

Make Poverty History?

by SC

In the UK, a big campaign called 'Make Poverty History' was started by several Christian and secular aid agencies. The ultimate goal of this campaign was to apply pressure on the leaders of the 'rich' countries to make every effort to ensure that poverty that exists today becomes a thing of the past.

Millions of people purchased and wore the white rubber wrist bands with the engraved words: 'Make Poverty History' – and I was one of them. However, to look deeper into the issue, is it ever possible to make poverty history?

The root of poverty is sin! Sin branches out into oppression and injustice, greed, gluttony, covetousness, overindulgence, corruption, pride and laziness. It is sin that leads one human being to oppress, cheat and take advantage of another. 'A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away' (Prov. 13:23). It is sin that causes people groups to feel the need to 'protect' themselves from the poor and not share out of their own abundance. As a result, we have millions of people living in our world today below the levels of sustenance, where they have no opportunities and where

they are denied the right to earn enough money to feed themselves and their families and to save for the future.

Sin causes what some call a self-inflicted poverty. Dishonest dealings, as well as laziness, can result in people's poverty. 'Dishonest money dwindles away...' (Prov.

13:11). 'Lazy hands make a man poor...' (Prov. 10:4). So, we will not see the end of poverty until human beings repent

and are redeemed from their sins.

Although being poor is difficult, it is not always a bad thing in itself. I am sure many of us have had the experience of being poor – maybe when we were students, or while our family was going through financial difficulties, or at some other time. Was that a bad time in every way? Did it not teach us to rely on God for our provision? Did it not reveal talents and strength of character in us that we didn't know were there? Did it not give us an understanding of others in similar circumstances? Maybe it caused us to be more inventive than we ever were before. Jesus said to us that 'The poor you will always have with you, and you can help

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them at any time you want...' (Mark 14:7). I don't think He meant that we will have the poor with us only until the campaign 'Make Poverty History' reaches its goal. Jesus himself was poor in earthly terms, and he talked to people about the high cost of being his disciples and the blessedness of the poor (Luke 14: 25-33; Matt. 19:16-24; Luke 6:20-26).

Was the campaign *Make Poverty History* a waste of time then? Not entirely!

The Bible gives us a few practical steps to take in our efforts to deal with poverty. We, the people of God are called:

- To seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow (Isa. 1:17)
- To loose the chains of injustice, to set the oppressed free, to share our food with the hungry, to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, and to clothe the naked (Isa. 58:6-7)
- To love mercy (Mic. 6:8)
- To speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute ... to judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy (Prov. 31:8-9)

So, reminding the leaders of rich countries that their laws need to change in order to become fair towards the rest of the world is part of speaking up on behalf of the poor.

However, such leaders cannot be made entirely responsible for doing away with poverty. Even though the unjust rulers of this world will have to answer for a lot before their Maker, they have no real power to deal with the main cause of poverty – sin.

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I think campaigners would have achieved more if they had gone with their message, not to the 'Rich' World leaders, but to us – God's people! We have the access to the only power there is to make the pockets of poverty become history.

There is no doubt that God can make incidents of poverty history through the actions and interventions of his people. For example, Nehemiah played a key role in stopping the injustice and economic oppression that was happening in Judah at his time by opposing and speaking against it (Neh. 5:1-13).

We are God's hands on earth, and while the world is struggling to understand the true causes of poverty, we have to use the power of God to minister to this hurting world. It saddens me, however, to see how often God's people rely on the power of finances rather than on the

power of the Holy Spirit in addressing the problems of poverty.

I think campaigners would have achieved more if they had campaigned for 'Making Contentment Reality'. The fact is that neither extreme poverty nor extreme riches are really good for us (Prov. 30:8-9). The speed with which rich countries are sliding down the moral scale is breathtaking. The consumer culture that grows in strength is often to blame, not only for the growing poverty in the rest of the world, but also for the degradation of many western nations (Eph. 4:18-19). Riches can lead to self-centredness, choke spiritual growth, breed greed and jealousy, and make us blind to the conditions that poor people live in around us. Many times, the nations of Israel and Judah incurred judgement upon themselves because of their growing affluence, which resulted in forsaking God and exploiting and neglecting the poor.

However, riches can be a blessing if wisely invested and shared with others. In Jesus' parable a servant who doubled the money that his master left with him was rewarded the most. The servant who did not invest ended up by being punished (Matt. 25:14-30). The believers who belonged to the early church shared all their posses-

sions with anyone who was in need (Acts 2:43-44).

To be able to share and invest, we need to be free of the love of money and learn to live contentedly. The world today is desperately in need of a message of what it is to live in contentment for the sake of others and for themselves. We, as people of God, need to demonstrate what contentment and deal-

ing with poverty is all about.

In conclusion, poverty is very unlikely to become history before sin is dealt with completely. As people of God we are called to deal with poverty on different levels: by speaking on behalf of the oppressed to rulers

and authorities, by taking care of the poor, and by being thankful during difficult times when we find ourselves poor. We are also called to demonstrate to the world the strength and benefit of contentment and sharing, which will certainly help to make incidents of poverty history.

Too few of God's people are busy seeing pockets of poverty become history in the world; and too many of God's people are busy looking for finances rather than for

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God's wisdom in trying to tackle the pockets of poverty.

On the other hand, Jesus and the New Testament writers warn us of the difficulties that being rich can bring us. Maybe a campaign 'Make Riches History' would serve humanity better? Not really!

We mustn't forget that the root of poverty is sin, so no ideal formula will ever be found to solve this problem. In the secular as well as the Christian world, the formula changes with impressive speed:

*foreign finances +
grassroots participation =
poverty becoming history*

Or

*foreign finances +
good local legislation +
lowered import barriers =
poverty becoming history, etc.*

Surprisingly, with all the money (secular and Christian), effort and knowledge invested in the process, poverty is still not becoming history.

Even if a given country manages to move from the category of 'developing' to 'developed', the results can be disastrous. We only need to look at the example of many western countries and their constant slide down the moral scale of things. I think it is time to start projects of rescuing 'poor' westerners from their riches. That is because none of the above has enough power to address the real root of the problem.

Sometimes it takes words, at other times it takes silent action, but all the time it takes prayer and God's wisdom to know when and how to facilitate the ministration of justice and mercy to this world through God's own people.