

Make Poverty Personal

By Ash Barker, Baker Books, 208 pp., \$14.99

Reviewed by Kelly Givens, FASTEN staff

Ash Barker is incredibly committed to the problem of poverty, and he wants you to know he's not the only one: God is incredibly committed to poverty, too. Barker's book, *Make Poverty Personal*, challenges readers to step out of comfortable indifference and into a way of living that recognizes the difficulties and disadvantages faced by the poorest people in the world, as well as encouraging us to commit to making a difference on an issue of paramount importance to believers.

Barker, an Australian, is the founding director of Urban Neighbors of Hope (UNOH). Since 2002, Barker and his family have worked with UNOH to plant its first overseas community in Klong Toey, the largest slum in Bangkok, Thailand.

Barker underscores the fact that the Bible refers to poverty and the poor some 2000 times. Obviously, God has much to say on this issue. "God reveals the very nature of poverty and sews a thread of response throughout the Bible," Barker explains. *Make Poverty Personal* examines that thread of response. Barker takes readers through what could essentially be an Old and New Testament theology course, looking at the different genres of the Bible and what each reveals about poverty. *Make Poverty Personal* examines the Mosaic books (Exodus and the Law books), the Hebrew Wisdom/Poetic Literature, the Prophets, the Gospels, Acts (and James), the Epistles and the apocalyptic messages of Revelation. The book's eight chapters are designed to be read in a small group study, reflecting on God's response to poverty in key biblical texts, with consideration given to their literary context. Throughout each chapter, Barker interweaves his own life and ministry in Klong Toey and in Melbourne, Australia. His hope is that his book would denounce the idea of the Bible as a "mat to stand on" or "ordainment for admiration" and instead serve to show the radical action to which God calls his people.

Barker's book might remind readers of Vaughan Robert's *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*. Both do an excellent job illustrating how the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments are really one large story of God's purposes for Creation and his coming Kingdom. Using this framework, Barker explores Moses' reluctant leadership of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, God's protective Jubilee laws for the poor, and the beautiful wisdom literature--the prayers, poetry and wise sayings--of the afflicted Hebrews during their exile from the Promised Land. We also see how the prophets--the "people on the margins"--worked to partner with those in the "center" (the priests and kings) to give voice to the voiceless sufferers. The gospels illuminate Jesus Christ's ministry to the poor and paint for us a picture of our own attitude toward suffering, vis-à-vis the rich, young ruler. (Barker notes, "[m]any Christians are more like the rich young ruler than any other New Testament character. Well-resourced, bright, charming, able to engage in religious discussion--talk about poverty, even--but unable to even comprehend what Jesus invites them to do and be.") Turning then to Acts and the book of James, we see how the early church stood by one another to so that no one was needy among them, and then we read

about Paul's urging the churches to continue that same generous way of life. Finally, Barker describes Revelation and the apocalyptic literature of the Bible, pointing out the ways it attempts to debunk the Roman Empire and the myths of poverty it supported.

Barker believes that the Bible is the best resource we have on fighting poverty. It's hard not to agree when you look at all God has to say about the poor in the Bible and how deliberately He speaks on the issue throughout its overarching narrative. There is unquestionably a call on every Christian not only to enter into and serve the suffering, but to seriously consider ministry to the poor as one of the most important aspects of our theology as Christians. Barker's work in the slums of Bangkok and the poor neighborhoods of Melbourne show us that there is much work to be done—and much joy to be gained—by working to help bring justice to the poor.