

Introduction

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

—Isaiah 58:6-9



Daily newspaper headlines highlight a crisis of homelessness and affordable housing. Some allude to people trying to find a place to sleep: “Cities Deal With a Surge in Shantytowns”; “As Jobs Vanish, Motel Rooms Become Home”; “Sacramento and Its Riverside Tent City.”¹ Others detail the mass of vacant homes resulting from the foreclosure crisis: “All Boarded Up”; “Painting Lawns Green.”² One writer, commenting on the homelessness situation in Sacramento, suggests,

It seems that the city/county/state should at least be considering putting the homeless in the people-less homes and apartments that plague the area, rather than making permanent these squalid tent cities. They can probably acquire foreclosed homes for very little money and turn them into low-cost, affordable housing.³

The mayor of Sacramento responded that the city cannot acquire private property and that low-income housing stock is “maxed out, fully occupied.”

Clearly the economic crisis that began in 2008 has increased the number of people who are homeless. Multiple economic and social factors have precipitated a steady decline over the last thirty years in the standard of living of poor and working-class people (and even a substantial number of middle-class people). The proverbial American Dream is out of reach for increasing numbers of Americans as job security has become more tenuous, pay and benefits have decreased, and costs of basic goods like housing and healthcare have risen exponentially. While not all people end up homeless, many are a paycheck away from ending up on their friends’ or families’ couches.

Many Christians and church communities take Isaiah’s call to house the homeless seriously. Some are involved in acts of mercy and compassion by providing financial support to groups who minister to people in poverty, and others are directly involved in addressing issues of homelessness and housing, either by volunteering at a shelter or soup kitchen and/or by participating on “builds” or other ventures to provide affordable housing.⁴ While most Christians find such actions “Christ-like,” there is rarely any reflection on whether such actions are empowering for the people whom the volunteers are helping. This book aims to examine whether typical Christian responses to homelessness and provision of low-income housing are empowering for those who are being offered help and hospitality. It also seeks to broaden our responses to include changing structures and systems that cause poverty and brokenness in addition to responding with private charity.

A large part of the book deconstructs how our traditional Christian institutional responses often reinforce dominant ideologies about

homelessness and housing in ways that both can be oppressive for those who are poor and/or homeless and can serve to mask the real causes of homelessness, thereby ensuring that the status quo of power and privilege remains intact. Christian churches in the United States typically respond to issues of homelessness and housing in two distinct ways: (1) a direct-service approach of providing shelters, food, and services, and (2) a more structural approach of building low-income housing. To analyze these types of approaches I use two Christian institutions as case studies: the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions (AGRM) as a direct-service approach, and Habitat for Humanity, International, as a provider of low-income housing. The latter part of the book analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and then outlines an alternative approach of prophetic disruption that focuses on how individual Christians and church communities can respond to the problems of homelessness and housing in ways that challenge poverty and inequality in our society and offer structural solutions for preventing homelessness and substandard housing.

To aid me in both the deconstructive and constructive tasks, I will employ a liberationist ethical method, using the work of Christian ethicist Traci West.⁵ Liberation theology and ethics began in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Latin America in response to traditional theological interpretations that focused on otherworldly salvation from God with no connection to the real material deprivation a majority of Latin Americans were suffering. Traditional theological interpretations served to justify the extreme wealth and privilege of a few as well as the immense land holdings of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Latin American liberation theologians and ethicists emphasized a God of liberation, using as exemplars of God's saving activity in this world Moses leading the people of Israel out of slavery and Jesus challenging the purity codes that served to marginalize and exploit particular groups of people. Soon Christian communities in other areas of the world developed their own distinctive liberation theologies. While liberation theologies have changed and developed over the years, the core insight remains, that this world (not simply an otherworld) should reflect God's intent for just and compassionate community. Thus, discipleship entails working toward such a vision.

Structure of This Book

In chapter 1 I give an overview of my ethical method, drawing on the work of Traci West. West argues that our Christian calling includes confronting that which denies human well-being and community, thus she emphasizes resistance and disruption of injustice. She assumes that social injustice will always be present; therefore, one's calling as a Christian will always include attentive listening to stories of injustice, determining appropriate societal response, organizing methods for enacting these responses, and continually resisting sources of injustice.

If we are to disrupt injustices and prophetically promote justice, we must have a well-grounded historical and social analysis of homelessness and housing. Therefore, an overview of our society's historical response to homelessness and housing and an explanation of dominant ideologies that influence our response are important. Unless we are aware of how these ideologies function, we will unknowingly adopt them and usually end up supporting injustice rather than enacting prophetic change. In chapter 2 I briefly outline the history of homelessness and housing in the United States, examine who is homeless and housed, and explore the purported causes of homelessness. Then I explain the current picture of homelessness and identify the economic policies that make it difficult for low-income people to access adequate housing.

In chapter 3 I lay out some dominant ideologies that influence how we respond to homelessness and housing. Our society bases its thinking and much of its social policy on stereotypes and half-truths of who is homeless and the reasons for their homelessness. Furthermore, we have a history of treating the so-called deserving poor differently from the so-called undeserving poor. Last of all, we equate the American Dream with owning a home and have a vision of the ideal homeowner. Our ideologies lead us toward individualistic solutions that focus on transforming the poor, rather than structural solutions that challenge social domination and inequality in our nation.

In chapters 4 and 5 I examine two common Christian responses to homelessness. One is a charity approach of providing shelters, clothes, food, and services. Whether it be in the form of a food bank, winter-coat drive, soup kitchens, or shelters, direct-service approaches are

popular with churches and religious organizations as they are less likely to involve the church in politics and do not upset the status quo. Furthermore, they appeal to the Christian sense of love and hospitality in the face of suffering and need and allow people to get involved directly with those who are in need.

The other Christian response is a more structural approach of building low-income housing. Many Christians realize that no matter how much charity they offer in response to homelessness, many people simply cannot afford a secure place to live. Generally, volunteers from churches do not have the time or the expertise to build affordable safe homes, but in coalition with other churches and nonprofits, it can be done. There are many forms this approach can take, from providing low-cost rental housing to helping people own homes.

To be able to do a more in-depth examination of common themes and ideologies in these types of approaches, I will highlight two organizations as case studies. I pick these organizations in particular because I think they exemplify typical Christian approaches to homelessness, and they are organizations with which many churches are involved. My work is not meant to be simply an examination of these two institutions, however. Instead, I am interested in how religious response in general reflects dominant American ideologies on homelessness and housing or prophetically disrupts such ideologies.

In chapter 4 I look at one example of a charity approach that offers shelters and services, namely the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions (AGRM). Based on literature from AGRM, observation of their practices, and interviews with both staff and clients, I examine key themes or beliefs that emerge. One belief is that homelessness is the result of individual behavior. Another is that homelessness is primarily a spiritual problem, not an economic issue. Still another theme is that the homeless need a work ethic and discipline to avoid dependency.

In chapter 5 I examine an organization that adopts a more structural approach of building low-income housing, namely Habitat for Humanity, International. Based on literature from Habitat for Humanity, books written by executive directors and others, observation of their practices, and interviews with both staff and clients, I focus on Habitat for Humanity's rationale for emphasizing homeownership, among various

options, to address poverty. Furthermore, I examine how this emphasis shapes its practices and beliefs, specifically its views on volunteers and homeowners, its emphasis on sweat-equity hours, and its uplifting of private over public housing.

In chapter 6 I assess both the charitable and structural Christian responses to homelessness and housing. In particular, I look at the ways that each reflects the dominant ideologies of homelessness and housing, as well as the ways in which each has liberating aspects. I then examine how appropriating dominant ideologies undercuts the response, making it more difficult to promote a just and compassionate community where all are housed both physically and spiritually. From this assessment, I begin to outline how an approach of prophetic disruption might look different.

In chapter 7 I propose a theological foundation and rationale for why individual Christians and Christian communities should be part of a prophetic social movement to end poverty and homelessness. I conclude with a discussion of strategies that congregations and religious organizations have adopted to promote a home for all in God's just and compassionate community.