

## WHY PEOPLE ARE POOR

The January 1981 issue of *Sojourners* included a milestone article by Tom Hanks under the above title. It begins with an observation of North American churches' understanding of the causes of poverty.

*The major cause of poverty is widely assumed to be "underdevelopment." Other prominent factors are believed to be laziness . . . , vices such as drunkenness, and, however subtly and discretely expressed, the supposed racial and national inferiority of certain peoples. It's a very comforting worldview and one that our most popular politicians delight to propagate.*

Hanks himself, an Old Testament scholar with now some 40 years of ministry in Latin America, has examined extensively what the Bible teaches about the causes of poverty. It says precisely nothing about underdevelopment and very little about "laziness, drunkenness, and other assorted causes." On the other hand, the Bible contains "an overwhelming avalanche of texts that identify oppression as the cause of poverty."

*Oppression is a major category in the Bible's understanding and approach to reality. The Exodus has come to be recognized as playing a central role in the theology of the O.T., comparable to that of the cross in the N.T. And it was in the Exodus that a people God recognized as oppressed won their liberation.*

*It is no exaggeration to say that 90 per cent of biblical history is written from the perspective of a small, weak, oppressed, poor people. Small wonder, then, that oppression and the resulting poverty form so large a bulk of the literature that recounts the struggle.*

*. . . The Lord makes clear that in a class struggle between oppressors and oppressed God does not remain neutral or impartial: God takes the side of the oppressed-poor and acts decisively for their liberation (Ex. 3:7-10; 6:2-5).*

*The Bible . . . abundantly witnesses its awareness of antagonistic classes and the struggle of the poor against their oppressors, particularly in Exodus, the references to "enemies" in the Psalms, and in the eighth century prophets.*

Hanks notes the long absence of social analysis of the causes of poverty in First World biblical theology and calls for a re-reading of the Bible from the Third World.

*In Latin America's theological and spiritual revolution, biblical Christians often are accused of introducing class struggle into the churches. This is utterly naïve and shows we have understood neither biblical social analysis nor the most elementary facts that are a daily part of Third World poverty.*

What are we called to do as biblical people?

*We need to stop justifying our privileges and start trying to discover, unmask, and denounce the mechanisms of oppression that make and keep people poor. . . . We need to examine radically our understanding of the Christian gospel and Jesus Christ. We must ask whether Christ is presented as liberator of the oppressed or as champion of an unjust status quo, and whether our gospel is "good news to the poor" or a rationalization for the rich.*

**What is your own understanding of the causes of poverty—in the US and around the world?**