

Beyond Charity

Is generous giving to charity enough? Is that the only difference Christians can make to those in poverty? Siu Fung Wu, Global Education Officer at World Vision Australia argues the case that we can go beyond giving money.

Monetary generosity is not enough because the Bible demands a holistic approach to alleviate poverty. Financial giving cannot fully deal with the power and injustice that marginalise the powerless and the disadvantaged.

Importantly, the Bible's demand to help the widows, the fatherless and foreigners should not simply be understood as charity. Instead, it is part of God's call for His people to bear witness to their Creator, who desires just and loving relationships between His image-bearers.

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Indeed, the word "charity", when understood in primarily monetary terms, does not fully represent what God expects from us in the face of extreme poverty.

Old Testament scholar, J. G. McConville, says that the Law's demand to protect the widows, the fatherless and foreigners (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) is not a welfare provision. Instead, it expresses the fact that they are full members of God's people. They are not second-class citizens, and deserve all of God's blessings.

McConville explains that they are not "the poor" as such, but that they are vulnerable and hence subject to injustice.

The Mosaic Law's requirement to protect the vulnerable is relentless. It says: "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." (Deuteronomy 27:19; TNIV)

Thus, the call to protect the disadvantaged is not only a matter of charity but also justice. A people under God's rule have to maintain justice for everyone, especially for the powerless and oppressed.

Therefore, financial giving to charity is not sufficient. What we need are just socio-political systems that ensure that the powerful do not exploit the powerless, and that the vulnerable are given a chance to stand on their own feet. As Proverbs 31:8 teaches us, we are to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute".

Obviously leaders and governments in developing countries play an important role here. But international systems and structures can exploit the disadvantaged. Rich countries can help to release the burden on the vulnerable. This is why the Make Poverty History and Micah Challenge campaigns focus on trade justice, debt relief, and more and better aid.

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In contrast, parents in Australia receive \$227.90 of Maternity Immunisation Allowance if they fully immunise their child (2006 figure). This policy is a positive measure to encourage immunization. But who is going to take a stand for the families in developing countries where measles and diarrhea kill thousands of children every day?

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Charity says that I should give to development agencies so that more overseas children can get immunised. However, justice says that I should also ask wealthy countries to increase foreign aid and debt relief so that these countries can provide better health systems.

For example, Mozambique was able to increase their health spending by \$A18.5 million because of debt relief granted to them. A recent World Vision report states that "half a million children are now vaccinated against tetanus, whooping cough and diphtheria, increasing coverage to 80 per cent". A commitment to justice is able to bring significant change to the underlying systems and structures that can exploit the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

A cow in Europe receives about \$US2 per day in subsidy, which is more than what 75 per cent of Africans earn each day. A TEAR Australia report last year says that "on average, low-income developing countries exporting to high-income countries face tariffs three to four times higher than the tariffs faced by other high-income countries". My almsgiving cannot be a voice for developing countries here. But I can be a voice for justice by asking the participants in the G20 summit to take actions to remove unjust trade rules.

Beyond justice

Recognition of the justice of God takes us a big step forward in understanding Micah's challenge to act justly and show mercy (Micah 6:8). But the realisation that this is in fact an essential part of our mission mandate will take us even further in understanding God's heart.

It should be noted that the nations around Israel in the ancient world did have similar law codes to protect widows and orphans. However, they had nothing to protect their resident foreigners. ("Foreigners" are translated as "aliens" in many Bible versions. Here I follow TNIV's translation.)

In other words, everyone knew that humanitarian aid for widows and orphans was important, but they would not give foreigners in their country equal access to the blessings of the land. But Israel's worldview was to be radically different, and so should the church's.

The unique provision for foreigners in the Mosaic Law stems from Israel's Exodus experience (Exodus 22:21; 23:9). But it also reflects the fact that their God was the Creator God, and every one of his image-bearers is important.

Most importantly, Israel's obedience to the Law was not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the whole world. This is made clear in Deuteronomy 4:5-8, which says that the vocation of Israel was to show the nations how righteous and just the laws of their God were. As Biblical scholar Christopher Wright says: "The point [of the passage] is that if Israel would live as God intended, then the nations would notice."

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In other words, this is the mission mandate for God's people. They are to bear witness to God by living out His plans and purposes, not least by defending the cause of the vulnerable - which of course includes the foreigners. This mission mandate is of course rooted in God's covenant with Abraham, which says that all peoples of the world will be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3).

In the same way, part of the Gospel mandate for us is to bear witness to Christ by defending the cause of the disadvantaged. Participating in the Micah Challenge campaign is not so much "a good thing" to do for the poor. Rather, it is part of our role in fulfilling the church's mission.

Another look at the Good Samaritan

It is probably no coincidence that Luke mentions the parable of the Good Samaritan after the sending out of the 72 disciples (Luke 10:1-37 - note that the NIV translation in Luke 10:25 is perhaps somewhat misleading, because it suggests a break from the previous passage. See NRSV, NAS, KJV, and NKJV.). Jesus sent them out for a mission. After their return a Law expert asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus then told him the Good Samaritan parable.

For us, the parable seems to be simply about charity. But for Jesus it is more. It is about a correct understanding of the love command (Leviticus 19:18). Loving our neighbour includes loving a foreigner -or, in Jesus' amazing challenge to his listener, the love of a foreigner (a Samaritan) for a resident (a Jew).

Ironically the Law expert failed to understand the missional purpose of the Law. At the heart of the Law is love for one's neighbour. And, as we have seen above, our neighbour includes "foreigners".

We cannot fulfill our mission mandate unless we take heed to Jesus' challenge. By defending the cause of foreigners, Israel would demonstrate to the nations what kind of God they serve - a God who demands his people to love the least likely candidates. Similarly, by standing with the vulnerable, we bear witness to the Gospel - a Gospel that sees no national, racial and socio-political boundaries.

Let us take Micah's challenge and be a people who do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our Lord.