



Can we make a difference?

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Can we make a difference? If I had a pound for every time I have heard someone tell us that we can make a difference I think I could personally end world poverty. I have a copy of a cartoon in which someone says, 'What difference can one person make?' In the next frame two or three more speech bubbles have appeared asking the same question. In the final frame there are a plethora of similar speech bubbles which have sprung up across the world. The implication is clear: together we *can* make a difference. And I agree. But I want to be cautious.

I believe that by the grace of God (and only by the grace of God) I can make a difference in the lives of people I know. I believe my church can make a difference in the life of the community in which it is situated. I believe that the concerted effort of Christians can impact political and business decisions. I was part of the Jubilee 2000 campaign in its earliest days. At that point, and I hope they will forgive me for saying this, it consisted of a bunch of eccentrics dreaming impossible dreams. Four years later I shed a few tears when I was part of 50,000 people on a sunny day in London sending a petition with 20 million signatures to world leaders who eventually agreed to cancel \$100 billion of Third World debt.¹ But still I am more cautious about what all this might add up to. For many the rhetoric is that of eradicating poverty. More than one organization has that as a stated goal. But we will not eradicate poverty from history. History is in a state of constant flux. Sometimes we see increased social justice and moral advance – often through the actions of God's people. But in other places we see moral decline and growing inequality. The international community has agreed a series of 'millennium development goals', the headline target of which is to halve the number of people in extreme poverty by 2015. These targets have been enthusiastically endorsed by the British Government and promoted by development agencies. And if they galvanize action for the poor then they will have proved their worth. Whether they are realistic time will tell, but I confess to be sceptical.

But is it contradictory to argue for social involvement while being sceptical about eradicating poverty? It often seems axiomatic among advocates of social involvement that we should talk up what can be achieved, holding out to people the hope of ending world poverty. Duncan Forrester speaks of the need for 're-igniting utopian hopes as the engine of social transformation'.² The hope of significant change, it seems, is needed to galvanize action. How should our expectations of social change – or lack of social change – affect our commitment as Christians to getting involved?

For many it is simply a question of getting our approach right. Each new fad in the development world is lauded as the approach that will enable us to make major strides forward. David Korten, in his influential book, *Getting to the 21st Century*,³ identifies the

¹ See Marlene Barrett (ed.), *The World Will Never Be The Same Again* (Jubilee 2000 Coalition, 2000) and Ann Pettifor, 'Case Study: Campaigning for Macro-Policy Change: Jubilee 2000', *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor*, ed. Tim Chester (Paternoster, 2002), pp. 217-227.

² Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (SCM, 2001), p. 5.

³ David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (Kumarian Press, 1990).

shifting approaches of voluntary organizations. The first generation, he claims, focused on relief and welfare – directly delivering services through humanitarian assistance. While such assistance continues to have a place in emergency situations and often receives significant public support, development agencies began to recognize that it offered only temporary alleviation. The second generation focused on small-scale, self-reliant local development. They began to work in partnership with communities to facilitate self-help projects. The focus was small and grassroots, in contrast to the large-scale state projects that often produced expensive white elephants bringing little benefit to the poorest communities. Some development agencies were founded to pursue these second generation strategies, but many others moved into them out of a disquiet with their involvement in welfare approaches. The third generation approach grew out of the frustration of only impacting a few communities. Agencies began to get involved in advocacy, trying to influence unjust and inequitable policies and practices. Korten highlights the way these approaches co-exist – often in significant tension – within development agencies. Korten himself advocates a fourth approach that shifts the focus away from Western development agencies towards indigenous civil society – organizations owned and run by local people. He sees hope in what he calls a ‘people’s movement’ for social change.

Development is a discipline with a strong sense of moral purpose and each new approach is promoted as *the* way forward that will eradicate poverty. The assumption is that with this new stage in our thinking we have arrived: we have discovered the secret to eradicating poverty. Advocacy, for example, is promoted on the basis that by tackling the underlying causes of poverty – the structures and practices that perpetuate injustice – we will make a deep and lasting impact. We will achieve at last what we have failed to achieve through other approaches. But Korten warns that each policy advance achieved through advocacy must be ‘replicated hundreds of thousands, even millions, of times, to achieve the needed transformation of the institutions of global society’ and then ‘each individual step forward transforming a policy or institution is subject to reversal by the still larger forces generated by backward looking national and international institutions’.⁴ Confidence in the ability of advocacy to change the world is an unrealistic romantic hope. The same, however, could be said of Korten’s confidence in people movements. Dewi Hughes reminds us that: ‘despite all the theorizing and the actions that have flowed from it, we have to face up to the fact that the problem of poverty is as great as ever ... Development may have succeeded here and there, and any success must not be despised, but in global terms all the talking and working in the last 50 years has not solved the problem.’⁵

The Bible has a much more realistic view of sin. The Bible recognizes that sin is a universal trait of humanity – both rich and poor. It should not surprise Christians when the exploited become the exploiters. The exploited may have a morally superior case in a particular situation, but that does not mean they are morally superior beings. And sin is not only universal, it is also deep. It penetrates our cultures and societies, affecting our social, economic and political systems. This is what the Bible calls ‘worldliness’. The term ‘world’ is used in the Bible for creation as an object of God’s love (John 3:16), but it is also used of human society and culture in opposition to God’s will (1 John 2:15–17). Satan tempts individuals into sin and error, but the lies of Satan also affect whole cultures and, as a result, social structures. Idolatry is as much a social phenomenon as an individual act. It is communal idolatries that perpetuate poverty. As Thomas Cullinan says, ‘if we idolize wealth then we create poverty; if we idolize success then we create the inadequate; if we idolize power we create powerlessness.’⁶

⁴ David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century*, p. 123.

⁵ Dewi Hughes, *God of the Poor*, p. 14.

⁶ Source unknown.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, distinguished between 'theologies of glory', which seek the revelation of God in visible displays of divine power and glory, and a 'theology of the cross', which sees the ultimate revelation of God in the cross. By faith the Christian sees in the cross power in weakness, victory in failure and glory in shame. In the same way we need to distinguish between 'eschatologies of glory' and an 'eschatology of the cross'. Eschatologies of glory expect the glory that belongs to the future in the present. They expect to move beyond the sacrifice, suffering and submission of the cross to perfection, glory and triumph. They want power, status and honour in the present. An eschatology of the cross, in contrast, recognizes that the kingdom of God is hidden now and that its glory lies in the future. The eschatology of the cross recognizes there is in the experience of the believer a pattern of suffering followed by glory that corresponds to the pattern of the cross and resurrection. It recognizes that life in the present is marked by the cross. The cross was not only the supreme expression of divine love, it was also the supreme expression of human evil. At the cross we discover the true depth of human sin. The resurrection of the crucified One is the promise and the beginning of the defeat of sin and the renewal of the earth. But history still bears the mark of the cross. The world is not yet redeemed. The glory and power of the coming kingdom are present in history, but in a hidden form as shame and weakness of the gospel community. The redemption of the world as a whole is a future reality and so no part of the political spectrum can offer utopia prior to the return of Christ. As such the cross judges any claim to the establishment of that which will rightly happen only after the return of Christ.

Melba Maggay was in the forefront of evangelical involvement in the 'people power' revolution that brought down the unjust Marcos regime in the Philippines. This people's revolution is often held up as a testament of what can be achieved through social action, but Maggay writes movingly of its disappointments. "People power", she says, 'deteriorated into distorted exercises of misguided political will by a loyal fringe screaming in the streets or a dangerously armed cadre of vigilantes let loose in the name of faith and freedom to track down communists. In politics, as in much of life, there is this tragic tendency to move towards a dark underside ... Scripture has an ancient name for this: sin.'⁷ And so Maggay talks about *the practice of radical pessimism*: 'Despair is the property of those who expect much, and have not yet learned the modulating pragmatism of a radical pessimism that rejoices at simply having endured while haunted by a constant sense of the possibility of failure.'⁸

The failure to see the cross as the mark of human history and Christian discipleship is the main weakness of liberation theology. Liberation theology came to prominence in the 1970s. It was initially a Latin American phenomenon, but has spread elsewhere. The person who first brought it to wider attention was Gustavo Gutierrez. Gutierrez used Marxist analysis to argue that poverty does not arise from a lack of development or education, but rather is the result of structural injustice. The problem is not that poorer countries are under-developed, but lies in their unjust dependency on the powerful countries of the West. Poverty is addressed not through occasional and paternalistic charity, but through radical social change. A key theme for liberation theology is the exodus from Egypt, which is seen as a paradigm for political liberation. There is much in liberation theology that is suggestive and positive. But the fundamental problem with it is its eschatology – it expects too much now and too little for the future. Its eschatology is over-realized. It looks for the coming of the kingdom through revolution or conscientization. It must contend with the Bible's witness to a future beyond history: the return of Christ and the new creation. The kingdom of God is present in grace through the proclamation of the gospel and in the lives of cross-centred disciples. But the coming of the kingdom in power belongs to the future.

⁷ Melba Maggay, *Transforming Society* (Regnum, 1994), p. 96.

⁸ Melba Maggay, *Transforming Society*, p. 99.

The critique offered by an eschatology of the cross can also be applied at the other end of the political spectrum to prosperity teaching. Prosperity teaching says that Christians can and should expect to be healthy and wealthy in this life. It is a common and growing phenomena across the world with an obvious attraction in communities in which daily life is a struggle. God wills this for his people, people are promised, if only we will exercise the faith to claim it. But again such thinking fails to recognize the centrality of the cross in Christian discipleship and a Christian view of life in history. Perhaps the most neglected promise of Jesus is: 'In this world you will have trouble' (John 16:33).

In the New Testament hope is often accompanied by patience and long-suffering – themes that feature weakly in liberation theology and prosperity teaching. In his letter, James writes to churches facing economic hardship. The recipients are facing 'trials of many kinds' (Jas. 1:2, 12). Though these trials seem to have taken different forms, at root they were economic. Acts 11:27–30 describes a famine that hit Palestine and which prompted the first gift from Gentile to Jewish believers. Many in the congregations would have been subsistence farmers or agricultural labourers facing hardship and exploitation as the value of their labour fell. Evidence for this is found within the letter itself. James says the rich in society are exploiting the poor within the congregation (Jas. 2:6). He talks about 'the brother in humble circumstances' (Jas. 1:9), that is, someone who is poor and marginalized in society. His warning against favouritism makes sense given how easy it would have been to treat a rich visitor with special honour as a potential benefactor (Jas. 2:1–5). When James links faith and deeds, the example he gives matches the situation in the congregation: a wealthy Christian who mouths empty words of comfort to a needy brother or sister without doing anything to help them (Jas. 2:15–17). In Jas. 5:1–6, James addresses the rich oppressors outside the church. But he wants to be overheard by those within the church. He wants those who emulate the rich to listen in – they are his real audience. 'You aspire to their wealth,' he says in effect, 'but do not you realize their wealth has a price tag on it. The cost is ruined lives – maybe even the lives of your brothers and sisters in the church. And the cry of the oppressed has reached the ears of God.' 'Don't you realize,' he is saying, 'what God has in store for the rich – their wealth will rot and corrode, and they will be condemned. How can you aspire to be like these people?'

The community is not to aspire to be like the rich landowners who face Gods judgment (Jas. 5:1–6). Instead they are to 'be patient ... until the Lords coming' (Jas. 5:7). The message to this community facing economic oppression is to be patient; to wait for the Lord's coming. Hope in the New Testament is certain hope that looks beyond history to the coming of a new creation. We should not be afraid of the accusation that this is an 'other worldly' eschatology. Biblical hope does not look to another world, but to the future renewal of this world. Nevertheless, it is a *future* renewal. Nor should we be afraid of declaring to the poor and oppressed the coming of a kingdom of justice and plenty. If this is 'pie in the sky' then so be it – we must not minimize the extent to which 'pie in the sky' is good news. It is worse to offer people hope for the imminent future that cannot be sustained in the reality of a world marred by sin.⁹ Hope in the New Testament is directed beyond history to the return of Christ and new creation. It is ultimate not proximate. We must contend with the fact that most of the poor will remain in poverty throughout their lives. The hope of the gospel is the only hope we can offer them that will survive the vagaries of history.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians: 'We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thess. 1:3). The work and labour of the Thessalonians are the result not of hope, but of faith and love. But this does not mean hope is unimportant. Paul

⁹ See Stephen Williams, 'On Giving Hope in a Suffering World: Response to Moltmann', *Issues in Faith and History*, ed. Nigel Cameron (Rutherford House, 1989), pp. 3-19.

thanks God for the endurance of the Thessalonians that is inspired by hope in Christ (see also Col. 1:5). That which is produced by faith and prompted by love is sustained by hope. This hope is not hope for change in this life. It is not hope that our work and labour will bring about transformations in history. Paul goes on to define Christians as those who have 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath' (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

In Mark 14:7 Jesus says: 'the poor you will always have with you' (see also Matt. 26:11 and John 12:8). Jesus is eating at the home of Simon the Leper when a woman pours an expensive flask of perfume over his head. Some of those attending are indignant at what they see as a waste of money. They rebuke her, saying 'it could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor' (Mark 14:5). But Jesus defends her:

Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. (Mark 14:6–9)

Jesus is not saying there are more important things to spend our money on than the poor. Nor is he suggesting that the continuing presence of the poor makes care for them pointless. He commends care for the poor as a normal priority – something we can do at 'any time you want'. Indeed John Owen, the great Puritan theologian, made this verse the foundation for the role of deacons whom he saw as those responsible for social involvement.¹⁰ Instead Jesus' point is to highlight the extraordinary nature of the moment. He is among them, but is about to leave. He wants to direct their attention to his imminent death. Her act is a preparation for his burial since the normal process of anointing the dead will be interrupted in the case of Jesus by his resurrection (Mark 16:1–3).

Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 15. Moses is reiterating the law to the people of Israel as they stand on the verge of the promised land. He warns them not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards the poor, but to be open-handed (Deut. 15:7–8). He reminds them to cancel debts and release slaves every seven years. Having experienced liberation from slavery in Exodus, they are to be a liberated and liberating society (Deut. 15:15). In this context he promises: 'There should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today' (15:4–5). When God's people live under God's rule there will be no poor among them. God's rule is a liberating rule, a rule of justice and blessing. It is a rule of peace and prosperity. Pharaoh's rule was harsh and cruel, but the ten commandments are, as Chris Wright puts it, like 'a bill of rights' ensuring a society of justice and equity.¹¹ The jubilee legislation of Deuteronomy 15 is a central dimension of that social vision.

But the book of Deuteronomy is also painfully realistic. It reflects on the faithlessness of the generation of Israelites in the wilderness, seeing it not as an aberration, but as typical (Deut. 1:26–46; 6:16; 8:1–20). Moses goes on to predict the rebellion of future generations (Deut. 31:14–29). This threat of rebellion is a brooding presence in the book, underlying its repeated call to remember both what God has done in salvation and what the people had done in

¹⁰ John Owen, *True Nature of a Gospel Church in The Works of John Owen* (Banner of Truth, 1968), Volume 16, pp. 143, 146.

¹¹ Chris Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (IVP, 1983), p. 143.

rebellion. And so while Deuteronomy 15 promises that there will be no poor among God's people if they live under God's rule, it is also realistic enough to say: 'There will always be poor people in the land' (Deut. 15:11). In other words, only a transformation of the rebellious heart of humanity will bring an end to poverty. Only with the re-establishment of God's rule over the earth at the return of Christ will there be justice and equity. In the meantime there will always be poor people on the earth. But far from being a reason for inaction, the *continuing* presence of the poor is the basis for the *continuing* command to be open-handed. Deuteronomy 15:11 continues: 'There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land.'

Only in the eschatological future will poverty be eradicated. But even now within history this future can be glimpsed. And it is glimpsed among those people whose rebellious hearts are being transformed by the grace of the gospel. It is glimpsed in the community in which the rule of God has begun to take shape. Luke alludes to Deuteronomy 15 in his description of the first Christian community:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had ... There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32–34; see also Acts 2:44–45).

We cannot eradicate poverty within history. Many of our achievements are reversed and undone. But still we are commanded to care for the poor. We help the poor not because we will move humanity one step closer to a poverty-free utopia. We help the poor because they are people whom we should love. And meanwhile the jubilee community of Jesus witnesses to the coming reign of God. Our social and economic relationships are the place on earth where God's future can be seen. We are the light of the world, a city on a hill (Matt. 5:14). Melba Maggay says:

So this we believe: a kingdom of justice and righteousness has begun, and it is making its way into people's lives and denting structures that continue to oppress and dehumanize. Such work is seldom done in the corridors of power nor in the halls of the great. Often it is in the many small acts of integrity and goodness that many faceless men and women do every day, believing that behind the face of an evil that is strong in an unseen good that is stronger, even when it wears the face of weakness. It is this daily practice of hope which keeps most of us going, keeping the monsters at bay as humbly and powerfully we are caught up in the kingdom fire and the stubborn grace that shines at the heart of existence.¹²

We cannot eradicate poverty within history. Our achievements may be reversed and undone. But we still have an obligation to care of the poor as we reflect the character of God, live under the reign of God and respond to the grace of God. Proclamation will be central to Christian involvement with the poor because the greatest need of the poor – along with all people – is to be reconciled with God through the gospel. But the message we proclaim is best understood in the context of loving actions and loving community.

¹² Melba Maggay, *Transforming Society*, p. 100.

We may see reform in society; we may not. The important thing is for the church to witness to the coming liberation of God. We are called to be the jubilee community in which the poor are welcomed, included and strengthened. We are the place on earth where God's future can be seen.

About the Author

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