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Do We See the Poor Through God's Lens? by John Braun

The people of God have a mandate to care for the poor. Although the mandate is general for all of God's people, it is specific for businesses and any other organizations (including churches) that deal with wealth, employees and the communities around them. There is no way to be aligned with the heart and intentions of the Creator without sharing in divine compassion for struggling and marginalized people. *To care or not to care?* With that question, a tipping point is established for self-definition: Are we partners with God or opponents of God? Sadly, the swift march of international corporations to control resources and markets in poor

countries, with the cooperation of the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, has come at a huge price to the poor of those countries.

It is hard to point a finger in any one place and say, "Evil resides here." Yet, the composite results of myriad actions begin to reveal harsh and debilitating consequences for struggling nations and their populations. In a 1999 World Bank paper, entitled: *The Simultaneous Evolution of Growth and Inequality*, Mattis Lundberg and Lyn Squire wrote: "Globalization appears to increase poverty and inequality . . . The costs of adjusting to greater openness are borne exclusively by the poor, regardless of how long the adjustment takes." On July 4, 2001 World Bank senior adviser William Easterly stated in the *Financial Times*, "Consider the facts and it soon becomes evident that the \$1,000 billion spent on aid since the 1960's, with the efforts of advisers, foreign aid givers, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have failed to attain the desired results . . . It is little wonder that protesters have demonstrated so vehemently against the international organizations."

Why the failure? Perhaps a clue is to be found in the attitude of corporations who move forward for financial gains as the World Bank and IMF open new frontiers with dropped barriers. In a February 2004 article on "Sustainability" in *The Leading Edge*, John Gibson wrote: "As the CEO of Haliburton Energy Services, the board of directors doesn't sit me down and say 'John, make this a better planet.' They want us to make and create wealth for our shareholders and employees."

What do these failed results look like a little closer to home? President George W. Bush said “Free markets and free trade are key priorities of our national security strategy.” That was on September 17, 2002. Although free trade, as negotiated in NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), may be good for the USA, it may be bad news for people in Mexico. When barriers to agricultural imports into Mexico were lifted, “Mexican farmers . . . found themselves competing with an influx of cheap, heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural commodities. Facing dire poverty in the Mexican countryside, millions have made the wrenching decision to leave behind families and communities and head northward” as unauthorized immigrants. (See *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures*, Summer 2006, article by Oscar A. Chacon, Amy Shannon and Sarah Anderson: *Alternatives to a Wall.*)

A Biblical View

A review of biblical references leaves the sense that the elimination of poverty is not expected. Rather, in the Creator’s love for all people, attention is focused on those who are having a tough time providing for the needs of life and family; they need protection, encouragement and a hand up. The writer of 1 John 3:17 asks, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

Some very harsh words were delivered by Amos, a prophet to Israel’s leaders and business community, about God’s punishment for trampling on, oppressing and crushing the poor (Amos 4:1-2; 5:11; 8:4-6). We might prefer the beloved Psalms for this gentler reminder: “Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble” (41:1). The inverse, however, is also true according to Proverbs: “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them” (22:22-23).

The heart-warming good news is that many employers who have great respect for Christ have modeled themselves after the Good Shepherd in John 10. They have chosen to align themselves with Christ over against the false leaders who come under God’s indictment in Ezekiel 34:2b-4: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

A catering business in northern Indiana has made it part of the business mission to hire immigrants and coach capable employees so they can open their own businesses. A couple in eastern Washington has transferred rental homes to immigrants at affordable rates and with mortgages that could not be secured in banks. They also continue to assist the immigrants who purchased their store and visit the store weekly to assist with book-keeping chores.

Micro-loans represent some of the most exciting news. These loans help low income people begin small businesses. Funded in large part by business people, hundreds of millions of dollars have been made available to help the poor in this way. The debt satisfaction rates for micro-loans are very high and the number of follow-up loans to finance further growth is astounding. Evidence shows that the poor are intelligent and know how to build up viable communities when given the chance. People who help them apparently do see the poor through the lens of God’s love.



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