PRODUCTIVITY AND OPPORTUNITY

The most effective way to turn around poverty, economic distress, and injustice is by expanding opportunity for people to develop and deploy their God-given productive potential in communities of exchange, especially through entrepreneurship.

ELEMENT 9

What can be done to help communities where poverty persists in spite of all our efforts? This is a question Christians must confront when they embrace the biblical command to care for those in need (Leviticus 25:35; Proverbs 14:21; Isaiah 58:10; Galatians 2:10; James 1:27). We cannot be Christians if we don't care about the poor. But after nearly a century of dramatically expanded church and public programs, we see little progress. What can be done?

We have said above that the biggest problem of the poor today is not a lack of money but a lack of dignity and right relationships, and the solution must involve a restoration of productivity (see Elements 3, 7, and 8). If that is true, our efforts to help the poor – in our personal lives, and through church and public programs – need a dramatic reformation. These efforts are mostly aimed at distributing money, not restoring dignity or repairing relationships.

Our efforts must shift from asking, "How can we hand well-being to our neighbors?" to "How can we help create opportunity for our neighbors to build their own well-being with God?"

This does not imply that we are off the hook when it comes to helping the poor. We are urgently called to help. Indeed, we are called to a form of help that is much more costly than just giving money, and perhaps this helps explain why the reforms we need are so difficult to achieve. Writing a check or paying higher taxes is easy compared to humbling our pride – silencing the inner voice that tells us we belong to a superior class, that our poorer neighbors were not made for fruitful work and the dignity of supporting a household as we are – and investing our time in building relationships with impoverished people for whom Christ died.

Our efforts must shift from asking, "How can we hand well-being to our neighbors?" to "How can we help create *opportunity* for our neighbors to build their own well-being with God?" People in impoverished neighborhoods bear God's image and are made to create and contribute. Only they, with God, can create the well-being they need. But we can do our part to honor the dignity God gave them and help repair relationships. We can join with them in mutual learning, growing with them as they grow with us in virtue and wisdom. And we can help remove artificial obstacles that they may not be in a position to remove by themselves.

The opposite of dependency is an entrepreneurial life and mindset. All of us should strive to be "entrepreneurs of life," as Os Guinness has put it in a book by that title. Pioneering organizations like FCS Ministries, HOPE International, and the members of the PovertyCure network are proving that entrepreneurial virtue and opportunity can break the bonds of dependency in even the most challenging places.

This kind of change is long and hard in coming. It is complex. It will not always work; even when it does work, success will be imperfect and incremental. The church today is just at the start of what will be a long process of figuring out how to help the poor more effectively in the 21st century than we did in the 20th. Let us embrace this challenge as entrepreneurs, and discover what the Lord has in store for us!