

For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty

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It is quite rare that a publication announcement elicits a visceral response in me, but the announcement of *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty* did just that. When I learned of its publication, I was momentarily dumbfounded. My reaction was triggered by a question, deeply seeded in my psyche, which upon articulating, became quite vexing. Why are Christians, in the 21st century, defining “A Biblical Answer to Poverty”? Followers of Christ have been actively helping the poor for thousands of years. Is it possible that none of the saints of old took a moment to pen their thoughts on the matter? Did they not think it important to link the inspired word of God to the issue of poverty? Obviously the answer to both these questions is “yes,” so why then was this book written?

I quickly learned that questions similar to my own were on the minds of the contributors to this work. AEI President Arthur C. Brooks eloquently presents the motivation for the work in the introduction. The particulars of poverty are always evolving; the dynamic nature of the issue requires that each generation tackle it anew. Though we confront poverty from multiple perspectives—secular, religious, academic, practitioner, and so on—each perspective must be in conversation with the others. This conversation should focus on both the moral and practical. We are obligated to understand why we should work to alleviate poverty and what tools are most effective to this end.

For the Least of These is comprised of three distinct, but related, sections; “Part 1: A Biblical Perspective on the Poor,” “Part 2: Markets and the Poor,” and “Part 3: Poverty Alleviation in Practice.” Each part in the work contains stand-alone chapters, written by different authors, addressing an overarching theme in a unique way. Though the book primarily focuses on poverty in the United States and does not give much attention to the role of the foreigner in fighting poverty, many of the themes explored are universal. One of the biggest strengths of the volume is the diverse expertise and perspectives of the authors. The authors are a mix of well-known theologians, economists, practitioners, and prominent voices in the Christian community.

Part 1 is a sweeping summary of what the Bible says about poverty.

Chapters in this section consider the Bible as a complete work, the Old and New Testaments individually, and specific sections from the Bible. Attention is also given to more narrow topics such as redistribution of wealth and historical examples of evangelicals working in poverty alleviation. Lindsley's chapter on the Jubilee and redistribution in the book of Acts is a must-read for those seeking a better understanding of these fascinating episodes. Each chapter is rife with verses; the authors are clearly striving to articulate their analysis and conclusions with the very words of the Bible.

The primary theme of Part 1 is that Christians are obligated to care for the poor in a way that treats them with dignity, has space for personal responsibility, and is effective. Poverty alleviation is presented as a partnership. The wealthy and elite have a responsibility to ensure that the less fortunate have the opportunity to improve their lot. The less fortunate have the responsibility to act upon such opportunities. Opportunity takes on different forms depending on context. The needs of the elderly widow are not the same as the needs of the able-bodied unemployed. The response of the Christian should be sensitive to this reality.

A second theme in this section is the criticism of biblically-based arguments defending the welfare state. The most penetrating leverage the "voluntary principle" or "moral proximity." Put succinctly, the voluntary principle states that efforts to help the poor should not be coerced; actions that are forced, regardless of outcome, are not virtuous. Proponents of moral proximity assert that we have greater responsibility to those nearest to us. In the context of poverty alleviation, the voluntary principle is most easily seen in opposition to income redistribution, while moral proximity is seen to challenge the giving of foreign aid. Chapter 1 by Sunshine and Chapter 5 by Turnbull formally discuss these principles but their influence is evident in other chapters.

A significant challenge faced by anyone seeking to formulate what the Bible may tell us about the modern welfare state are the dramatic political, economic, and cultural differences between the ancient and modern world. As a result, it is challenging to use the Bible to argue for, or against, the modern welfare state. While many of the criticisms of the welfare state in Part 1 are warranted and adequately supported, some are not. For example, Sunshine claims that "Another problem that flows from the increased dependency that the welfare state has produced is increased corruption in government" (p. 16). Kaiser writes, "In all economies where such forceful redistribution of wealth has occurred, the standard of living for all has dropped" (p. 57). The location of these passages in the text does not

provide adequate support for them. Taken at face value, they are simply not accurate depictions of modern nations with substantial welfare states.

When chapters in Part 1 focus on criticizing the welfare state, and Christian advocates of it, the book suffers. Part 1 is strongest when a Biblical conception of poverty is being articulated. While the topics of poverty alleviation and the welfare state are clearly related, the complexity of the modern welfare state necessitates adequate space to address it sufficiently.

In Part 2, “Markets and the Poor,” the role of markets in poverty alleviation is presented. Most economists will be more familiar with the ideas and arguments in this section than the previous. One of the most striking features of Part 2 is its eloquence. The authors are to be praised for successfully presenting complex ideas in an accessible manner. Many of the examples and insights from this section will be used to initiate discussions and bolster lectures in my own courses.

A second commendable feature of this section is the authors’ use of moral, rather than efficiency-based, arguments for markets. Reading this section was refreshing because of the absence of thinly veiled references to Pareto optimality, efficiency, or Utilitarianism. More and more I wonder whether this set of justifications for competitive markets is meaningful to non-economists. The moral case presented in Part 2 is bolstered by compelling evidence on the effectiveness of markets in alleviating poverty.

Most of the chapters in this section address fundamental economic concepts such as property rights, the role of price as a signal, and the benefits of competitive markets. As the reader begins to understand these ideas and their profound importance, a foundation for thinking about the linkages between the political and economic is created. This foundation allows the reader to understand more complex ideas considered in the section such as the dangers of crony capitalism, Schumpeter’s creative destruction, and the consequences of non-competitive markets.

Chapter 8 by Bradley is unique in Part 2. Rather than discuss first economic principles the chapter focuses exclusively on the causes and measurement of income inequality. Given the increasing attention paid to income inequality, this chapter is an invaluable starting point for those interested in this issue.

When I first picked up *For the Least of These* I was particularly eager to read Part 3, “Poverty Alleviation in Practice.” Too often economics is mired in abstract theory. Hearing from those outside of academia can be a refreshing break from abstraction. Unfortunately, this section falls short of the mark. It is not that the authors lack meaningful insights; rather,

chapters 10 and 11 are out of place. These chapters are primarily about American political perspectives on poverty alleviation prior to the modern welfare state. These chapters are quite informative but do not give enough attention to the practice of poverty alleviation to be housed in a section labeled as such. Chapter 12 by Greer is true to the section's title. It is also one of the few in the work which explicitly addresses poverty outside of the United States. Greer discusses the benefits of job creation to the individual, as well as to the economy as a whole. In doing so there is a significant amount of practical advice for individuals and churches wishing to leverage markets in their efforts to help the poor. Greer offers a compelling reminder of the importance of work in poverty alleviation.

For the Least of These fills an important niche in the Christian economist's tool kit. The book, or selected chapters, could be used in many settings: as a supplemental text, the focal point of an extra-curricular discussion group, or even a resource to engage with one's church on the issue of poverty. The book is accessible to both economists and non-economists. Those looking for a concise, thorough evaluation of what the Bible says about poverty would be well served by reading Part 1 in its entirety. Part 2 can be used to start a conversation about markets from an explicitly Christian perspective. If used in a course it would be most useful at the lower-division level. Part 3 outlines early American thoughts on the welfare state and the importance of jobs in poverty alleviation.

An invaluable outcome of reading *For the Least of These* are the questions it forces the reader to ponder. The reader is brought into a conversation of extreme importance and complexity. My mind kept wrestling with the relationship between the voluntary principle, the welfare state, and democracy. How do we think about policies that may not be our personal choosing but are an outcome of systems in place? How does one reconcile the freedom and coercion inherent in democratic governance? The idea of moral proximity also grabbed my attention. Is it absolute? Am I "wrong" if I pursue the needs of those overseas before my literal neighbor? Does the degree of need matter? In our age, when domestic poverty is primarily (though not completely) relative, and poverty abroad is absolute, adhering to moral proximity introduces a profound tension.

For the Least of These is a powerful work. It is a compelling reminder that God is the source of ultimate truth and wisdom. In our efforts to model Christ's love it never hurts to center ourselves on God's word. From that foundation we can make sense of the world and improve upon our efforts to care for the least of these. ■