.

⁷⁰ There are countless treatments of injustice and resultant economic loss in North America. Some of these include: Harry Glasbeek, *Wealth by Stealth: Corporate Crime, Corporate Law, and the Perversion of Democracy* (Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 2002); Steven Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* (New York: Knopf, 2008); David Cay Johnson, *Perfectly Legal: The*

Evangelical discussion shows that the overriding justice focus is on the rights of Christians, especially religious liberties, with little or no attention given to injustices and resulting suffering that others experience and which require redress. For instance, in a forty page discussion of biblical principles concerning government, Wayne Grudem devotes a mere half a page to the responsibility of government to “execute justice and protect the weak.”⁷¹ Particularly in the west with our emphasis on human rights and our extensive legal code designed to protect the vulnerable, much of the injustice against the poor is indirect and less directly visible, but no less real and prevalent. For instance, the impact of child abuse and neglect on poverty is enormous, but not in an entirely direct fashion. Adolescents and adults who experienced abuse as children have greatly elevated rates of homelessness, drug abuse, promiscuity, out of wedlock births, and long-term mental health disorders, all of which are highly correlated with poverty.⁷² In light of the complexity of exploitation, we will explain a few specific categories of oppression against the poor.

1. Oppression by wealthy business owners

Obviously not all business owners are oppressive. Business activity carried out through capitalism have lifted millions out of poverty. Scripture gives various examples of the wealthy, including business owners, who are godly.⁷³ But we must not worship

Covert Campaign to Rig Our Tax System to Benefit the Super Rich—and Cheat Everybody Else (New York: Portfolio, 2003); *Inequality Matters: The Growing Economic Divide in America and Its Poisonous Consequences* (ed. James Dardner and David A. Smith; New York: The New Press, 2005); Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner, *Reckless Endangerment: How Outsized Ambition, Greed, and Corruption Led to Economic Armageddon* (New York: Times Books, 2011); Gary Rivlin, *Broke, USA: From Pawnshops to Poverty, Inc.—How the Working Poor Became Big Business* (New York: Harper Business, 2010); Matt Taibbi, *Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con That is Breaking America* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

⁷¹ Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible*, 77-115. In this same chapter Grudem devotes four and a half pages to the government’s responsibility to “safeguard individual liberty.” In personal correspondence regarding this paper, Grudem acknowledges that *some* poverty is caused by oppression and injustice.

⁷² Angela Browne, “Family Violence and Homelessness: The Relevance of Trauma Histories in the Lives of Homeless Women,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 63 (1993): 370-84; Nadine Rayburn, et al., “Trauma, Depression, Coping, and Mental Health Service Seeking Among Impoverished Women,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73 (2005): 667-77; Mary Jane Rotheram-Borus, Karen A Mahler, and Cheryl Koopman, “Sexual Abuse History and Associated Multiple Risk Behavior in Adolescent Runaways,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 66 (1996): 390-400; Cathy Spatz Widom, Naomi R. Marmorstein, and Helene Raskin White, “Childhood Victimization and Illicit Drug Use in Middle Adulthood,” *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 20 (2006): 394-403.

⁷³ Gen 13:2; 26:12-14; 1 Kgs 3:13; 2 Chr 17:5-6; Job 42:10; Ps 112:1-3; Matt 27:57-59; Acts 4:34; 16:14-15; 1 Cor 16:19.

capitalism (or any other economic system). Many evangelicals trust the rich but largely distrust the poor. Scripture takes the opposite approach to wealth and poverty.

Throughout Scripture we are told that wealth and the desire for it often create destructive greed (Jer 6:13; Luke 12:13-21), arrogance (Hos 12:8; Rev 3:17), callousness (Prov 18:23; Luke 16:14), and ruthlessness (Prov 11:16; Mic 6:12) which drive people away from God and from virtue (Ezek 28:1-5; Matt 19:21-22; 1 Tim 6:6-10). Scripture also repeatedly teaches that wealth is very often gained through oppressing the poor and the marginalized,⁷⁴ a point often minimized by evangelicals. Jesus himself had relatively little good to say about money and repeatedly warned against its danger. He identified the “deceitfulness of wealth” as that which chokes out the gospel (Matt 13:22). He warned against storing up material treasures on earth (Matt 5:19-20). He pronounced broad blessings on the poor and broad woes on the wealthy (Luke 6:20-25; cp. Jas 5:1-6). He said you cannot serve God and money (Matt 6:24). Jesus was pessimistic about the spirituality of the rich, saying it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25).⁷⁵

Exploitation of the poor and vulnerable can be seen in individual business owners and in whole industries. In terms of the former, a recent study of wage law violations (the largest such study conducted in the previous decade) is quite relevant. The researchers found that low wage workers in the US are routinely cheated out of their wages. A staggering 68% of the workers interviewed had experienced at least one pay-related violation in the previous work week. The typical worker had been cheated out of \$51 the previous week through wage violations, out of average weekly earnings of \$339, which amounts to a 15% loss in pay. Furthermore, 26% of the workers had been paid less than the minimum wage the week before being surveyed; 76% of those who had worked overtime the week before were not paid their proper overtime; only 8% of those who

⁷⁴ Ps 52:7; 37:14-16; 73:6-12; Prov 22:16; 28:8; Eccl 5:8-10; Isa 10:12-14; Jer 5:26-28; Hos 12:6-8; Amos 2:6-7; 8:4-6; Acts 16:16-19; Jas 2:5-7; 5:1-6.

⁷⁵ For an excellent practical overview of materialism, including in the church, see Rand Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (rev. ed.; Carol Stream, IL, Tyndale, 2003), 29-74.

suffered serious injuries on the job filed for compensation to pay for medical care and missed days at work stemming from those injuries.⁷⁶

Not only do individual business owners exploit the poor, but sometimes whole industries develop and thrive by preying on the economically vulnerable. Journalist Gary Rivlin has documented the development and extreme profitability of the “poverty industry”—businesses such as pawnshops, subprime lenders, and payday loan companies which reap enormous profits by exploiting the working poor.⁷⁷ For instance, “pay day” loan companies charge exorbitant fees (450% on average) for short term loans to the poor. A recent study found that a \$325 two week loan would typically carry a finance charge of \$52, yet the average borrower, being poor and economically desperate, cannot pay the loan off promptly and ends up paying approximately \$793 on a \$325 loan.⁷⁸ Amazingly, this study found a strong *positive* correlation between the geographic national density of payday lenders and the political clout of conservative Christians. In other words, the largest concentration of these predatory lenders is found in the very areas where the religious right has the greatest political clout.

2. Oppression and Injustice by other Nations

Sadly, the west enjoys high levels of medical care at the expense of the developing world, especially Africa. An article in the distinguished British medical journal *The Lancet* documented this problem and showed that high income nations (specifically Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia, the UK, the United Arab Emirates, and the US) have maintained their high physician to patient ratio by aggressively recruiting

⁷⁶ Annette Bernhardt, et al., “Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America’s Cities,” 2009. Available at: http://nelp.3cdn.net/1797b93dd1ccdf9e7d_sdm6bc50n.pdf.

⁷⁷ Gary Rivlin, *Broke, USA: From Pawnshops to Poverty, Inc.—How the Working Poor Became Big Business*.

⁷⁸ Christopher Lewis Peterson and Steven M. Graves, “Usury Law and the Christian Right: Faith Based Political Power and the Geography of the American Payday Loan Regulation,” *Catholic University Law Review* 57 (2008) 637-700. On the actual costs of payday loans see Uriah King, Leslie Parrish, and Ozlem Tanik, “Financial Quicksand: Payday Lending Sinks Borrowers in Debt with \$4.2 Billion in Predatory Fees Every Year,” Durham, NC: Center for Responsible Lending, 2006; available at: http://www.responsiblelending.org/pdfs/rr012exec-Financial_Quicksand-1106.pdf. On the systemic injustice of traditional banks and pay day loans toward the poor, see Steven M. Graves, “Landscapes of Predation, Landscapes of Neglect: A Location Analysis of Payday Lenders and Banks,” *The Professional Geographer* 55 (2004) 303-17.

doctors, nurses, and pharmacists from Africa.⁷⁹ Rich countries also save millions of dollars by hiring foreign health care workers. For instance, it is estimated that the UK saved \$130 million in training costs between 1998 and 2002 by recruiting Ghanaian doctors, while Ghana had spent \$70 million training health professionals who then left to work in Britain.⁸⁰ The discrepancies in medical care resources are staggering.

The US has 256 physicians per 100,000 people, whereas Uganda has just eight per 100,000 people, Rwanda just five, and Malawi a mere two. In other words, the US has 128 times more physicians per capita than does Malawi.⁸¹ The shortage of medical specialists in Africa is particularly severe. Recently, Rwanda had just one cardiologist for a country of over eight million (and he was a Kenyan in Rwanda on a two year contract). North Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has ten medical specialists for a population of five million. Most of the specialists have gone to rich nations. One in ten doctors practicing in the UK are from Africa. In the US one-third of practicing doctors were trained in medical schools outside the US; developing world countries supply 40 to 75% of these foreign-trained doctors.⁸² And the health care worker shortage in Africa is getting much worse. For instance, in 2000 roughly 500 nurses left Ghana which is twice the number of nurses that graduated from nursing school in Ghana that year. Experts estimated in 2009 that Africa had only 30% of the 1.16 million doctors, nurses and midwives it needed based on World Health Organization recommendations.⁸³ The problem of African health care workers being recruited to work in the west is so severe and egregious that the authors of the *The Lancet* article argues this should be considered a criminal act under international law.

3. Racial Discrimination and Ethnic Conflict

Racial and tribal conflict is as old as human history and is a very powerful factor in poverty. In some instances the discrimination and overt hostility is severe and clearly a

⁷⁹ Edward J. Mills, "Should Active Recruitment of Health Workers from Sub-Saharan Africa Be Viewed as a Crime?" *The Lancet* 371 (2008): 685 – 88.

⁸⁰ Lena Wen, "Where Are the Doctors?" *New York Times*, June 25, 2007.

⁸¹ "2007/2008 Commitment to Health: Resources, Access and Services," United Nations Human Development Reports; available at" <http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/58.html>; accessed 9/4/2008.

⁸² Wen, "Where Are the Doctors?"

⁸³ Sarah Arnquis, "800,000 More Workers Needed in Africa to Meet Health Goals by 2015," *New York Times*, August 11, 2009.

major factor in poverty. This is seen in the ethnic conflict in Sudan, Eastern Congo, etc. Discrimination through the caste system in India has kept millions locked into poverty. In many other instances race is strongly, undeniably correlated with poverty, but in a much more complex manner which must be carefully analyzed to assess the exact manner in which direct and indirect racial discrimination and injustice contribute to poverty. For instance, in the US, 26.5% of all single parent female headed households live in poverty, but 44% of all single parent black and Latino households live in poverty.⁸⁴ According to the 2010 Census Report 9.4% of Whites live in poverty, while over 25% of Black and Hispanics live in poverty.⁸⁵ Blacks and whites use illegal drugs at about the same rates, yet African Americans are ten times more likely to be imprisoned for drug offenses.⁸⁶ The typical black household earns only 60% of the earnings of white households and has a net worth of only 10% of white households.⁸⁷

4. Gender Injustice and Oppression

According to the United Nations, women comprise more than 70% of the world's poorest people.⁸⁸ There are many factors for this, including the fact that violence against women world-wide is one of the leading factors in female injury, death, and poor health world wide.⁸⁹ Furthermore, while women often do the vast bulk of domestic and agricultural work,⁹⁰ they often have limited legal ownership of the land and limited control or even say in how family wealth is used. For instance, in Brazil, in 2000, women owned 11% of the land and men 89%. In Mexico, in 2003, women owned 22% and men 78%. In Nicaragua, it was 16% and 81% (couples owned 4%), and, in Peru, 13% and 74% (couples owned 13%).⁹¹ Gender injustice in health care and education also has a

⁸⁴ Sider, *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 37.

⁸⁵ DeNavas-Walt et al., "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage 2009," 16.

⁸⁶ Michelle Alexander, "Cruel and Unequal," *Sojourners*, February 2011, 16-19.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Bread for the World Institute, "Agriculture in the Global Economy: Hunger Report 2003" (Washington, DC: Bread for the World Institute, 2003), 151.

⁸⁹ *WHO Violence against Women Information Pack*, 1997; available from www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/vaw/infopack.htm...

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹¹ Karen O. Mason and Helene M. Carlsson, "The Development Impact of Gender Equality in Land Rights:" in Philip Alston and Mary Robinson, *Human Rights in Development* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119.

great impact on elevated female poverty rates. Of the world's 781 illiterate adults, 64% are women. This is particularly tragic given the fact that, according to the World Bank "educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world."⁹² In the majority world girls are much more likely to be malnourished than boys and are less likely to receive health care than boys. For instance, in India girls are four times as likely as boys to suffer acute malnutrition, while boys are 40 times more likely to be taken to the hospital when they are ill.⁹³

Gender oppression and injustice is also very relevant to domestic poverty. For instance, A multi-site study conducted in Florida of the experience of violence among 800 homeless women revealed that almost one-quarter of the women indicated that violence was one of, if not the main reason, they were homeless. In fact, almost one-third of the sample of homeless women indicated they had left a childhood home due to violence.⁹⁴ Other studies of homeless women have found that up to fifty percent of the time domestic violence was a major factor in women becoming homeless.

Conclusion

We have sought to identify several common evangelical misconceptions regarding poverty and seen that these misunderstandings are common and serious. These misunderstandings have resulted in a scandalous failure to prioritize care for the poor. As a fellow evangelical, the goal of this essay is not to indict Christians but rather to empower them. Since poverty is such a deep-seated and wide-spread problem in our world, and God has blessed us with great material and spiritual resources, and he has a particular compassion for the poor and calls us to serve the them, then incredible opportunities lie before us. Ron Sider brilliantly articulates the strategic challenges and opportunities that confront us. After noting that recent research shows that many Christians are engaged with the poor, he states:

⁹² Mary Carmichael, "A Shot of Hope," *Newsweek*, October 1, 2007.

⁹³ Michael Todaro and Stephen C. Smith, *Economic Development* (8th ed.; Boston: Addison Wesley, 2003), 151, 231.

⁹⁴ Jana L. Jasinski et al., *The Experience of Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women: A Research Report* (2005), 2, 9-10. This report was submitted the National Institute of Justice and is available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/211976.pdf>.

Suffocating materialism and narcissistic individualism have wormed their way into so many Christian hearts and congregations. Fearfully, I wonder if most Christians may not sleep through one of the most amazing opportunities in our history. I am convinced that in the next ten years, Christians in the United States have a historic opportunity unparalleled in decades, perhaps in a century. Dismayed by repeated failures to reduce poverty, secular policy elites are astonishingly open to faith-based proposals and contributions.

[W]e—at least politically conservative Christians—asked government to cut programs for the poor with the promise that churches could do it better. It is now time to fulfill the promise and demonstrate the claim... If much hard work, prayer, and money make good on that claim in the next decade, it will be a powerful witness for the gospel. Not only will many broken people twisted and demoralized by poverty be transformed by faith in Christ, but our secular intellectual community will take notice... Think about the impact if several million Christians came to care as much about the poor as the Bible says God does.⁹⁵

By God's grace, may we shed our misconceptions of poverty and seize this historic opportunity!

⁹⁵ Ron Sider, *Just Generosity*, 286, 287, 288.