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Book Reviews

Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), ISBN 978-0802863737

Canadian theologian Bruce Longenecker tackles the intriguing question of whether Paul was as concerned for the poor as Jesus was. Most scholars, who have studied the issues of poverty and justice, as well as the economic dimensions of the early church, usually do not refer to Paul, as they mistakenly believe that he had little regard for the poor.

Longenecker addresses this issue in detail in his book *Remember the Poor*. He gets the title from Galatians 2.10, where at the end of the Church's first major theological crisis Peter and others reminded Paul and Barnabas that they were to remember the poor in their ministry to the Gentiles. Longenecker uses history, economics, biblical exegesis, writings of the early Church Fathers, and theology to make the case that caring for the poor was integral to Paul's gospel and was standard practice in the 'Jesus groups' that he founded. This multidisciplinary approach is one of the strengths of the book.

Longenecker divides the book into two sections. In the first he discusses the socio-economic context and society's attitudes towards the poor in the urban contexts where he established Jesus groups or to those to whom he wrote letters. In the second section he discusses in detail who the poor were within the Jesus groups and Paul's attitude towards them. Using social historical analysis of the first century, Longenecker estimates that about eighty per cent of the population lived at a subsistence level or in poverty.

Longenecker provides extensive detail to show that care of the poor was a vital part of Paul's theology and what he expected in the communities of Jesus followers he established. He follows that up with evidence from Scripture that there was care for the poor in the communities of Jesus followers that Paul established. So the conclusion is that, while Paul did not devote whole sections of his letters to teaching about the poor and how to address poverty, it is evident that he was very concerned about the poor and their plight. Longenecker writes:

Paul's letters dealt with matters that were situationally urgent; if those letters are silent with regard to care for the poor, we still need to ask whether that is a reflection on Paul's own theology or whether, in fact, care for the poor was being observed without compromise in the Jesus communities...

Longenecker finally ties this into Paul's theology of the 'body' characterized by various individuals in I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. This has to do

with the stronger members of the body taking care of the weaker. He concludes by saying – not communism, not charity, but community.

Longenecker then moves to the very critical question of whether the generosity was directed to only members of the Jesus groups. Paul is very clear as to what the ideal should be. In Galatians 6.10 he states, '*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*' In I Thessalonians 5.14-15 he stresses the need to help the weak and then to strive to do good for each other and everyone else. So, while the reality of the limited resources focused the assistance within the Jesus groups, the ultimate focus was always to be beyond that.

The one major weakness of Longenecker's argument is that he uses a predominantly economic model to define poverty. Present understandings of poverty use multi-dimensional models of poverty that include indicators such as marginalization, powerlessness, voicelessness, and isolation. Using such models, for example, would have explained the status of slaves who according to some estimates constituted about one quarter of the population within the Roman Empire. Slaves do not fit into standard socio-economic models. It would also explain more clearly the difference between citizens who were poor and were entitled to help from the State and the Roman elite and non-citizens who were poor and not entitled to any help.

While Longenecker makes a robust case that Paul was concerned for the poor, he only marginally discusses the theological arguments on which the concern for the poor is based – namely, the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of God. Longenecker's thesis is:

For Paul, economic assistance of the poor was not sufficient in and of itself, nor was it exhaustive of the good news of Jesus; but neither was it supplemental or peripheral to that good news. Instead, falling within the essentials of the good news, care for the poor was thought by Paul to be a necessary hallmark of the corporate life of Jesus-followers who lived in conformity with the good news of the early Jesus movement.

Remember the Poor fills an important gap in understanding Paul's theology and is the first serious academic analysis as to whether Paul was concerned about the poor. In the light of the present global refugee crisis and as churches are wondering what their role should be, it would be worthwhile to read *Remember the Poor* to understand that for Paul the Good News was not just forgiveness of sins, but its reality was expressed by caring for the poor and those on the margins of society.

Reviewed by Rupen Das