

# APPENDIX



## SYSTEMIC POVERTY

*Paradigm 5: Nation transformation must be tangible, and the premier social indicator is the elimination of systemic poverty.*

Nowhere is the kingdom of darkness more entrenched in the world today than when it comes to the manifestations of systemic poverty. Systemic poverty is not a peripheral issue in the Bible. The elimination of poverty is central to the gospel message of redemption, and for that reason it is both a by-product and the most tangible social evidence of true, biblically based transformation. In fact, Jesus began His ministry by announcing good news to the poor; the Early Church had no needy people in its ranks (as I will show here in great detail); and the book of Revelation ends with a climactic parade of healthy and wealthy nations bringing their honor and glory to God. The elimination of systemic poverty may sound like a radical statement, but it is fully biblical and, if embraced, will have tremendous repercussions for the Church as we know it today—and even greater and more glorious ones for the world around us.

Our theology today, and particularly our eschatology, has become mystically skewed to the point that we have difficulty considering, much less embracing, this paradigm. Our view of the future tends to focus almost exclusively on escaping this *sin-sick* world to the exclusion of the potential of bettering things on Earth in general and of resolving

the plight of the poor in particular. There is nothing wrong with being heavenly minded. In fact, we are told to “set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). But the intent of this biblical exhortation is to obtain an eternal perspective with which we can effectually deal with challenges on Earth, not escape them.

This tendency is further accentuated by fear of contamination by a social gospel that emphasizes doing good (even excellent) works that address social evils to the exclusion of addressing the eternal issues of the soul—or the so-called *name it and claim it* theology that short-circuits the powerful grace of God available to bring about authentic transformation—by substituting a quick-fix version based on shallow theology and flawed interpretation. To couch this new paradigm in a proper context, three observations must be made. First, I am referring to a *social* indicator, not an ethereal or “spiritual” one. By “social” I mean that which is reflected in the community and can be measured and documented: The crime rate goes down, per capita income goes up, more students are graduating. These are measurable social indicators. Second, the poverty I am discussing is *systemic* poverty, not individual poverty. And third, the causes for *personal* poverty are multiple and usually self-inflicted, such as laziness, addiction or procrastination.

*Systemic* poverty is different from *personal* poverty in that it is something that most people are born into and their fate is dictated

and controlled by it. Those who are not born into it are targets to be brought into it. That is why it must be eliminated—because it reflects a scheme that is diabolical in design and evil in its implementation. It deprives masses of people of their daily bread by stealing the fruit of their labor and keeping them in social misery.

## WHAT IS POVERTY?

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines “poverty” as “a condition in which a person or community is deprived of, or lacks the essentials for, a minimum standard of well-being and life.” Thus, the essence of poverty is the lack of resources that are essential for living with dignity.

What then is systemic poverty? It is an all-encompassing socio-economic structure that keeps people deprived. It exists because of an institutionalized attitude that legitimizes its twin evil premises that

(1) some people deserve more opportunity than others, and that (2) there is not much that can or should be done about this prevailing social injustice—similar to how slavery was justified in the past. Because this evil is systemic, it will not be eradicated by simply taking care of individuals at the micro level or providing massive aid at the macro level. It must be uprooted.

For example, prior to emancipation, there were compassionate white people in the American South who took good care of their slaves, but their actions did not eliminate slavery. They merely alleviated conditions for a few. It took the Civil War and the dismantling of the Old South for slavery to cease legally, and an additional hundred years and

the Civil Rights Movement for its cultural conditioning and imprint to be ejected from the national psyche.

Let’s now look at a definition for the *poverty* side of the term.

There are different kinds of poverty indicators. Economists use the expression “poverty line” to describe the minimum level of income deemed necessary to achieve an adequate standard of living. Populations are then classified as above or below it. However, a simple monetary standard is inadequate because what is considered poor in the USA would easily qualify as rich in most Third World countries. Poverty is also understood as the lack of material resources, such as food, safe drinking water, and shelter, or social resources, such as access to information, education, health care, social status, political power, or the opportunity to develop meaningful connections with other people in society.

For the purpose of this book, I define *poverty* as “lacking our daily bread” and *systemic poverty* as “the structure that perpetuates such deficiency.” This definition, extrapolated from the Lord’s Prayer, though uncommonly simple, is as comprehensive as the one provided by the editors at Wikipedia. To expand on this point, let’s examine each of the core words: “our,” “daily” and “bread.” The term “our” points to the corporate dimension of life. Provision is necessary, not just for *me* but also for *others* who comprise the community I am part of. Furthermore, this provision has to have continuity; it has to be a *daily* occurrence. The exact words in the Lord’s Prayer are “Give us *this day* our *daily* bread” (Matt. 6:11, emphasis added). It is meant to be a *predictable* daily occurrence. The recipient must know, or at least have

hope, that tomorrow is part of a continuum and not a crisis waiting to happen. And finally, *bread* speaks of food that has substance and nutrition. The broader context points to a loving God as the source, *Our Father who art in heaven*, and describes provision as a gift (“give us”).

## FOUR KINDS OF POVERTY

From these observations, I see four kinds of poverty: spiritual, relational, motivational and material.

1. *Spiritual poverty* afflicts those who do not know that God is their father.
2. *Relational poverty* encompasses those whose focus is on themselves at the expense of the community they are a part of.
3. *Motivational poverty* is a state of hopelessness that engulfs those who have no adequate way or means (or the confidence) to tackle tomorrow’s challenges.
4. *Material poverty* impacts those who lack the basic necessities to sustain themselves.

The flip side of these four dimensions of poverty is spiritual, relational, motivational (hope-filled) and material *wealth*.

Why would our Lord make food (bread) such a central point? Because the food supply is the most volatile component of the marketplace. As I state in my book *Prayer Evangelism*:

Almost anything can go wrong in the marketplace—inflation, political corruption, even a natural disaster—and the city (or the nation) will put up with it and eventually recover. But if the food supply becomes critically insufficient, then revolutions happen, rulers lose their heads and chaos ensues until order

is restored, first in the food supply and eventually in all other areas of the marketplace. A calamitous disruption in the food supply is the societal equivalent of a heart attack.<sup>1</sup>

This is also true for individuals. People can live without everything but food, air and water; but food is the ingredient that provides the energy needed for vibrant productivity.

Missionaries and inner-city workers know about the difficulty of communicating the gospel to starving people without first addressing their hunger. This same understanding was a critical component of the Spirit-led strategy of the Early Church, which made the regular provision of food for the hungry an integral part of its ministry because it knew that this was the arena where spiritual oppression and its resulting deprivation were most visibly and painfully felt.



This social blight is not abstract—quite the opposite is true: Poverty and the resulting hunger, if left unabated, will result in very real starvation. Throughout the Old Testament the penalty for idolatry took the form of famine, pestilence or drought. The brunt of such judgment was always felt in the marketplace and particularly in the stomachs of the people. Food became scarce and eventually insufficient. On the other hand, 2 Chronicles 7:14 teaches that if we get right with God, He will, after granting forgiveness for our sins, heal the land. The implication is impossible to miss: The land that produced

insufficiently will once again produce abundant food.

Two things can cause this insufficiency: (1) a divine judgment as a result of sin, or (2) an evil system that enables a few to hoard resources at the expense of many. This is the difference between self-inflicted poverty and systemic poverty. To resolve the first case requires personal and corporate repentance, which opens the door for God to intervene. The second has to be dismantled by the Church, first within its own ranks where mindsets need to be changed and transforming patterns of behavior established, and subsequently into society until it is transformed. The latter is not only possible but also desirable. God wants it to happen, and the leaders of nations are wide open to it since poverty is not only a bane to those who suffer it, but it is also a blight on those who have not been able to resolve it.

Please note that I am not advocating a socialistic approach that imposes a redistribution of wealth. What I am referring to is the social and spiritual blindness of modern-day “rich young rulers” who fail to enter into the kingdom of God because they have too many idle possessions and no concern whatsoever for those who are utterly dispossessed. They could greatly help others by allowing much of their wealth to flow back into the market capital and thus improve the common good. It was exactly that reluctance that kept the young aristocrat mentioned in Matthew 19:22 from entering into what he, of his own volition, came asking Jesus for: “When the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.” Note that Jesus had not asked the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and *give* the money to the poor.

He told him, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (v. 21). There is no “it” between “give” and “to.”

How is a rich person expected to help the poor? It is not by he himself becoming poor through self-dispossession, but by moving idle capital (possessions or property) into the marketplace for the purpose of developing products and creating jobs as well as making profits with

which to alleviate the plight of the poor. Keeping those assets from entering the marketplace, whether out of fear, selfishness, insecurity or all of those reasons, will negatively impact the economy (and, by extension, those who need help the most) by failing to generate new capital.

The point is this: Poverty is not only the *lack of something* but also the *fear of lacking something*. One reason that poor people are kept poor is because those who control the marketplace live in emotional and spiritual poverty themselves, even though they are materially rich. Enough is never enough for them, and the resulting fear causes moral paucity.

The result is that the rich get richer, through hoarding, but not happier or more fulfilled, and the poor are enchained to hopelessness. As a result, the future of the nation is mortgaged because its main assets—its people—have been bridled.

Could it be for that reason that Jesus’ parables and miracles so often touched on issues and circumstances involving money and assets—because He was dealing with systemic issues? It is no coincidence that almost all of the miracles of the Gospels and the book of Acts occurred in the economic sector (mar-

ketplace) of the city. God was addressing a new way of doing business.

I wish to submit that the case for the elimination of systemic poverty is so intrinsically woven into the Scriptures that we have failed to see it, much less embrace it as a possibility, basically because it is impossible to

separate the two. To address this in an orderly way, in the following chapters I have organized the discussion into four parts: the *biblical basis*, the *Early Church experience*, *individual examples*, and *emerging corporate prototypes*.

From chapter 11 in Transformation

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