

The Poor Will Be Glad: Joining the Revolution to Lift the World Out of Poverty

Peter Greer and Phil Smith. 2009. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. ISBN: 978-0-310-29359-0, \$19.99

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The stark contrast between the developed and developing world is what drew me to the discipline of economics. As an undergraduate on a short-term mission trip to Guadalajara, Mexico I encountered a degree of poverty which I had not seen in the U.S. I was forced to consider some very difficult questions. Why would a loving God allow such poverty? As a Christian what should my response be? Why was I born into middle-class America while others are born into extreme poverty? In one way or another many of us have wrestled with questions similar to these throughout our lifetimes. While the answers may be difficult to find, hopefully they create a desire to help the less fortunate. I believe this desire is the catalyst for Greer and Smith's book.

The Poor Will Be Glad is a moving summary of economic development mechanisms. Written for a wide audience, the authors successfully intertwine economic theory, personal experience, the wisdom of other practitioners, and an exhaustive amount of resources into one book. In addition, the photography of Jeremy Cowart puts the reader face-to-face with the developing world. Given that the intended audience for the authors is those who are not formally trained in economics, I cannot help but think of my parents as part of this group. They have been on numerous short-term mission trips that usually focus on a building project of some sort. While they are blessed by their experiences, they have often wondered about what measures could be used to help create lasting change in the communities they have visited. This book provides an answer to such an inquiry.

Greer and Smith's book also has valuable information for the formally trained Christian economist. Development economists wishing to apply their training beyond academia will gain from the authors' discussions of the practical difficulties associated with development work. Economists unfamiliar with the specifics of microlending will learn about how this tool is currently being applied. For those in a teaching role the book would be well-suited to an introductory economics course. At the same time it should be noted that the book does not include in-depth case studies, cutting-edge economic theory, or quantitative research.

From the onset the authors are clear that they are more concerned

with the consequences of poverty than an arbitrary income measure. This means the book also addresses issues such as social justice, malnutrition, and illiteracy. Not a page of the book is wasted in relaying their message. Immediately the reader is taken to an orphanage in Mumbai to put the plight of the global poor into perspective. In this context Greer contrasts the opportunities that his daughter will likely have growing up in the U.S. versus the challenges faced by a typical little girl in a developing country. From this moving comparison the authors begin to present answers to the question, “what can be done to address poverty?”

The book is divided into three sections: “How Bad is Poverty Anyway,” “How \$100 can Change the World,” and “Joining the Revolution.” I find that three principles underlie the work. These principles are presented in section one and applied throughout the rest of the book. The first principle is that Christian service should excel in word and deed. Smith discusses an “unhelpful dichotomy” in Christian service. This dichotomy leads us to focus our actions on either “word” (i.e., spreading the gospel) or “deed” (i.e., meeting physical needs). Smith asks the reader to consider the model Jesus pursued. Citing numerous examples from Jesus’ ministry, Smith states that “church-based programs are most effective when they simultaneously meet both spiritual and physical needs in a culturally appropriate manner” (p. 46). The authors firmly believe that Christ used an integrated approach to ministry and that we should follow His example.

The second principle is that aid should be used to create sustainable change. In chapter three Greer contrasts temporary relief versus development measures. While there is a time and place for temporary aid, usually in response to a catastrophe, the authors believe that there should be more focus on producing lasting change. In many instances if the poor had some amount of savings their need for temporary aid would diminish. With little to no savings, any adverse income shock can create dire circumstances. For many, income smoothing is simply not an option. The phrase “a hand up not a handout” is used many times in the book. The type of development the authors advocate would entail helping to create robust local markets via job creation efforts rather than fostering economic dependency via handouts.

The potential unintended consequences of misguided programs is one of the key insights that will stick with the reader long after the book is finished. To illustrate, Greer relates the story of a Rwandan man who began selling eggs in his village after the nation had begun to rebuild after the genocide. At the same time a church in the U.S.,

feeling called to help Rwandans, began donating eggs to the man's village. Despite the best intentions simple economics tells us that local markets cannot compete with cheap subsidized imports—i.e., the donated eggs. The man was forced to shut down his business and, in a tragic twist, the church withdrew their donations after a couple of years, leaving the town without a viable supply of eggs (pp. 58–59). Greer is quick to note that we should not fault the heart of the church in this story, but instead we need to take a more critical view of aid projects. Responsible programs must be pursued in a manner that accounts for their potential consequences on the local economy.

The third principle, the dangers of creating dependency, is intertwined with the second. A culture of dependency can be damning to both individual and community. The authors firmly believe that “nearly every human prefers the dignity that comes from employment to the demeaning dependence of handouts” (p. 63). The authors are quick to warn that assisting in creating a functioning local economy is much more difficult than a simple handout. They assert that helping to lift local economies and families out of the poverty trap is hard work. Working with locals is vital to understanding the needs and idiosyncrasies of a community. This is usually not achieved with a quick fix but instead by forming long-lasting relationships.

Building off of these principles, the second section presents a basic outline of microfinance institutions (MFIs) and savings and credit associations (SCAs). Readers unfamiliar with these lending practices and the challenges faced by these institutions will learn a lot in this section. Those with an understanding will enjoy the personal success stories related by the authors. Yet Greer and Smith are also conscious of the limitations of MFIs. Many of the challenges of lending to low income individuals are presented in section two and discussed in detail in section three.

Of particular interest to Christians, section two discusses extensions between the local church and economic development initiatives. Greer and Smith advocate a “holistic” approach to development, meaning financial, spiritual, and quality of life issues should all be addressed by MFIs involved with the local church. In chapter eight Greer presents some variations on basic microfinance that can be used to meet this holistic goal. These extensions include such diverse ideas as micro-insurance, clean water programs, and micro-pharmacies. Smith complements these ideas in chapter 10 by presenting “microfinance plus,” which includes such measures as literacy programs, job training, and insurance. Combining the ideas of chapters 8, 9, and 10, we see that MFIs working with the local

church have the potential to be powerful agents for social change, but the road is not an easy one.

In section three those who feel led to action will find invaluable resources. The authors extend their preliminary discussion of MFIs to include ways to combine for-profit business with missions, an extended discussion of SCAs, and various employment-based mechanisms. Chapter 12 provides a list of preliminary questions an individual, group, or church should ask themselves prior to pursuing development measures outside of their community. These questions force the reader to acknowledge the constraints they face as well as to determine what their comparative advantage may be. While a typical loan made by an MFI is small by U.S. standards, it is easy to ignore the fact that there are significant financial resources necessary to create an effective, sustainable program. While the authors firmly believe in the power of using financial capital to help the poor, there are many challenges to implementing these types of programs which should not be ignored. Anyone wishing to become involved with poverty alleviation should be aware of these challenges before starting.

As Christ's representative to the world, the Church faces unique challenges when it becomes involved with economic development. Because of this higher calling, portions of chapters 13, 15, and 16 explore many of the unique issues faced by Christian development organizations. The authors specifically highlight challenges that are typically not faced by secular organizations. These include not serving God and money, being above reproach in business practices, and ultimately caring for the eternal salvation of the poor instead of simply their financial well-being.

This book is for Christians wishing to learn more about the basics of economic development. From the onset the reader cannot help but feel compelled to action. Despite the many challenges and shortcomings of MFIs, SCAs and employment-based development mechanisms, the authors are successful in illustrating that these approaches are a powerful way for the church to offer "a tangible demonstration and verbal proclamation of a God who sees and responds to the poor" (p. 260). As Jesus' ambassadors, we can play our part in fulfilling the edict of Psalm 69:32-33, which opens the book: "The poor will see and be glad—you who seek God, may your hearts live! The Lord hears the needy and does not despise his captive people." ■