

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 11

Volume 11 • Number 3 • July 1987

**Evangelical
Review of
Theology** p. 195

[[Matt. 5:3-10](#)].

God identifies himself with the poor to such an extent that their rights become the rights of God himself: 'he who oppresses a poor [p. 253](#) man insults his Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honours him' ([Prov. 14:31](#)); 'he who mocks the poor insults his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished' ([Prov. 17:5](#)).

It is clear that these many passages of the Bible in favour of the poor are in serious danger of being subjected to another kind of spiritualization: that of calling upon the poor to be satisfied with their state, not of poverty as such, but of privilege in God's sight. This would be disastrous because then even the rich would feel tempted to experience certain wants in order that they too might be God's favourites. Then the situation of injustice that God condemns would be alleviated in the eyes of the world.

We must always keep in mind, therefore, that poverty is an unworthy state that must be changed. I repeat: poverty is not a virtue but an evil that reflects the socioeconomic conditions of inequality in which people live. Poverty is a challenge to God the Creator; because of the insufferable conditions under which the poor live, God is obliged to fight at their side.

In Latin America the poor are blessed, but the reason is not that they have resigned themselves to poverty but, on the contrary, that they cry out and struggle and have their mouths shut for them on the grounds that 'they are rebels and have recourse to violence'. They are blessed, but not because they voluntarily seek to be poor, for it is the mode of production forced upon Latin America that leads them to penury. They are blessed, but not because they have scorned riches; on the contrary, it is they themselves who have been scorned by those who monopolize the world's riches.

The poor in Latin America are blessed because the reign of God is at hand and because the eschatological promise of justice is drawing ever nearer to fulfillment and, with it, the end of poverty.

Elsa Tamez is a professor of Biblical Studies at the Seminario Biblico Latinoamericano in San Jose, Costa Rica. [p. 254](#)

Poverty is Powerlessness

Chandrakant Shourie

Reprinted from The TRACI Journal, 30 December 1985, with permission

This article specially pertains to the Indian context. Doing theology is a risky business. Involvement in the context can alter one's theology with far reaching effects as evidenced by the present effort. Struggling against the injustice done to the farmers by the allied businessmen and quasi-government officials, Shourie's theologizing rapidly turns to an action programme, perhaps inevitably so. (The following is only an abstract of the theologization process and not of the action). Whatever one might say concerning the outcome of such an effort, the burning relevancy of the following pages cannot be denied.

Editor

Contact with poverty is a devastating experience. The sight of hunger, of disease, of the miserable existence of fellow humans scars our sensibilities and sends our responses shuddering through a spectrum of emotions. We are often too shattered to make the concerted effort of concentrating our vision amidst the kaleidoscopic expressions of poverty.

The State sweats after health and education programmes, labour intensive industry, intermediate technology, loans, and subsidies—worthwhile efforts in their own place—but it has neither solved the problems of poverty nor alleviated the suffering of the poor. After almost four decades since Indian independence, poverty, like the proverbial camel, has entered our tent. The villager gets poorer as our nation gets richer. His income, which has been static for three decades, is shivering uncontrollably now.

And we, too, are mistaken. We do not realize that worthy sentiments need tough, disciplined commitment to precipitate concern into directed action. We waste our vital energy, concern and care through our naive and simplistic outlook. We allow ourselves to be misguided in actualizing our convictions into tangible, concrete realities.

The issue is no longer health or education or employment or resources or skills or technology. The issue is no longer escalating inflation, flawed policy or rampant corruption, harsh and painful though they may be. Is the physician's anaesthetic the patient's panacea? No more are the problems the effects of poverty itself. We [p. 255](#) have misconstrued matters, focussed on the fruits and ended up wide off the mark.

The essential force has to be applied elsewhere, for the causes are ancient, the roots deep ([Matthew 7:17-18, 20](#)):¹ Poverty is powerlessness.

HUMAN NATURE AND THE CONCEPT OF POWER

This leads us to the following definition of power: *Power is the ability to control various factors in order to perpetuate selfish gain over and above the legitimate interests of others.* The mechanisms of this control are coercion, subversion, exploitation, manipulation and the exchanging of mutual conveniences.

What activates these control mechanisms? What generates such power? Position and authority; control over financial resources; connections with those in power; the ability and potential to use force; educational status. A combination of some or all of these factors activates control. Poverty in its various forms, the prevalent ethos of corruption, and an unjust and diseased socio-economic order are all fruits of this tree. They are born of the same root—a distorted focus on self—variously expressed as selfishness, greed, self-glorification.

The poor also subscribe to the dynamics of this power. Our farmer will willingly bribe and pull strings—isn't that how his son can get a job? Alas, perforce of poverty, he is left cursing: 'If I had Rs. 3,000 to pay, I would have got the job!'. This is common knowledge—that's how the postmaster, the school-teacher, the peon, and others, have got there anyway. They had the money. Since the poor do not have the resources which generate this power, they believe they are powerless. Thus they become powerless. Why do they believe this? They see it operating in society; they board a bus, and people 'salaam' the powerful Thakur or the politician, make way for him, and push the villager aside, with abuses.

An influential man goes to court and comes away winning the case notwithstanding his guilt. A poor man has the file thrown at his face; his land will not be registered because

¹ Biblical references taken from the Amplified Bible.

he cannot afford twenty rupees for the file clerk! Seeing is believing. Effectiveness is the gospel.

The consequences of such beliefs are essentially destructive, fanning social tensions, setting into motion a reaction and retaliation syndrome, creating interpersonal backlash, resentment, mistrust, instability, callousness, cruelty, violence, in particular: [p. 256](#)

The powerful consume the powerless

Society automatically fosters keen disparity when power becomes the ability to control in order to perpetuate selfish gain. It determines the direction of aspirations for all. Naturally, legitimate interests, by and large, are denied. As the process moves to its logical climax, increasing concentration and centralization of resources will split society into irreparable fragments. With such beliefs, too, ironically, there is no place for the poor. And the poor are equally responsible, for their very acceptance of these beliefs brought them, in the first place, into existence.

The poor lose self-confidence

Once the poor become the poor, they become powerless. They cannot change or oppose what they see as wrong and unjust because they believe in the same sources of power, they become doubly powerless. Neither do they have the resources they think they need. They are impotent. They have no self-worth. They have no self-confidence.

People lose hope and faith

This loss of self-confidence grows into a loss of hope and faith—loss of hope for a better tomorrow, loss of faith in themselves and in the values of truth and justice on which a better tomorrow may be built. Any leader who claims to improve their lot is irrelevant and destructive because he lives not for them but for himself alone.

The hands of control are strengthened

Once the poor lose their faith, hope and self-confidence, they become truly powerless. They have lost the will to oppose. They are bound, easily controlled. The powerful acquire even more power because this lack of opposition makes gluttony and the hoarding of resources child's play.

The socio-economic order is diseased

The powerful do not aim for justice, honesty, integrity and compassion because they do not need to. What is more profitable is a race for power. What brings success is greed, envy, jealousy, selfish ambition. Dispensing responsibility becomes stupidity. A strong sense of duty, and honest work ethics, rapidly vanish. Power and profit are paramount. They bring the good life. Bribery, corruption and irresponsibility become the order of the day. [p. 257](#)

This has been happening in Nagod, a village in Central India:

In the block office, annual reports have not been prepared for the last 5 years. Officials require bribes to sanction legitimate loans, move a file or put their signature on a routine document. A vast army of petty officials and clerks never do an honest day's work. Parents of undeserving candidates bribe teachers to push their wards up the classes. Nutriment being provided by Government for use of Anganwadi infants are issued and, worse still, stolen.

THE NATURE OF POWER AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

What would Jesus do? Let us have a brief look at the first recorded temptations of Jesus, his first public ministerial declaration, his death and resurrection, and his call to repentance.

The definition (Luke 4:1–13)

This starter, the wrestling with Satan of our Lord, is illuminating. We see the monarch of this world, one who controls all the kingdoms in their splendour to such a degree that they are his to give away. We also see Jesus, man, the son of a poor carpenter, hungry, thirsty.

The monarch is the epitome of the powers of this world. He has at his command all the resources which generate the power of human systems. Jesus has none of this power.

However, Jesus introduces a New Order. God is its definition. He demonstrates that this monarch has no power over Him. Satan fails to control Jesus and, because he cannot accept open defeat, withdraws from the battleground. The classic encounter reveals the divinity of Jesus, power, the dynamics of which possessed priorities. So rearranged they left the ball bouncing in Satan's court.

The poor need exactly this. The antidote to poverty is power. And it is when we come to the nature of this power that we arrive at the crucial factor. A mere reshuffling of the resources does not solve anything at all, creating rather only a new population of the poor. We need to convert (Latin=turn together) to another, totally different source of power: the power which Jesus proclaimed.

The application (Luke 4:16–20)

Jesus' ministry can be summarized in the words of verses [18](#) and [19](#). The poor are the 'captives', the 'blind', the 'oppressed'. The blindness of the poor to the nature and consequences of the power of this world [p. 258](#) stems from their acceptance of its dynamics; and this is the captivity of the poor—handing over the control of themselves and their resources to others. The vicious cycle is on. Blindness strikes. They know not what they do.

Soon the ability to avoid the consequences of this distorted power is lost. As they begin believing in terrestrial power, they become prisoners of an order they have helped create. The poor have internalized the very values which cause them grief and affliction. The system that was hitherto imposed now becomes self-perpetuating. The result is a curse-oppression ([Romans 8:22](#)).

To these people Jesus brings 'release', 'sight' and 'deliverance'. The process of releasing the chains involves generating faith and confidence among the poor: faith in the values inherent in the New Order, confidence to choose it. Faith and confidence are interrelated—faith increases confidence, confidence increases faith. The restoration of sight is twofold:

1. Making the poor challenge, from heart and mind, the existing order of power.
2. Furthering their understanding and helping their acceptance of the New Order.

The poor, having their eyes opened and their shackles freed, are now delivered in faith. They begin to put into practice concepts of the New Order. They begin to resist the control of others over their own lives and resources. They are liberated.

This is the 'good news'. Jesus had recognised the cause of poverty and the needs of the poor. His ministry was primarily for the poor. His messages to them were the answers to their powerlessness.

The availability

Central to the effectiveness of the power of this world is fear. Fear rules the roost. Fear activates the autocrat. Fear cows the controlled. There is no confrontation without fear, no stand taken in true courage against exploitation, in justice or the evils generated by earthly power.

It is at this point that Jesus' death on the Cross, and his resurrection thereafter, become significant. In that final act Jesus releases all from the fear of death. He wins victory over death—the extreme penalty that the powers of this world can inflict—and, by his resurrection, hands this victory to us. Releasing us from fear, he releases us from bondage to the powers of this world.

Such a release comes from faith in the power of God. A group which [p. 259](#) is fearless in the face of this power by virtue of the transference of its allegiance to a greater Power cannot be called powerless. The man of poverty needs to be just such a member of society. True fearlessness will then enable him to act in the way which he sees to be right.

The condition

Jesus had understood that the poor would never find salvation as long as they continued to accept, believe in and apply the concepts of worldly power. He knew that unless all repented, man might die, but poverty would not ([Matthew 26:11](#)). He therefore called them to repentance. Repentance, a turning back from the kingdom of this world, a total rejection of the concept and practices of the powers-that-be—is the only escape from the inexorable vortex of poverty, blindness, captivity, oppression. As people turn to God, the power of God is made available to them. There are no exceptions; God is infinite. Just as poverty was a natural consequence of the kingdom of Satan on earth, so also would abundance be a natural product of the kingdom of Heaven ([Matthew 6:33](#)). It cannot be that one becomes powerless for the sake of another's appropriation of power.

The result

Now each has ability to control his own resources, behaviour and destination; to direct these in a way which builds himself and others around to successfully resist any usurpation of this control by an external group of any second individual. The structure of power in society is changed, not by a coup or a massacre but by making the objects of worldly control and power inaccessible. 'You seek to control us and our resources. We don't seek to control you, but we will not let you control us' becomes a representation of public attitudes. Power is diffused, for these biblical values are service, not subjugation; mutual dependence, not insulation. There is fearless confrontation of attempt at subversion, manipulation and exploitation of legitimate interests. The roots of poverty are struck.

Self-control, mutual love, respect, trust, harmony and reliability are the mechanisms that become operative. There comes a climate where constructive and creative activities are taken up by a whole people. All realize the intrinsic worth of created man.

When we accept the challenge to change (and cause change) we do not, however, initiate reform; we begin to become links in a chain. Our task is taken from those before us, applied to the present and, hopefully, handed down to the future. In our whole exercise of [p. 260](#) struggling for the poor and against poverty, we have to point people to God. He

is the One who enables spiritual transformation, the basis for establishing a New Order. As Christians, we must, in a way, cease from action and, in the state of being, aspire to be Jesus' city on the hill. In a way, too, we must be the yeast which is invisible but affects the whole loaf nevertheless ([John 3:30](#)).

The struggle against poverty is spiritual, not religious. The distinction lies in this: Religious conversion is basically leaving one institutional framework to join another, both being essentially structures of the same world of power. Religious conversion results in merely flipping to the other side of a perishable coin. Spiritual conversion is superseding the order of this world in favour of the New Order of the Spirit, intrinsic ([Galatians 5:19–23](#)). The first is focussed on self; the second is rooted in God. The focus, the emphasis on the values of Jesus' new order were contemporaneous. It was no ritual. Constantly alive, vibrant, spontaneous, touching the hearts of people, the New Order was a self-renewing challenge, a reformation. Ever open to change and adaption, it perpetuated the inherent values, and not the form, of the New Order.

But are we not captives ourselves of the first order? It originates within us. Our socio-economic order is proof of this. At personal levels we, too, are captive, blind and oppressed by our own selves.

Can we rise above ourselves to control ourselves? It needs Someone to open our eyes, release us, free us, and help us internalize the process of Transformation. And yet 'what is impossible with men is possible with God'. God enables us. Submission he requires; but the more we submit, so much the more he enables to practise the Second Order.

Change is eternal and transformation slow; but reformation is the need of every generation. And it is only with the power which Jesus made available to us that we can ever hope to consider taking up the task. In fact, if we are to follow Jesus, we do not have much choice!

Jesus came—and there was a vision, an abundant, liberating tradition, a rich inheritance for the people of His time, their children and their children's children!

Chandrakant Shourie is in charge of Kisan Sewa Samiti—a movement for the economic reform of Indian farmers, in Nagod, in Central India. [p. 261](#)

The Urban Poor: Prime Missionary Target

Viv Grigg

Reprinted from Urban Mission, March, 1987 with permission

This article deals with the specific conditions faced by the urban poor, and investigates the question of how to minister to them, and especially to reach them with the Gospel. The insights evolved from the author's own work in slums have the appeal of relevance and workability; while the stress on the Church's diakonia, koinonia and leitourgia is refreshing. Grigg makes the thought-provoking suggestion that there should be a Protestant missionary order with its own vows and a commitment to non-destitute poverty. While primarily