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Intro to Christian Theology

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Research Topic: The Role of the Church in a Poor and Disabled Society

1. Annotated Bibliography

Mashau, Thinandavha D., and Leomile Mangoedi. "Faith Communities, Social Exclusion,

Homelessness and Disability: Transforming the Margins in the City of Tshwane."*Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1-9*. ProQuest*, http://ucheck.berry.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1774865234?accountid=8577, doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.3088.

Reflecting on the realities of social inclusion and exclusion, the article stresses the significance of these in regards to the homeless and disabled society in the city of Tshwane. This place has a history of social exclusion that keeps resurfacing in different manifestations of religion, poverty, “gender, class, power, and racial constructs” that all contribute in polarizing the society from each other (Mashau). The churches aren’t a safe space because the exclusion is still prevalent in the way the church keeps those that are marginalized on the margins. Social exclusion can look different in alternate contexts, but for purposes of relevancy, this article primarily focused on the social, economic and political aspects of it. What makes this article unique is that it offers the voices of trained and ordinary readers from the margins and their opinions on how they want communities of faith to respond to their situation. The biggest takeaway they had about the church was that it was not living up to the way it should especially in Tshwane. Yet they did not say all hope was lost. There was a common desire for the churches to rise to their full potential and a belief that they could if they learned what those on the margins truly need.

Verster, P. "A Church with the Poor -Lessons from Scripture and from Congregations in

Informal Settlements."*Acta Theologica*, vol. 32, 2012, pp. 70-88*. ProQuest*, <http://ucheck.berry.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2183291359?accountid=8577>.

First of all, the church has to change the way they relate to the poor in order to be present for them. Literature is an excellent source to become more knowledgeable about what it looks like to serve the poor as a scripture-based church in informal areas. One of these areas is in a part of the Free State Province, South Africa called Mangaung. A critical point that must be considered in pursuing this type of a church is what kind of congregation the church is made up of and how that congregation can become one for the poor. Research questions were raised regarding how the church can do this without compromising its character and how to do so in a loving manner. This brings the focus back to the community in Mangaung where they face a variety of needs primarily consisting around finances which forces them to be dependent on outside providers whilst still maintaining a sense of order within the community. In order for this to work, the church must be deeply rooted in humility, encouraging its members to walk into their callings, while also practically ministering to its community.

White, P. "The Biblical View of Humanity and the Promotion of the Rights of

Persons with Disabilities: The Call and Mission of the Church."*Acta Theologica*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2017, pp. 120-134*. ProQuest*, http://ucheck.berry.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2179742520?accountid=8577, doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v37i1.8.

The purpose of this article is to help define disability and bring awareness to how the church is supposed to relate to people with disabilities. The call of the church in Proverbs 31:8 is to "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute;" this most definitely includes those who have disabilities (White). Disability refers to anyone who is uncapable either through biological, physiological or psychological means to “perform an activity within the range considered normal for others” (White). The likelihood of these people being subject to rape and violence is also higher which should put a red flag on anyone’s radar. “It has been estimated that 10 per cent of the world's population, approximately 650 million people, live with disability. Eighty per cent of them live in developing countries” (White). There is a significant need for international awareness of how individuals with disabilities are being treated, especially in Africa where these individuals are being ostracized from society because of the prejudices against them. The call for justice should be motivation for the church to intervene in this case. The Bible mentions those with disabilities multiple times and it is clear from those instances that God considers them as a part of the body of Christ, and he cares for them so compassionately that “the kingdom of God is not complete without persons with disabilities” (White). This claim is cause for debate since some argue that disability is a result of the fall, but then we look at people like Moses whom God created with a speech impediment, and whom he used to save his people, we must conclude that the world would not be the same without people with disabilities.

1. Primary Source Textual Explication

Chapter 4

In Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book, *Spiritual Writings*, he focuses a lot on the church’s role in liberation theology. When we consider the poor and needy in our world and how we encounter them in our lives, we must remember that the least of these reflect Jesus himself, and we must receive them as if we are receiving Christ by putting them in the midst and heart of our purpose as a loving church community (Matthew 25:40). We must become like children, in other words be willing to give up our social status, in order to take on the humility required to be able to empathize with those who are marginalized and are considered “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). Until we actually experience the inferiority that is felt and the humiliation that is brought on by utter dependence on others, we will never understand what Jesus means when he says in Mark 18:15 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Gutiérrez 75-76). Gutiérrez goes on to depict the church as a shepherd like Christ is in the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14). The Church must go beyond its borders to rescue the lost sheep that may have wandered or gone off the path away from the shepherd.

Chapter 7

An unspoken belief that societies maintain is that there is a certain order in the way people are, the rich and the poor, and sometimes those systems do not need to be messed with because it will throw everything into chaos (Gutiérrez 101). But this stems from prideful thinking that we deserve what is handed to us when in fact we do not. An important example that Jesus sets in the Gospels is one of compassion and a willingness to listen before action. Sometime people think they know what the poor need, when in fact they do not. Jesus models this for us in Mark 10:51 where he interacts with a blind man on the street that everyone is trying to hide away and keep silent, but whom he draws close to and simply asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” He does not presuppose what the man wants nor forces any kind of remedy on him, but he considers the opinion and desires of this man as crucial and he is purposeful in making sure that he is heard (Gutiérrez 103).

In order to understand how to minister to the poor and oppressed, it is important to understand what type of poor is present in different locations. Gutiérrez claims that there are three types of poverty: “Real (or material) poverty […] spiritual poverty […and] solidarity poverty” (Gutiérrez 104-105). When Gutiérrez refers to real poverty, he is talking about it in the physical sense; spiritual poverty is more in regards to our “spiritual childhood” and submitting everything to God, while solidarity poverty is standing up against real poverty by taking on that lifestyle that is forced upon them. The reality of the situation is that Jesus is present with these people. He came to earth to save the broken and lost. He did not come just to free them from their socioeconomic distresses, but to love them and extend compassion, respect and equality where it was lacking (Gutiérrez 107). The way we can best reach the poor is by making our own experience with the poor; it is not enough to run parallel with them, we must walk the walk they are walking and immerse ourselves in their midst. Going in we must also not be primarily concerned with fixing their physical state of being poor, but start to inquire how the outside reflects the inside and how we can spur transformation from the inside out. Gutiérrez uses examples of the poor in Latin American to help prove his point in all of this.

Chapter 10

The “rich and proud” are mistaken when they devalue the poor or believe that God is not present among them, “So with faith they must know clearly that where the poor are, there is Jesus Christ himself, where God is, there is justice” (Gutiérrez 121). God is most definitely with the poor in spirit and heart because “The poor are a crucified people” and this language so intimately connects them to Christ and also further confirms who he came to earth to minister to and suffer along with (Gutiérrez 123). Awareness of the suffering and destitution of humankind on a personal and social level is important for knowing the balance in a nation (Gutiérrez 123). The significance lies in the fact that poverty is a worldwide problem that we are still striving to end today. Despite this, we must continue to keep God in the conversation, because he created us all and the world we live in, and because we all bear the consequences of human depravity, we are all in the same boat.

Chapter 12

The two ways that Gutiérrez says we talk about God are “contemplative” and “prophetic”; the contemplative language is focused on praying and “gratuitous love” in which he stresses this characteristic love of God and how it should reside in the cores of our hearts as well (Gutiérrez 134). The prophetic language is more concerned with a commitment of declaring justice in the midst of the poor as well as fighting for their needs (Gutiérrez 134). Gutiérrez makes the claim that God carries a “preferential love for the poor” mostly because their state of living does not at all align with God’s will (Gutiérrez 136). Why does the innocent suffer? Through the story of Job, we start to understand that this is not the question we should be asking. Rather we should be asking the questions: who is God? and what kind of God is he? God’s “*agapeic love*” is so overwhelmingly extravagant and uncontainable that it reaches the poor and oppressed all the same as it reaches those who are well off (Gutiérrez 136). The book of Job is given as an example of the “innocent suffering” and the discipline of obedience is also stressed in this case (Gutiérrez 137). Yet the book of Job is one of hurt and loneliness that seems to be undeserved. Job cries out to God demanding an answer, as do our current brothers and sisters who are overcome by poverty and exclusion. The significant factor in all of this is that Job *was* innocent. He did nothing to deserve his plight and he eventually repented for even expressing lamentation for the things his friends declared he must have done to deserve his current difficulties, when in fact it was all unnecessary to God (Gutiérrez 146). Gutiérrez leaves his readers with the charge that we must all be committed, in fact, it is our duty as followers of Christ to alleviate the burden of human suffering as much as we can considering Jesus’ claim to an “easy yoke and light burden” (Gutiérrez 158). In order for this to be possible, Christian believers need to make their presence known among the lost and broken, and more than ever need to be determined to show up “wherever the unjust abuse the innocent” (Gutiérrez 158).

1. Description

Gutiérrez does an excellent job in bringing attention to the state of the poor and our role as a loving church community to stand up for them and make sure they are heard, known and accounted for. He also touches on the different types of poverty such as the real, spiritual, and solidarity poverties. The secondary sources that I referenced gave deeper insights into the aspects of the poor and what that looks like in specific environments. The term “poor” can refer to more than the physically poor, as we have seen. Specifically, the spiritually poor can be the ones that are disheartened from a lack of Christian community, and the people that are oppressed in this way can frequently be the disabled community which is one that is yet to see an enveloping of arms welcoming them into a place where they know they can be loved and respected. Love is something we all desperately need, so the one without love could be considered the poorest of all.

Voices from communities such as the one in Tshwane comment that they have not felt an inclusive atmosphere in the past from the church, but one that was silent, distant, in competition with the homeless for land, acting as an accomplice for the state to silence the poor, divided, and transforming (or overbearing) (Mashau). There was a research project done that focused on reading Acts 3:1-10 with the homeless people of Tshwane in which they conducted a Bible study with them (Mashau). Reflecting on how Jesus treated those in social exclusion, homelessness and disability, we see him model a way for his disciples to follow by always transforming any beggar’s plight, and this is what the people say communities of faith should be like: transforming ones (Mashau).

Regarding disabled people in the church context brings up a certain measure of uneasiness that really speaks to the way communities immediately exclude people just because they are different from the norm. This overlooks what these people actually desire, which is a sense of belonging in the church. How is it that we exclude people so fast because of how they appear before giving them a chance to prove themselves? This was the real story behind the lame man in Acts: he required healing in order to gain his sense of belonging because the church would not accept him until he was healed because he was considered “unclean” and unwelcome in the temple. Yet the healing did not only save the man from his disability, but it saved him from the life of dependency that he had always known and freed him to walk not just on his feet, but alongside Christ and his fellow believers. Through the story of Peter, John, the lame man, the worshippers at the temple, God, and through the name of Jesus, the people of Tshwane were able to connect the events of the story to their lives and started to understand more how God uses people to speak to other people and perform his will. (Mashau)

There are challenges that come along with churches reaching out to the surrounding poor and disabled community because of the deceiving way the cities pull in the poor making them think their lives will be better, only to have them dumped into the informal areas worse off than before. This is why the church is so needed in these areas! The responsibility to take care of these people falls too often solely on the shoulders of the government, when the church needs to step in as well. When the church’s resources are limited, sometimes the best things they can be is an intentional community of love, but even this is lacking. In order to get a better perspective of what this looks like in the Bible, one should look back to the nation of Israel and how they showed each other love throughout the Old Testament with the help of the Ten Commandments. If we are called to love one another as we love ourselves, this should include the disabled community. People with disabilities are a crucial part of the unity of the church, and they have spiritual needs just the same as anyone else does, but they are often put on the back burner due to the constrictive physical needs they have, which seem to be the more immediate concern. But they need to be discipled just as much as anyone else in the congregation and in light of the “missional role of the church,” it should be their goal to reach them in the best way that they can. (White, P.)

Fundamental establishments like the Sabbath and the year of Jubilee were set in stone to counteract poverty and create a sense of balance, but these have been neglected over time resulting in just the opposite. In addition to the call to be a community of faith and love, Israel is called to be a community of justice, which emphasizes not just the poor, but the disabled, the widows, and the orphans. With the entrance of Jesus into the world in the New Testament, the stress for a community of love grows only stronger and comes to a pinnacle with the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus charges the people to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and this includes your enemies. We are called to be the salt and light of the earth, which means not just remaining with our own people, but seeking out the lost and oppressed. This sometimes requires the act of reconciliation amongst churches and different cultures. (Verster, P.)

1. Response

I think Gutiérrez is right on the target concerning the perspective from which we need to treat the poor and disabled. It is very scriptural and reflects what Jesus says in his parable in Matthew 25, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” This is a very convicting passage because it makes the reader think about how many times they did or did not receive the “least of these” that Jesus is talking about. The people described in the passage are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and regarded as strangers in the land (Matthew 25). What would it look like if we actually took the initiative to reach out to these people on the margins? If we chose to deny ourselves, including our comforts and wishes like we are called to do in “Luke 9:23,” and stopped neglecting the needs that are so prevalent in our world today, we might actually see a difference in the world we are living in. But a lot of the time our pride and selfish entitlement gets in the way of this actually happening.

Just because someone is under certain circumstances they cannot control does not mean that they deserve to be there. To claim that a person is entitled to a better status than others is to completely misunderstand what Jesus came to earth to do, “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). I think Gutiérrez is mostly right about the immersion with the poor and needy, but for everyone to be immersed into poverty seems to be defeating the purpose in our goal to eradicate it. I think there is value in being exposed to it on some level so that we might be able to empathize with those people, even if that is the only thing we can do at first. In fact, from this perspective it may even be deemed more important to communicate to the poor and disabled their value in this world despite the brokenness that is manifested in their condition. It is especially important when we reach out to the spiritually poor and disabled parts of society that we do so in a humble and servant-hearted way that seeks to fill their communicated needs before anything else.

Bibliography

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primarily be drawing from chapters 4, 7, 10 and 12

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