Mission and the Survival of the Poor in the Graeco-Roman World and the Age of the Internet: A Dialogue between John M. G. Barclay and Gustavo Gutierrez

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Abstract. This article attempts to revisit the problem of poverty and the mission of Christianity. Benefiting from the works of John M. G. Barclay and Gustavo Gutiérrez on a similar topic, it argues that the poor and Christian mission – from the early period to the modern era – survive because of the solidarity built in the Christian network. By dialoguing the two figures, using the comparative method, in the context of digital advancement, the article concludes that the internet can extend the solidarity network for the poor and the Christian mission.

Keywords: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Internet, John. M. G. Barclay, Mission, Solidarity Network, The Poor

1   Introduction

It is undeniable that Christianity is struggling with the problem of poverty and the Christian mission. As a result, many scholarly responses have been made to address the issue. To mention but a few, including the works of Daniel G. Groody [1], Susan R. Holman [2], Bruce W. Longenecker [3], Andrea Bieler, and Hans-Martin Gutmann [4]. However, despite being addressed from multiple perspectives, the problem of poverty is far from over. New challenges are always present, and they seem to be more challenging over time. Therefore, more efforts – such as new strategies, approaches, practical guidelines, and even publications – are welcome to contribute to the issue.

This article addresses the issue by dialoguing the thoughts of John M. G. Barclay and Gustavo Gutiérrez on the same issue. As a leading New Testament scholar who is an expert in social sciences, Barclay has contributed to the discussion of poverty from the angle of the New Testament and Early Christianity. Coming from a different tradition and field of study, Gutiérrez, a well-known liberation theologian, has spoken a lot about the problem of poverty from a liberation theology perspective. Contributions from those two Christian giants will surely enrich how churches address the issue. This article will bring together their contributions to enlighten the churches to develop a new way to address the issue in the context of our era.

2   Methods

This article uses a comparative method in religious studies and theology in a qualitative approach [5]. The method is now widely used in Christian theology, including biblical studies and contemporary theology. Quoting Jonathan Z. Smith, Barclay defines the method as "comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in their being 'like' in some stipulated fashion. The comparison provides how we revise phenomena as our data to solve our theoretical problem" (Barclay et al., The New Testament in Comparison, 9) [6]. Following Barlcay's definition, the article will compare John M. G. Barclay and Gustavo Gutierrez on poverty and mission.

Another methodological remark worth mentioning is the purpose of comparison. Barclay argues that "one possible purpose of the comparison is to see the familiar in a new light ('to see ourselves as others see us') and thereby to generate the possibility of new understandings of ourselves as the people conducting the comparison and of the frames and tools by which we conduct that comparison" (Barclay et al., The New Testament in Comparison, 9-10) [6]. One important keyword to note is "new understandings." It is crucial not to limit "the new" here to merely a methodological newness but also other possible forms of newness. Relevant to this article is to bring the classical problem such as poverty and the mission to find newness in the internet age.

3   Findings and Discussion

As previously stated, the central part of this article deals with the thoughts of John M. G. Barclay and Gustavo Gutiérrez on the issue of poverty. In doing so, the article will first describe John M. G. Barclay's thoughts on poverty and the Christian mission. It will then elaborate on Gustavo Gutierrez's views on liberation theology, the poor, and the Church's calling. After that, it will compare Barclay's and Gutierrez's contributions. The final section will attempt to apply their ideas to our present age.

3.1   John M. G. Barclay on Mission and the Survival of the Poor in the Graeco-Roman World

John M. G. Barclay is well-known for his works on the social science approaches to the New Testament texts and early Christianity. One of his recent scholarly interests is the topic of poverty [7]. He addresses the issue from the biblical understanding of grace. His recent book, Paul and the Gift, shows that biblical grace sometimes differs as we understand it [8]. In our modern mind, biblical grace refers to the one-way gift, expecting no return. On the contrary, Barclay argues that biblical grace is a reciprocal gift; the giver expects a return [9]. He contends that after receiving the grace of God, the believers are to extend the grace to others among themselves, including the poor [10]. Such a reciprocal gift does not always come in material forms but can be in other forms, such as moral support.

One crucial occasion in Paul's ministry, according to Barclay, is his efforts to collect a sum of money for the Church in Jerusalem [11]. Paul urges the diaspora churches to support their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem because they have already received grace from God and spiritual blessings from Jerusalem. In other words, they are obliged to give to Jerusalem because the grace they receive is reciprocal. In addition, Paul believes believers will become wealthy by giving to the poor – in this context, to the Church in Jerusalem. Barclay claims that wealth, in this sense, can also be understood as wealth-in-generosity because of their reciprocal relationship [12].

On another occasion, Barclay speaks of the concept of grace in sociological terminology. Using the habitus concept from Bourdieu, he argues that believers must discipline their bodies to the will of God as their response to grace [13]. While speaking about the relationship between theological and sociological (personal) responses to grace, his idea can be extended to the social-communal context. By practicing reciprocal giving activities to support each other, they not only become accustomed to the act of giving itself but conform to their identity with the generous God they worship. Paul's letters seem to promote such an idea [14].

Recently, in 2019, Barclay wrote an article entitled "Mission and the Survival of the Poor in the Graeco-Roman World" to address the issue of poverty and Christian mission [15]. In the article, he argues that the poor can survive because of the Christian network that enables its members to share among themselves as an implementation of reciprocal grace. Such internal support creates a system that empowers their economy [16]. Moreover, sharing itself is done beyond the social markers, such as ethnicity, language, and other markers. By doing that, they form a new identity in Christ beyond their existing identities [17]. This new identity is so unique and interesting to outsiders that it becomes an instrument to do missions, including outreach missions.

Barclay's idea about how the poor early Christians could survive can be summarized as follows: they helped each other because of their understanding of grace. As a recipient of God's grace, they must extend it to their community. Living in the reciprocal giving environment strengthens their sense of identity in Christ. Because they extend the act of giving beyond social markers of the time, that act becomes how they do their mission. In other words, by caring for the poor, they sustain their community and reach out to outsiders to join their community.

3.2 Gustavo Gutierrez on Liberation Theology, the Poor, and the Church's Calling

As one of the renowned liberation theologians, Gustavo Gutiérrez has a particular interest and concern for the problem of poverty. He began his ministry in a poor congregation in Lima and taught theology and social sciences at the Catholic University there (Grenz et al., 20th Century Theology, 213) [18]. Upon returning to Peru, he faced a similar reality: the poverty and suffering of the people there. He observed an ironic fact about the Catholic Church as a church that had enormous power; unfortunately, it was less on the side of those oppressed but rather on the side of the oppressor. Such a social condition pushed him to respond with a profound theological reflection. In 1971, he commented on the struggles and challenges of society in Peru in the book entitled

Teología de la liberación (translated into English in 1973) (Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xiii-xiv) [19].

Gutiérrez's understanding of liberation theology departs from the truth of the Catholic faith and the truth of God's word. He argues that the Catholic faith and the truth of God's word are seen practically in the acts of love. He believes that suffering occurs as a consequence of sin. Thus, every believer needs to be actively involved in liberating people who are trapped in the hell of a life. In other words, faith's material and spiritual aspects are closely related (Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, xi) [19].

Gutiérrez's views on liberation theology and poverty can be summarized as follows: Gutiérrez defines the concept of salvation beyond the understanding of the orthodox Catholic faith, which derives from the theology of Thomas Aquinas. He shows that Aquinas's understanding focused only on the philosophical and spiritual dimensions but not on its physical counterpart (Gutiérrez, Teología De La Liberación, 103-4) [20]. As a Christian, he argued, every believer has to present God's love to the world by giving heed to the poor. Salvation is a manifestation of God's grace to those who suffer. It is the case that God's love is understood neither as an abstract reality nor a philosophical subject but as a practical act. Therefore, the calling of believers in the work of salvation is to form a just and prosperous community or society in which God's grace and His Kingdom are manifested amid the community's life (Gutiérrez, Teología De La Liberación, 105-6) [20].

Gutiérrez construes salvation as a liberating gift we receive in Christ (Galatians 5:1). deliverance from sin is liberation from personal ego and self-centeredness. Hence, believers commit to being able to love God. Loving God is evident in loving others. Such love embodies providing help and justice for the poor to have a better life (Gutiérrez, The Truth Shall Make You Free, 265-9) [21]. Gutiérrez's reading of Matthew 25:31-46 (on the believer's responsibility to declare salvation) includes the calling to care for the poor (Gutiérrez, The Truth Shall Make You Free, 617) [21].

Gutiérrez's understanding of deliverance also relates salvation with creation. Believers are called to renew the deprived creation by administering justice and love for others, especially the poor and those who suffer. The Old Testament narrative demonstrates that God works out salvation by liberating His people from slavery in Egypt. Commenting on Exodus 3:8, Gutiérrez emphasizes God's work in saving the people to be an instrument for them to enjoy a better life. The people are also called to impact society by imparting love to those who suffer and the poor so that all can be freed from such horrible conditions (Gutiérrez, The Truth Shall Make You Free, 1881-4) [21].

Gutiérrez describes the Church as a community not apart from this world but amid the world. The Church has to open itself to the world and position itself in the center of the world to serve it better. The Church must free the chains of poverty and other social problems (e.g., injustice and oppression) (Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 278) [19]. Gutiérrez contends that God's saving works are realized in the involvement of the Church to free people from social issues (Gutiérrez, Noted For A Theology of Liberation, 259) [22]. Contact with the poor and the oppressed means encountering God (Matthew 25:31-46). The encounter will encourage the Church to have more solidarity with others. Similarly, Gutiérrez's reading of Psalm 133 leads him to promote a community of harmony, which is defined as a community that supports the poor and the oppressed.

Thus, the Church should understand its role in changing society. (Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Well, 132) [23].

3.3   Networks and Solidarity: John M. G. Barclay's and Gustavo Gutiérrez's Concerns on the Poor and Mission

Barclay and Gutiérrez are from different traditions, one being a protestant and the other a catholic. Moreover, the two come from different academic backgrounds; the former is a new testament scholar, while the latter is a liberation theologian. Thus, different perspectives are expected from both of them.

Despite their differences, there are some crucial contact points worth mentioning here. First, both figures agree that caring for the poor and the oppressed has something to do with Christian identity. Christians are not merely saved but also called to extend the saving grace they receive. The extension of grace should reach the social dimension and daily life. Looking after the poor and the oppressed is one way of implementing it.

Second, both scholars stress the importance of networks while addressing the issue of poverty. The poor survive and strive in early and modern times because they live in a social network supporting their living. Despite being dominantly poor, the early Christians and the Latin American Christians supported each other because their networks allowed them, not without challenges. The available networks help to build solidarity among the Christians, including the poor and the oppressed. In short, caring and sharing in Christian networks portrays their solidarity.

Lastly, Barclay and Gutiérrez mention the importance of the Christian mission while discussing the poor and the oppressed. The solidarity previously mentioned is a response to God's grace in the community. Interestingly, it is not confined to their community. Their solidarity with the marginalized goes beyond their scope of themselves. Just like God reaches the sinners, believers should care for the poor who are not yet Christians. In other words, concerns for the marginalized should be implemented in the act of reaching out.

3.4   Extending Networks and Solidarity in the Age of the Internet

Both Barclay and Gutiérrez are speaking from different contexts. However, it does not mean they are irrelevant to us who live in the internet age. Conversely, our context can extend their idea to a broader impact. First, the internet provides a platform to define our identity [24]. It helps us to form a new community beyond our physical limitations. It means we can also form a community that includes the poor and the oppressed. As recipients of God's grace, we should live out our identity by looking after the poor and the oppressed, including in online communities.

Second, the internet also provides networks to show solidarity with others. Because the internet is almost limitless in providing us with networks, it can reach more broadly than our traditional approach. One clear example of solidarity action is a fundraising campaign to help the poor [25]. Another example includes providing accessible education for the poor using online facilities [26]. Many more examples can be cited here,

but the thrust is that the internet enables us with the network to implement our solidarity.

Third, the internet is useful for Christian missions, including reaching out to the poor and the oppressed. Christians can reach out more broadly using the internet; our Daily Bread Ministries provides materials both to Christians and beyond. In addition, the missional element enhanced by the internet relates to the second point above. By seeing Christians raising funds for their poor, the world is watching a visible testimony of being a recipient of God's grace. Providing affordable education online makes the world aware that Christians care for future generations. It indeed speaks a lot about what sort of community the Christians are.

Many more can be added to the relevance of Barclay's and Gutiérrez's thoughts on poverty and missions in the context of the internet era. But it seems enough to conclude that their ideas are still relevant and can be extended to our era.

4   Conclusion

The findings of this article have shown that one way of addressing the problem of poverty and the Christian mission is by paying attention to Christian networks and solidarity. Those two variables have something to do with the identity of the Church. In the early Church, the poor could survive because of the network they had among themselves. The network, which went beyond social markers, later became their instrument for doing missions. That was how they survived! In modern times, Gutiérrez reminds the Church that its presence has to be felt by the world, especially by the poor and the oppressed. The best way of manifesting it is by showing solidarity through the available networks. What has been done by the early Church and its modern counterpart can be extended in the Internet age. The internet provides countless possible networks for the Church to reach out to the poor and show solidarity.

Research Contribution: This article compares the works of John M. G. Barclay and Gustavo Gutierrez on poverty and Christian mission. Focusing on their similarities, it is arguable that both figures are stressing the importance of the solidarity built in the Christian network in responding to the issue of poverty. Furthermore, we suggest that such a network is extendable today using the internet available more widely now.

5   Acknowledgment

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