Perspectives

How to Help the Poor…and How Not To

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert

"Thanks so much, Jerry! I don't know what I would have done without you. I am sure this will be the last time." As Tony left his office, Jerry thought, "No, it won't be the last time. You will be here again next month, and again the month after that…."

For the past eight years, Jerry had been serving as the Mercy Coordinator for Parkview Fellowship, a thriving congregation located on one of the main thoroughfares of a mid-size, American city. Jerry was the primary liaison to the many needy people who wandered into the church building seeking help with electricity bills, car repairs, and rent payments. Jerry was passionate about serving his community and showing the love of Christ to the materially poor, but he was growing increasingly discouraged. His life seemed to be an endless cycle of people like Tony, people who for a variety of reasons showed up like clockwork looking for financial assistance. Jerry had begun to wonder if he was just enabling people like Tony, actually hurting them in the very process of trying to help them. And Parkview's congregation was growing increasingly cynical about how much the church was spending on mercy ministry, given that the people being helped didn't seem to be moving out of poverty. Just last week, Jerry had overheard a congregation member after church commenting, "Clearly these folks just don't want to change. Why can't they keep jobs? Where is their work ethic, anyway?"

Steve Corbett

We've got to change what we are doing, thought Jerry. But how? Where do we begin?

How can churches like Parkview foster lasting transformation in the lives of people like Tony? Good intentions aren't enough. As we will see, it is actually possible to harm the poor in our attempts to help them. The first step in moving forward is recognizing that poverty — and thus poverty alleviation — is more complicated than we might think.

What Is Poverty?

Imagine that you went to the doctor with chronic headaches. How would you feel if the doctor made no attempt to diagnose what was causing your headaches, but instead just prescribed a powerful painkiller so you would feel better for now? Or what might happen if the doctor misdiagnosed you, treating you for sinus headaches when you actually had a brain tumor? It wouldn't matter if the doctor loved you and had good intentions. At the end of the day, you would be left with an untreated brain tumor that might kill you.

As relatively affluent Christians, we tend to define poverty as a lack of material things, such as money, food, and shelter. As a result, we often define poverty alleviation as giving these things to the poor, whether in the form of backpacks full of school supplies, turkeys and toys at Christmas, or repainted houses every summer. When a person like Tony walks into our church, we automatically look for how we can pay the bill in his hand. Although these actions may help temporarily, such handouts might only be treating the symptoms of poverty rather than its underlying causes. Further, low-income people describe their poverty in far more psychological and social terms than we do, often expressing a profound sense of shame, inferiority, helplessness, vulnerability, and social isolation. To be truly effective, we need to move past treating the symptoms of poverty — a lack of material things — and correctly diagnose its deeper causes.

Brian Fikkert

From a biblical perspective, poverty is rooted in broken relationships. The Bible teaches that in creation God established four foundational relationships that shape each person: a relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. When these relationships are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended: families are nurturing, work is fulfilling and productive, and people glorify God in all that they do.

However, the fall damaged all four of these relationships for all of us. We are all "poor" in the sense that none of us are experiencing these relationships as God intended. Those of us who are not materially poor often experience this brokenness in the form of pride, self-centeredness, workaholic tendencies, and a desire to "play god" in everyday life. In contrast, those who are materially poor often experience this brokenness in the form of a paralyzing sense of inferiority, violent conflict and exploitation, a failure to steward resources, or a sense of spiritual fear or isolation. Thus, all of us, regardless of income level, desperately need the restorative work of Christ in our lives.

Helping or Hurting?

Here is the clincher: The way that the materially non-poor are broken tends to exacerbate the brokenness of the materially poor, and vice versa. The ways that we speak and act towards the materially poor often confirm what they are already feeling: "I am inferior; I can't do it; I need somebody to save me." This attitude makes them more passive, and, as this happens, we get more arrogant: "I knew they didn't have my work ethic and initiative. Why don't they do something to improve their lives?" Their shame is deepened, and our pride is enhanced.

This dynamic can be summarized in the equation below:

Material Definition of Poverty

+

God-complexes of the Materially Non-Poor

+

Feelings of Inferiority of the Materially Poor

=

Harm to the Materially Poor and Non-Poor

Breaking out of this equation requires changing the way we define poverty and repenting of our sense of superiority and god-complexes. If poverty is rooted in broken relationships, poverty alleviation is ultimately about reconciling those relationships — in both our lives and the materially poor's lives. As a result, effective poverty alleviation happens by forming humble, long-term relationships with the materially poor, walking alongside them over time as Christ restores both of us. Operating from this alternative framework fosters lasting change in the lives of people like Tony, and combats the cynicism and frustration common to churches like Parkview.

Not All Poverty Is Created Equal

Taking the next steps in walking with low-income people requires discerning whether a situation calls for relief — short-term handouts to people in an emergency or crisis situation — or development — walking with people over time in a way that reconciles their and our relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. If people are in a crisis resulting from a natural disaster such as an earthquake, from a medical emergency, from another unexpected large bill, or from some personal trauma, then relief is often the appropriate response. But the vast majority of materially poor people around the world are not in a crisis. They can contribute to improving their circumstances, meaning that walking alongside them developmentally is the proper approach. In development, we might provide money or material to resources help people, but we would do this in a way that complements the gifts and resources that they are also contributing to their own progress. Relief is done to people or for people, while development is done with people.

Unfortunately, because of our tendency to define poverty as a material condition, we often give hand-outs for long periods of time to individuals or communities that actually need development. *This is one of the most common and detrimental mistakes churches make in attempting to alleviate poverty, whether in their own communities or around the globe on a short-term mission trip.* Simply handing out shoes, clothing, or money to people such as Tony who are not helpless and who are not in a crisis can deepen the very feelings of shame that are one of the root causes of material poverty. Doing so undermines their capacity and drive to support themselves and their families through work, fostering a mindset of dependency.

Assets or Needs?

Churches also need to move toward “asset-based” approaches to poverty alleviation, rather than “needs-based” approaches. An asset-based approach tackles problems by focusing on the gifts, resources, and abilities that God has placed in low-income individuals and communities. It seeks to identify, celebrate, and mobilize those gifts in order to address problems. A needs-based approach focuses on the needs and deficits in an individual or a community, assuming they have little to offer to combat issues. This leads to believing that only outside resources, leadership, and solutions can “fix” the problems. Such an approach often reflects and feeds sinful god-complexes in our own hearts and intensifies the feelings of inferiority that commonly plague low-income people. In short, it again deepens the poverty we are each experiencing.

Focusing on the assets God has put in a community frames our interactions with the materially poor in light of their God-given dignity. It affirms that they can steward their resources to God’s glory and support themselves, combating their feelings of inferiority. In the process, an asset-based approach fosters an attitude of respect in our hearts for the materially poor, countering our sense of superiority. This does not mean we will never bring in outside resources, but rather that we will only do so in a way that complements, not undermines, individual and community assets.

Further, healthy poverty alleviation efforts are participatory, encouraging individuals and communities to initiate and contribute to their own improvement. It is easy for us to walk into a community with a predetermined plan of how to alleviate poverty, imposing our ideas about what and how it should be done. In this “blueprint” approach, we dictate to the materially poor what they need to do and how to do it. A participatory approach gives low-income people ownership of their own change and empowers them to sustain that change in the future.

Moving Forward

So what dose it look like when these principles are embodied in a church’s ministry initiatives? Let’s go back to Parkview. Realizing that their approach wasn’t effective or sustainable, Jerry and Parkview retooled their efforts. Instead of giving handouts to Tony each time he came in, Jerry created a list of small projects around the church that needed to be done. When Tony arrived with the next bill, Jerry offered to help him pay the bill in return for assisting the church’s maintenance staff or deacons with a project on the church grounds, allowing Tony to interact with Parkview’s staff on a personal level and to work in exchange for financial help. Parkview also opened a thrift store where low-income people could buy donated clothes and household items at a steeply reduced cost. In the process of running the thrift store, Parkview’s members built relationships with people like Tony, and eventually offered job preparedness and financial education classes. In these classes, Tony and his fellow participants studied Scripture together, fellowshipped with church members as equals, and learned how to better support themselves and their families. As Parkview saw the impact that walking with the residents over time had, they realized that their international work via short-term missions trips still involved relief-style handouts, even though the contexts where they were working required development. Parkview changed their trips, focusing on supporting and encouraging long-term partners who could actually engage in development.

Churches like Parkview are seeking to fulfill their biblical calling to care for people who are poor in new ways. That is a cause for celebration. The local church, as the body, bride, and fullness of Jesus Christ, is the primary tool of God's work in a community. And by considering how we can more effectively engage in poverty alleviation, we can participate in his restorative work in our own neighborhoods, around the globe, and in our own hearts.

- See more at: http://www.catalystresources.org/how-to-help-the-poor-and-how-not-to/#sthash.pGk4uAyr.dpuf